ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON TECHNOLOGY

p. cm. — (Amerind Foundation New World studies series ; no. 5)

"An Amerind Foundation publication."
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-8263-2369-3 (cloth : alk. paper)

GN406 .A72 2001
306.4'6—dc21

00-012735
Contents

List of Figures  IX
List of Tables  IX
Foreword
Anne I. Woosley  XI
Preface
Michael Brian Schiffer  XIII

Chapter 1: Toward an Anthropology of Technology
Michael Brian Schiffer  1

Chapter 2: Beyond Art and Technology: The Anthropology of Skill
Tim Ingold  17

Chapter 3: Thought and Production: Insights of the Practitioner
Charles M. Keller  33

Chapter 4: Meaning in the Making: Agency and the Social Embodiment of Technology and Art
Marcia-Anne Dobres  47

Chapter 5: Symbols Do Not Create Meanings—Activities Do: Or, Why Symbolic Anthropology Needs the Anthropology of Technology
Bryan Pfaffenberger  77

Chapter 6: Ritual Technology in an Extranatural World
William H. Walker  87

Chapter 7: Toward an Archaeology of Needs
Richard R. Wilk  107

Chapter 8: The Design Process as a Critical Component of the Anthropology of Technology
W. David Kingery  123
Chapter 9: Understanding Artifact Variability and Change: A Behavioral Framework
James M. Skibo and Michael Brian Schiffer  139

Chapter 10: Artifice Constrained: What Determines Technological Choice?
Peter Blyde  151

Chapter 11: Building Bridges: Practice-based Ethnographies of Contemporary Technology
Lucy A. Suchman  163

Chapter 12: Coordination of Technological Practice and Representations at the Boundaries
Meredith Aronson, David Bell, and Dan Vermeer  179

Chapter 13: From Sail to Steam at Sea in the Late Nineteenth Century
Richard A. Gould  193

Chapter 14: The Explanation of Long-Term Technological Change
Michael Brian Schiffer  215

Contributors  237
Index  238
CHAPTER FIVE
Symbols Do Not Create Meanings—Activities Do: Or, Why Symbolic Anthropology Needs the Anthropology of Technology

Bryan Pfaffenberger

This essay examines the oft-asserted proposition that artifacts embody symbols because they communicate meanings that are conducive or even essential to the maintenance of a society’s social and political relations. Rejecting this proposition on theoretical grounds, I argue instead that the symbolism embodied in artifacts is rightly regarded, not as the cause of shared cultural meaning, but rather as the consequence of technological activities—which are, in turn, easily demonstrated to act as powerful progenitors of shared cultural meaning. I make this case by reexamining classic Melanesian ethnography (specifically, the yam storehouses of Malinowski’s Trobriand Islanders, and canoes of the island of Gawa, studied by Nancy Munn). This essay makes the case that the anthropological study of technological activities is not only indispensable to symbolic anthropology, but even further, that symbolic anthropology is liable to grave interpretive errors if it fails to take technological activities into account. More broadly still, the essay amounts to an indictment of any interpretive anthropology that ignores social behavior.

In the Trobriand Islands of Melanesia, anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1922, 1935) was struck by the singular architecture of yam storehouses, called bwayma. Impressive structures indeed, bwayma are log cabins built on stilts with lofty roofs shaped in the form of a Gothic arch. Distinct from smaller, utilitarian storehouses, the show storehouses feature lofty, imposing dimensions, an elegant shape, and conspicuous position (Malinowski 1935:1, 242). The result, Malinowski noted, is that yams are better housed than human beings: they are “higher and more imposing than the living-house; more lavishly decorated, more scrupulously kept in repair; [and] surrounded with many more taboos and rules of conduct” (1935:1, 218). Anticipating the symbolic anthropology of a half century later, Malinowski offers an explanation for the bwayma’s striking style: By enabling the prominent display of a chief’s capacity to accumulate yams, bwayma serve as an “index and symbol of power” (1935:1, 240).

That complex, highly visible symbols such as the bwayma communicate social information seems self-evident, and it would be ridiculous to deny that artifact-embodied symbols play a role in shaping fields of shared cultural meaning. Yet this essay argues that the meaning-shaping role played by artifact-embodied symbols is much less significant than most archaeologists and anthropologists suspect. I argue instead that cultural meanings are most likely to take shape when people engage in artifact-related activities, in which they interact with symbol-laden materials and artifacts in ways that are culturally constituted and circumscribed. In defining...
the term “activities,” I find Schiffer’s definition apposite:

An activity is defined as a patterned interaction between an energy source ... and other material elements. ... By “patterned” interaction is meant the strong tendency for activity performance to be repeated in the same place (or type of place) with the same constituents in the same way (Schiffer 1992:4).

