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Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade**KINGDOM COME, BUT WHO IS THE KING?
ESSAY ON THE CONCEPT OF AMBIGUITY AS
CLAIMED BY E. R. LEACH²**

Abstract: I discuss analytic purpose of the term ambiguity, as used by E. R. Leach, for the issues concerning identification with cultural heroes. Cultural heroes represent cultural cognitive models, which are unquestionable concerning norms and values they stand for in the real life, no matter some contradictions could be noted within them by the external observer. People striving to improve their status – as Leach has put it – by identifying with the figures of cultural heroes do not take into consideration such contradictions, taking the model and its representative, cultural hero, as granted form for the object of their identification. If we study what those people think and how they behave accordingly, and not that what we the anthropologist think they think and do, I argue that the term ambiguity is analytically obsolete.

Key words: ambiguity, contradiction, identification, cultural hero, structural anthropology, cognitive anthropology.

Interpretative anthropology is discursive in itself. It constructs its categories of interpretation in the way anthropologists consider that it suits best the facts from the real world reviewed through certain theoretical lenses and explained in the words invented to fit in its method of analysis. One such word from a particular theoretical and methodological vocabulary is *ambiguity* of structural anthropologists' analytic and interpretative basics. The notion of ambiguity is based on the concept of *contradiction*, which in turn has been seen as an elemental tool for logical comprehension of cultural concepts: structural anthropologists imagined man's cultural mind as a net consisted of binary oppositions, their transformations and paradigms in constant trafficking, where overcoming the contradictions which are postulated by binary coding when

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conceptualizing nature and culture is set as the primary aim of putting such net into effect (Žikić 2009).

One is tempted to claim that structural anthropologists looked upon contradiction as the basic feature of human world, because numerous results of structural anthropology analyses suggested that overcoming the contradiction is the specific goal of particular myth, legend, story or so (cf. Lévi-Straus 1955, 1959; Leach 1953, 1961, 1969, 1970; Kovačević 1985). I will put it this way, even it is not formulated so by structural anthropologists explicitly: contradiction is what determines world in itself, being that world of nature or human world, i.e. world of culture; overcoming the contradiction is the way of organizing human world in a conceptual manner, while ambiguity is that what lies between the concept of contradiction and the conceptual way of overcoming it. Ambiguity is human condition by itself, the description of what people feel when facing contradictions, the platform from where they start their reasoning in answering the contradictions, but also the quality ascribed to other human subjects and their actions.

Although a general claim of structural analysis in anthropology was that its outcome is the presentation of the way certain cultural contradictory situation is resolved by handling ambiguity in contextually preferable manner, in my opinion ambiguity is analytically redundant. I will discuss my claim focusing on Leach. He postulated that communication approach in analyzing how mythological systems impact behavior of individuals and groups should refer always to omnipresent ambiguity of implications inherent to such systems, and has illustrated that by the example of a Christian who tends to improve his/her spiritual status through mass and Holy Communion³, where improvement of status is in the believer becoming like King as much as possible; ambiguity is in the possible outcomes of connoting the King – it could be Jesus as King in Heaven, or Herod as King of Judea (Leach 1973:55) Could it be Elvis (Presley) also, as King of rock'n'roll?

Leach's thought has two implications by itself: it could be understood as an interpretation of actual religious behavior, and then it is obsolete – believers do not know anything of ambiguity when it is perceived as the choice between the central figure of their cult and anything else; they simply believe. It could be understood also as an interpretation of the very process of identification with cultural heroes, addressing the possibility that there are some other qualities beside those inspired by the original context of such figure appearing in particular culture that inform people in approaching the process of identification. I will try to "make my case" upon this latter interpretation, but arguing that it makes no analytical sense to superpose cultural heroes originating from different contexts,

³ Leach exercised this also on the case of Ceylon's (former name of Sri Lanka) Buddhist, see Leach 1962.

even when certain perception of one of them could be seen as part of another one's context. Placing one over another so that all like parts coincide could work only if there are like parts. And those parts would be like not if they look one to another, but if they mean the same.