I begin this argument on theoretical grounds, returning to an examination of classic ethnography—including Malinowski’s bwayma—to continue my argument on evidentiary grounds. (I caution the reader, however, that I am here ransacking the secondary literature to make my point.) More broadly, I would like to demonstrate the enormous theoretical and interpretive cost of anthropology’s penchant to ignore technology, which I define as those activities that involve the creation, appropriation, and use of artifacts. I will show that the meanings expressed by a completed bwayma, complex as they are, are all but inconsequential in comparison to the meanings generated by the activities that produce bwaymas. This essay’s approach is consonant with an emerging theoretical stance in social anthropology and ethnoarchaeology that understands technological activities as a means of creating meanings and social relationships as well as artifacts (Childs 1999; Riddington 1998), and kindred stances in cultural anthropology that discount essentialist interpretations of artifact meanings (Appadurai 1986; Thomas 1991).

THE STRONG PROGRAM IN SYMBOLIC ANTHROPOLOGY

Any visitor to Japan will soon be struck by the omnipresent phenomenon of “cuteness” (kawaii) in Japanese artifacts. Should you buy a book, you’ll find a bookmark with a cute, cuddly cartoon figure—a kitty, a bunny, a child. Cuteness reigns in advertisements, greeting cards, stuffed animals, feature-length animated cartoons, and TV shows. Women strive for cuteness; a best-selling “how-to” book advocates cuteness as a guise within which a savvy woman can achieve her goals. Cuteness certainly occurs in other cultures, but in Japan it’s a complex, a fixation. Trying to unravel the cuteness puzzle, anthropologist Brian McVeigh (1996) insightfully argues that the cuteness complex functions as a “complex, paradoxical commentary on sociopolitical relations” in Japanese society, reinforcing the mutual rights and obligations of superiors and inferiors (particularly in gender relations). Interpersonally, cuteness provides a defense of sorts against male exploitation; that which is “cute” is certainly inferior, but it also deserves to be cuddled and cared for. But McVeigh, like many anthropologists, takes this argument much further, and suggests that the cuteness complex is one of the cornerstones on which the entire edifice of Japanese gender relations rests; constant exposure to “cute” symbols serves to lay down what McVeigh calls a “bedrock of belief” (1996:308) without which such relations could not function so smoothly. Similarly, in a study of pottery decoration, David et al. (1988:379) argue that designs on pots provide a “low technology channel through which society implants its values in the individual—every day at mealtimes.” One could multiply citations here endlessly; in various guises, this thesis is one of the most commonly advanced theoretical assumptions in anthropology.

I term this thesis the strong program in symbolic anthropology: namely, that people create symbols because social systems cannot function, or at least cannot function so smoothly, without the meanings that artifacts publicly disseminate. Variants of this thesis include a social learning approach, such as McVeigh’s, in which the meanings expressed in artifacts are seen to be crucial to socialization. In archaeology, Wobst (1977) influenced decades of subsequent theorizing by formulating the information exchange theory of artifact style. Wobst suggested that artifacts express visible style variations because such variations encode social information that must be publicly and visibly expressed if social relations are to function smoothly. Wobst further predicted that, due to the high cost of encoding information in styles, “only simple invariate and recurrent messages will normally be transmitted stylistically” (Wobst 1977:323). In addition, Wobst predicted that messages expressed by means of style would need to be highly visible, since they are generally intended for those who do not know the message sender well.

Wobst’s approach seems apposite in considering the Trobriand bwayma; the conspicuous buildings are conspicuously located and convey what appears to be a simple, straightforward message: they provide, Malinowski inferred, a ready index to a given chief’s political power and wealth. One might surmise that such
an index is convenient indeed, given that Trobriand society is marked by constant wrangling over minute variations in the prestige of competing lineages. And one could easily make the leap to the proposition that Trobriand society could not possibly function so smoothly without such visible indices. But such an assertion is vulnerable on theoretical grounds; for one thing, it constitutes a post hoc ergo propter hoc fallacy (Hantman 1983). The mere fact of a symbols' existence does not conclusively demonstrate that it plays an indispensable functional role. To make a case for such a proposition, one must at the minimum advance some sort of theory that specifies just why the communication of meanings is so vital to the maintenance of social relations.

As for the bwayma, one could bring in a bit of economics to make the case; one could argue that the bwayma exists because it economically expresses a host of meanings that could not otherwise be stated in such concise terms. And after all, people in many societies go to great lengths to appropriate and display artifacts that signal subtle gradations in prestige. But this is a matter of the expression of meaning, and it is quite another matter to argue convincingly that Trobriand society could not function so smoothly if such gradations could not be so visibly expressed. After all, as Malinowski observed, a given chief's prestige is a matter of common knowledge within the local community; it is more credible to assert that the bwayma takes on its form in order to send a message to outsiders—specifically, prospective kula partners. Yet there is no evidence that this is indeed the case.

Even if such evidence could be found, there are additional theoretical grounds for questioning the strong program's central theoretical contention, namely, that Trobrianders build bwaymas because the message they embody is in some sense crucial to their community's smooth functioning. The first of these grounds concerns the fact that artifact-borne meanings are notoriously susceptible to subversive reinterpretation (Miller 1987). In the Trobriands, a relatively large bwayma could very well attest to a chief's power. But how small must a bwayma become before it sends the opposite message, namely, that the chief who caused this particular bwayma to be built is not in command of a sufficiently large network of supporters? Arguably, a society that relied on artifact-borne messages to convey crucial meanings would be rife with conflict and confusion, rather than consensus.

The second line of argument for rejecting the strong program focuses on the a priori assumptions that are necessarily made about the nature of the messages deemed to be broadcast by an artifact. Malinowski simply assumes that the bwayma's message is an index, a relatively simple message that quickly sums up a social status. But he makes no inquiry to determine whether the bwayma's message might be better described as a symbol. As Victor Turner (1967) argued compellingly, symbols are characterized by ambiguity, multiple shades of meaning, and even provocative contradiction. To the extent that the bwayma's message is symbolic, it seems most unlikely that any such symbol would develop because of its capacity to disseminate an unambiguous meaning. On the contrary, an adequate theoretical account of artifact-borne information exchange should be able to explain precisely why such symbols are typically so riddled with contradiction and polysemy.

**Symbols Are the Consequence of Meaning-Formation Processes (Not the Cause)**

Why, then, do people build symbolism into artifacts? In what follows, I argue that artifact-borne symbols should be understood as a consequence of the social processes that create shared meanings, rather than as a cause of such meanings. Consider the Japanese cuteness complex. Most consumers of "cute" artifacts are girls and young women; they purchase and display these artifacts, and they imitate them in dress and demeanor. In other words, they engage in activities of artifact appropriation that create a very considerable demand for such artifacts. It seems reasonable to suggest that the cuteness complex exists not because it sends a vital message to Japanese girls, but rather that Japanese girls very frequently engage in some sort of social process that requires a very large number of cute artifacts—artifacts that embody a contradictory, ambiguous message about cuteness and inferiority.

Thanks to the work of Daniel Miller (1987), there are powerful theoretical grounds for making precisely this contention. Drawing on an impressive body philosophical and psychological theory concerning material objects and the formation of personal identity, Miller argues convincingly that, in all human societies, we come to know ourselves by appropriating and...
manipulating things. In childhood, Miller notes, artifact manipulation is a prominent part of object formation processes, in which individuation and self-awareness develop. This process does not stop with maturity, Miller argues; as adults, we continue to appropriate artifacts to understand the circumstances of our lives. In the context of Japanese gender relations, arguably, “cute” artifacts provide a touchstone for the formation of feminine identities; Japanese girls appropriate “cute” artifacts in an effort to understand and adapt to a world in which their lives will be sharply circumscribed by male prerogatives. To put this point another way, the ubiquity of “cute” artifacts in Japan attests to the ubiquity of the user appropriation activities involving these artifacts. To be sure, the omnipresence of “cute” artifacts in Japanese society doubtless serves to circumscribe the range of available accommodative behaviors, and to disseminate meanings about gender relations, but one can also argue forcefully that the artifacts themselves cannot be fully understood if you have not been through what a Japanese girl goes through.