Striving to improve one's status is another way to say that somebody wants to identify him/herself with a cultural hero because of the reasons stemming from individual motives, to which performative framework is supplied by certain cultural context. It has to be publicly recognizable due to the shared quality of cultural communications and that is what makes it eligible to anthropological analysis. Identification with cultural heroes is not performed only being based on some scripture. People tending to identify themselves in that manner do not have any need to explain contradictions and to resolve ambiguities concerning the final result of their identification; they claim they *know* the object of their identification, and their knowledge is what matters, not just the symbols associated to that object.

Contradictions make part of the process of identification: identification is based on conceptual separation of similar from dissimilar, like from unlike. Identification considered as practical result of the cognitive process of identification could suggest to structural anthropologists that ambiguity is overcome and contradiction is resolved, but identification does not happen for that reason. Identification comes as constant cognitive process of connecting meaning, ideas, and values in humans, within certain space and time, usually defined as social and cultural context responsible for defining and sharing such communication⁴, which means that it is based on individual embracing of cultural cognitive patterns, schemes and models, and on their public displaying and perpetuating.

But let's go back to kings this discussion has started from. None of them is a real king, a crowned sovereign of a country⁵. I rather see the word "king" as something connoting their field of expertise in cultural cognition of the Western culture, where semantics of their reign is positioned within the domain of general cultural competence, gained by living in particular culture, and acquired not only through institutional means of knowledge. We all know that Jesus is King in Heaven, while Elvis is King of rock'n'roll, and such knowledge mostly did not come to us through agency of the system of education, but through experience of

⁴ I was inspired for this claim by a note on the relation of identification to cognition, made by my doctoral student Marija Ristivojević, who suggested this kind of "connectivist" relation between those concepts in her seminal paper, as well by the connectionism of cognitive anthropology, where the latter is a way of thinking I usually do not pursue in my discussions.

⁵ Herod's title is *tetrarch*, which literally means "ruler of the quarter of a country", and his striving for kingdom was what had cost him his head, cf. Jensen 2007.

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living in particular cultural surroundings, through learning culture, its communication and re-creating through more informal ways of knowledge transmission.

Cultural cognitive patterns, schemes, and models are modeled just like that: by transmitting cultural material acquired in many different ways. Culturally accurate use of such knowledge is based on the ability to recognize which part of the cultural inventory is compatible to which cultural sub-context, and what we learn about that in our everyday social life is considered to be more important for our appreciation of the figure of cultural hero, which is modeled after some imaginary or real character, than what we learn about that figure or its "original" model through more institutionalized ways of transmitting the knowledge. When we attribute Jesus as King in Heaven, or Elvis as King of rock'n'roll, we do not recollect what we have learned about them in school or in the Sunday school, or even through some supposedly accurate reports on their lives; we think of them as of figures, conceptual representations, adding to those representations and taking from them a bit, as far as our further communication of those figures could be comprehensible to others, or culturally shared.

Verbalized patterns of culturally rooted, learnt, and shared knowledge become cultural cognitive schemes, which in turn make parts of cultural cognitive models (cf. D'Andrade 1992): scheme suggesting that king is the ruler of a realm is essential to formation of any cultural cognitive model responsible for cultural thinking of sovereignty, expertise, self-sufficiency, excellence, having no match in some domain etc. That scheme relates literal, or basic, meaning of the principle notions it contends to the cultural metaphor, as the basic tool of cultural communication.

Metaphorical potential of the verbal communication has been subject of structural anthropologists' analyses, where discussions on the transformations of notions into categories followed the sense of logically plausible paradigmization: sequences have been reviewed from the perspective of mathematical logic (cf. Leach 1964, Жикић 1997). Structural anthropologists dealt with grammatical subject and object by overlooking almost unlimited metaphoric and symbolic potential of the predicate. The verb "to rule" is the crucial element of the scheme "king is one who rules the realm"⁶. It is what makes possible an almost unlimited span of the communication net considering attributing something as "kingdom" within a particular culture, because language enables existence of the kings of different abstract realms, like "Kingdom of Heaven", or "Rock'n'roll", or even – and that we know by the experience of living in certain culture – "Tabloid" and "Cocaine".