Let me make my assertion clear by stating it as baldly as possible: On theoretical grounds, I am contending that the symbolism encoded in so many human artifacts is largely an epiphenomenon; such symbolism is properly regarded as the result of technological activities that generate shared cultural meaning, rather than the cause of such meanings. And it follows that no anthropological account of cultural symbolism can claim anything but a limited extent (Tambiah 1990:73). To capture this notion, Malinowski led the campaign to dissociate social anthropology from the nonscientific enthusiasms of collectors and evolutionary theorists, who built their wild-guess theories by removing artifacts from their social context. Subsequent anthropologists took Malinowski’s aversion to mean that the study of technology is verboten in principle, but Malinowski did not take such an extreme view: “Personally I am interested in technology only in so far as it reveals the traditional ways and means by which knowledge and industry solve certain problems presented by a given culture” (1935:1, 240). The specific Trobriand problems to which Malinowski refers are those of a redistributive economy and “big man” political system, in which prestige and political power accrue to those who are able to accumulate impressive numbers of yams. And so, in his least-read work (Coral Gardens and their Magic, 1935), Malinowski endeavored to provide a meticulous account of the activities that culminate in a bwayma.

Malinowski found that a bwayma is much more than a building. Properly understood, the bwayma should be understood as a sort of recipe or blueprint, not merely for creating a structure, but far more importantly to create and synchronize the very social relationships that are crucial to the chief’s bid for prestige. Under construction (along with the building itself) are the social and political relationships on which the chief must rely if he is to make a bid for higher rank; he must transform his kinship relationships into a well-oiled, extensive machine, one that is capable of producing astonishing numbers of yams. As Malinowski painstakingly documents, the bwayma provides a sort of blueprint—a “pre-energized social template,” in Malinowski’s words—that enables a chief to call forth his kin, and draw them into a step-by-step sequence of fabricative and ritual activities, which run “parallel” to each other in a “strictly-determined” order (1935:1, 470). The chief needs a well-oiled machine; building the bwayma provides an opportunity to “trigger” this machine, as well as to test its condition, strength, and extent (Tambiah 1990:73). To capture this notion, Malinowski spoke of the bwayma activity as a “pre-
energized social template" that could be set into motion by a chief making a bid for high rank.

Thus far, Malinowski's analysis of the bwayma affirms this essay's central contention, namely, that it is not the visible symbolism of the resulting artifact, but rather the technological activities in which the artifact is imbricated, that serve to reinforce and sustain social relations. Going further, I would like to show that understanding these activities also holds the key to grasping the artifact's symbolism and paves the way for understanding the role played by artifacts in the construction of shared cultural meanings. Here, as will be seen, Malinowski makes an interpretive blunder, but nevertheless provides sufficient information to point to a way toward a more credible interpretation.

Turning to an analysis of the ritual activities that run parallel to bwayma construction in a strict sequence, Malinowski discovered that the bwayma itself embodies complex ideological symbolism: the structure symbolizes a canoe that has been dragged from the sea and anchored to the land. Malinowski discovered this symbolism by exploring the meanings related to the constituent parts of the structure. For example, the transversal logs that provide the bwayma's foundation are called kaylagim, recalling the transversal boards (lagim) that enclose the well of the canoe at both ends. The anchored-canoe metaphor is affirmed and repeated almost endlessly in the various magical rituals that accompany bwayma construction. The rite that precedes the filling of the bwayma, called vilam alia, a ritual of plenty and prosperity, echoes the theme of transformation. The vilamalia serves to "anchor the canoe": enumerating every component of the bwayma, the magician recites, "It shall be anchored," like immovable stone, like bedrock.

Malinowski's evidence affirms that the entire process of bwayma construction drives home the theme of transformation; a canoe is anchored, and in so doing it undergoes a parallel transformation from light to dark, concepts that are loaded with meaning in Trobriand culture. Indeed, the resulting artifact itself can be seen as a sort of preindustrial multimedia device that is designed to drive home the contrast between light and dark. Prior to loading the yams, the structure is open, light, and airy; once the yams have been stored, it is closed, dark, and full. Running in parallel with rituals such as the vilamalia that stress the transformation from light and open to dark, heavy, and closed, the act of stuffing the bwayma with yams echoes and affirms the meanings that saturate the entire bwayma activity: the bwayma is a formerly light canoe that has been dragged on to land, made heavy and full, made dark, affixed to the earth. The structure indeed seems optimized to emphasize this transformation.

What does this mean? What does it matter that a canoe is anchored to the earth, and in so doing, becomes full, dark, and heavy? As an informant named Bagido'u explained to an uncomprehending Malinowski:

Suppose the vilamalia were not made. Men and women would want to eat all the time, morning, noon and evening. Their bellies would grow big, they would swell—all the time they would want more and more food. I make the magic, the belly is satisfied, it is rounded up. A man takes half a tya and leaves the other half. A woman cooks the food; she calls her husband and her children—they do not come. They want to eat pig, they want to eat food from the bush, and the fruits of trees. Kaulo (yam-food) they do not want. The food in the bwayma rots... 'till the next harvest. Nothing is eaten (Malinowski 1935:1, 227).

Another villager, echoing Bagido'u's statement:

When we do not make the magic of prosperity, the belly is like a very big hole—it constantly demands food. After we [perform the rites] the belly is already satisfied (Malinowski 1935:1, 227).

In short, Malinowski's informants repeatedly stressed that the experience of building the bwayma and participating in its various constituent rituals, such as the vilamalia, brought about a crucial transformation in the men and women who participated. They began as greedy, hungry people who would not hesitate to eat yams until their entire culture fell apart. But by the time the bwayma is built, they lose their hunger for yams. They become the kind of people Trobrianders must be if they are to achieve the goals that, as a community, they set for themselves.

But here, Malinowski's interpretive powers meet their match. Ridiculing his informants' interpretation of the vilamalia, Malinowski points to the many substances used in the ritual that would seem to symbolize fertility, and he goes on to develop his naive psychological theory, which is easily refuted (Tambiah 1990), that the
use of magic stems from the anxiety of a primitive people faced with uncertain weather and the potential failure of crop failure. It is striking that Malinowski failed to connect the outcome of the bwayma with the central problem faced by any redistributive culture, namely, how to appeal to individuals to constrain their consumption in favor of accumulating a surplus.

To grasp the power of bwayma-construction processes in the production of shared meaning, it is instructive to return to Miller's compelling thesis concerning the role artifacts play in the formation of identity. Just as Japanese girls find out what sort of people they can be by appropriating "cute" artifacts, Trobrianders do the same by constructing a bwayma. And what of the symbolism in the resulting artifact? I do not mean to suggest that this symbolism is irrelevant—at the minimum, it serves as a constant reminder to every Trobriander that the survival of their community depends on their becoming yam-refusers. But it is the processes that create the bwayma, rather than these mere reminders, that generate the field of shared meanings that strike outsiders as the distinctive culture of the Trobriand Islands.

And what of Malinowski's earlier suggestion that the bwayma serves as a ready index of a chief's power? His subsequent account of the bwayma provides no evidence in support of this proposition, and in fact I believe it to be deeply misconstrued; Trobrianders would doubtless have jeered at it, and rightly so. A bwayma stands as a testament, a monument, to a community's dedication to transform themselves in ways that they find vital to their community's survival. This point illustrates the interpretive blunders that can be made so easily by ignoring technological activities; to outsiders, it seems perfectly reasonable to suppose that the bwayma might have played a communicative role in providing an index to a chief's power, but this account of the artifact's symbolism—and the role it plays in Trobriand society—misses the mark. Subsequent anthropological research in the Trobriands reveals that the bwayma's symbolism is complex indeed; for Trobrianders, and chiefs are fathers to their people. The activities of building the bwayma—"hammering, structuring, strengthening, growth" are one foundation of the chief's "anti-hunger magic," which emanates from his mystical force; by undertaking such activities, the chief strengthens his people and his community by giving them a firm, sturdy form, like that of a yam; indeed, yams are people (Mosko 1995). To construct the bwayma is to construct an entire community as well as the persons who live within it; otherwise, the community would be amorphous and unable to act collectively (Wiener 1988). In short, what produces meaning in the Trobriands are not the material results of chiefly activities (such as the bwayma), but rather the activities that bind the chief and his people in a binding, structured, and reciprocal relationship that is marked by the cessation of hunger.

The Lightened Log: Gawan Canoes

As argued in the previous section, Malinowski came close to formulating a remarkably contemporary theory of technological activity in relation to the construction of social relations, but missed an opportunity to grasp the profound role that technological activity can play in the generation of shared meaning. But a subsequent anthropological study of another Melanesian island, called Gawa (Munn 1974, 1986), was to push Malinowski's interpretation to its logical conclusion. What is striking about Munn's study, and what makes it particularly interesting to discuss in this context, is that the activity Munn studied is a symbolic reversal of the Trobriand "anchored canoe," which was transformed into a dark, heavy object. In Gawa, islanders transform a dark, heavy object—a log—into a light, gaily decorated canoe, which constitutes the chief economic contribution that Gawans make to the kula exchange. Munn's ethnography helps to illuminate the meanings that are only crudely described in Malinowski's work; the many islands of Melanesia can be viewed as an extensive cultural area in which islanders work out broadly shared cultural themes in distinctive ways (Damon 1989).

Gawa, an island of some 400 souls at the time of anthropologist Nancy Munn's study, is famed for hundreds of miles in all directions for the beautiful, seagoing canoes the islanders make. Gawans fabricate canoes by hollowing out logs, a laborious process that can take up to seven months to complete. In creating the bwayma, Trobriand Islanders metaphorically bring a light canoe to the island, make it heavy, and anchor it to the earth. In creating a canoe, Gawans take a heavy, dark log from the island, lighten it, and send it to sea. At every step of the canoe's fabrication, the various rites (not to mention the technical acts of construction) are intended to transform the canoe from a dark, heavy log into something light and airy, a vessel that can (as Gawans put it) "fly" across the surface of the water. To acquire
the requisite propulsion, Gawans hollow out the log, and also use magic, which Munn engagingly describes as a kind of "kinesis" that is "given by humans to wood."

What is striking about Munn's account of Gawan canoe-making (1974) is that, like bwayma-making, this activity's social organization is well described by Malinowski's term "pre-energized social template," one that people can use when they decide to make a bid for higher rank. The man who takes on the seemingly self-sacrificial task of fabricating the canoe begins by calling forth the labor of his matrilineal clan mates. Along with their spouses, they form the construction team (the men build the canoe, while the women cook for the workers). But this labor, Munn notes sardonically, must be “compensated” (Munn's quotation marks). Munn observes that nowhere else in Gawan social life would men compensate women for cooking services; the expectation of compensation here struck Munn as a contrivance of sorts, a fiction adopted to serve the expectation of compensation here.

In this way, Gawans must become people who will not eat yams. At stake in this transformation, Gawans explain, is the fame of Gawa. In the Gawan scheme of things, excessive eating makes the body heavy and slow and dull; stuffing oneself lies at the opposite extreme from the positive values of youthfulness, buoyant lightness, and feelings of joy (Munn 1986:76). In overeating, one takes on the heaviness of the soil, a quality that is positive in gardens but not in people. One becomes indolent; one's garden dies; one cannot give to others. Restricting one's consumption is the necessary condition for the creation of a surplus, and ultimately of Gawa's fame, as one Gawan put it (when someone eats a lot of food):

... it makes his stomach swell; he does nothing but eat and lie down; but when we give food to someone else, when an overseas visitor eats pig, vegetable food, chews betel, then he will take away its noise, its fame. If we ourselves eat, there is no noise, no fame, it will disappear, [become] rubbish, it will default. If we give to visitors, they praise us, it's fine. If not there is no fame; Gawa and lie down; but when we give food to someone else, when an overseas visitor eats pig, vegetable food, chews betel, then he will take away its noise, its fame. If we ourselves eat, there is no noise, no fame, it will disappear, [become] rubbish, it will default. If we give to visitors, they praise us, it's fine. If not there is no fame; Gawa would have no kula shells, no men of high standing, no kula fame (Munn 1986:49).  

Why does canoe-building help to create and sustain meanings so powerful that one no longer feels an appetite for yams? Here, Munn anticipates the anthropology of experience (Stoller 1989); she emphasizes the meaning-formation potency of a social process that brings canoe-builders face-to-face with a range of alternative modalities of personhood, ranging from the dark, heavy, indolent yam-eater (symbolized by the log)
to the light, buoyant, and joyful person who refuses to eat yams (symbolized by the completed canoe). The transformation of material is paralleled by a transformation of self, for constructing the canoe engages Gawans in a type of social theater, one that reveals to Gawans the type of moral conflict in which they are involved (Munn 1986:272). To make a canoe is to transform one kind of person into another, and to engage in this activity is to experience this transformation kinaesthetically: you caress the heavy dark person at the beginning, and the buoyant, light person at the end—and in so doing, you are yourself transformed, in a context that dramatizes all that hangs in the balance. And in making the canoe, Gawans construct the social relations that are indispensable to their gaining entry to the valued kula exchanges, without which there would be no fame. The canoe that stems from this process embodies these meanings, but its meaning-formation role would seem to be inconsequential for Gawans themselves; it merely “calls” to the prospective kula partner, and soon departs from the scene.

**Conclusion**

In this essay, I have argued that the symbolism encoded in artifacts is epiphenomenal; that is, such symbolism is a consequence of activities that produce shared meanings, rather than a cause of such meanings.

As this essay demonstrates, it is both fallacious to argue, and empirically very difficult to demonstrate, that artifacts embody symbolism because the dissemination of symbolically expressed meanings is in some sense vital to the maintenance of social relations. In consequence, there are strong theoretical grounds, and it is comparatively easy to demonstrate, that artifacts embody symbolism as a consequence of the role artifacts play in technological activities, including manufacture and user appropriation.

Japan is not riddled with cute artifacts because their sheer number tips the balance in girls’ acquiescence to stratified gender relations; there are huge numbers of cute artifacts because correspondingly huge numbers of Japanese girls undergo an accommodative process in which the appropriation of cute artifacts plays a helpful role. The shores of Trobriand Island villages do not have large yam storehouses because these structures broadcast some sort of indispensable cultural meaning; the storehouses exist because building them enables chiefs to construct and test the economic and political relations required to make a bid for higher status, and because his followers view the storehouse-building activities as the primary means by which the community can ensure that its members are the right kind of people. Gawan canoes do not symbolize a light, buoyant person because the communication of this meaning is vital to Gawan society; they embody this meaning as the result of an activity in which the material transformation from log to canoe is paralleled by a kindred transformation in the canoe-builders’ soul and spirit, and because the activity constructs the exchange relations required to propel the canoe off the island. In short, symbols do not create meanings; activities do.

This essay demonstrates the enormous cost of Anglo-American anthropologists’ penchant to ignore technological activities, as if they constituted something wholly instrumental, banal, and outside the purview of anthropological interest. Such an attitude represents an almost unbelievable interpretive blunder, in that it posits the universality of Anglo-American culture’s mapping (and rigid social separation) of technical and symbolic space, which cultures can and do map in different ways (Childs 1999:38–39). As Tim Ingold has argued (1993), the Anglo-American cultural mapping of technological and symbolic spaces is a form of alienation in the classic Marxist sense, a consequence of an industrial revolution that separated artifacts from the activities that produce them; it is hardly surprising that Anglo-American anthropologists would so often express the tenets of the strong program in symbolic anthropology, in which artifacts—divorced from the activities in which they are created, used, maintained, appropriated, stolen, sabotaged, and destroyed—are viewed through an essentialist lens in which they possess immutable meanings. In rejecting a consideration of technological activities, some Anglo-American anthropologists imagine that they are refraining from imposing external values on non-Western cultures; in reality, they are imposing their own fetishized conception of technology on social settings in which it is indefensible to make a priori assumptions about the mapping of technological and symbolic space. The result is a deeply misleading impression of human beings suspended in meanings that they themselves have constructed (to paraphrase Geertz). By bringing technological activities back into the picture, one sees human beings actively using...
activities to create the type of people, as well as the modalities of social relationship, that they deem vital to their community’s survival.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This essay was written with the assistance of a fellowship from the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in the Social Sciences, in Uppsala, Sweden. I should like to thank Ulf Hannerz, then the Center’s codirector, for suggesting that I reexamine classic ethnography in light of the findings of science and technology studies (STS). I previously examined the Trobriand and Gawa cases in, Worlds in the Making: Technological Activities and the Construction of Intersubjective Meaning (Dobres and Hoffman 1999).

REFERENCES CITED

Appadurai, A.  

Childs, T. S.  

Damon, F.  


Dobres, M-A., and C. R. Hoffman  

Hantman, J.  

Ingold, T.  

Malinowski, B.  


McVeigh, B.  

Miller, D.  

Mosko, M.  

Munn, N.  


Pfaffenberger, B.  

Riddington, R.  

Schiffer, M. B.  

Stoller, P.  

Tambiah, S.  
1990 Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of

Turner, V.  

Thomas, N.  

Wiener, A.  

Wobst, H. M.  