The way we conceptualize cultural heroes is embedded in the ways cultural cognitive models are formatted, and those models are based on schemes

⁶ "To rule" as the synonym to "to reign", or "to govern".

expressed through verbal patterns. Concepts derived after such process are not modeled by binary coding exclusively, i. e. the mechanism of the process does not come entirely after the perception of semantic oppositions responsible for meaningful operations with cultural symbols, as suggested by structural anthropologists (cf. Dundes 1997). The roots of the mechanism are psychological and it is hard to estimate precisely how culture really affects them, although culture makes a frame of reference considering their meaningful expressions through (cultural) communication (cf. Strauss 1992): it is the need to know something, to have opinion about something, the conviction that such knowledge or thought is objective or merit by itself, without its logical or factual checking, just because it is part of some broader cultural system of knowledge, values, or beliefs, even if it is not verified as such by social or cultural institutions dealing with knowledge acquisition and transmission.

Figures of cultural heroes associated with kingdom in this text are all also parts of a general cultural context, and not only of contexts of religion, politics, or popular culture. Attitudes that people of our culture have towards them – including those striving to identify with some of them – are not based on sacred scriptures or history books only. Even the knowledge with which believers engage themselves in worshipping the religious figure of Jesus is shaped by more sources than sacred scriptures only: it could be part of oral transmission, come to them through media, or else, so their striving for identification would be shaped similarly due to local cultural differences of the cultural model promoted by certain figure of cultural hero, and all of the values embedded in it. Jesus from Brazilian favelas differs significantly to Jesus from the US East Coast suburbs, although it is essentially the same religious figure from the same sacred scripture.

People striving to identify themselves with cultural heroes do not need sacred scriptures in their enterprise: there is no scripture on Elvis Presley for example, but in cases like that, what we all know about such figures is that what their worshippers know also, and that comes from creative heritage of the real people after whom cultural heroes are modeled, as well from folklore they and their heritage are surrounded with in cultural cognition (cf. Höpfl 2008). And the latter is where formatting figures of cultural heroes is similar concerning both Jesus and Elvis: real data is put aside to make place for what is considered to be words, deeds, messages, lifestyle etc. of the cultural heroes. But check this: the figure of Herod looks the most reliable of all of three figures attributed with kingdom in this text, being historical figure supposedly untouched by religion or popular culture, yet what we know about him is not result of the study of politics or history, but it originated directly from the Christian scripture, and was formed based on the guesses of the 19th Century historians, then established in Western culture through popular judgments, common knowledge and modern folklore (cf. Bartchy 2005).

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Turning to other sources of information on central figures of worshiping and/or fandom than those mediated through institutions usually responsible for knowledge transfer within the society suggests that those behaviors aimed at taking off some features of or deeds performed by such figures – or identification with it in order to improve one's status, as Leach proposed – could hardly be loaded with ambiguities as structural anthropologists claimed they were. Fans and worshippers know which features of cultural heroes they strive to identify with (cf. Margry and Sánchez-Carretero 2007, Duffet 2003). It does not matter effectively if it is a religious figure or the one from popular culture, politics or else, striving to identification with each of them is based on symbolic association of certain features of those figures to the conceptual model of life preferred and its values to which it is striving to. The Jesus that his worshippers want to identify with is determined by cultural locality in a manner similar to that by which difference is made between him and Herod in the Gospel According to Mark for example: Jesus from Brazil favors families with as many kids as possible, and parents living with all of their kids, but also with their parents together, while in Kansas or in Missouri Jesus could be found who is eager to annihilate all the sinners of the world in a manner of St. Augustine's preaching – and preferably those who mention St. Augustine in their services too.

But why are Jesus and Herod contested over kingdom, and not over something else, does it have something to do with why Herod is connoted as a king after all? Gospel According to Mark portrays him in that way, but not as a king as depicted in the genitive scheme of a king. Herod is a king in Mark as a literary character, with the distinct features of the literary figure of a king, known to the readers of the certain culture. Old Greek literature, as well Hellenistic and early Christian literature demanded the type of character attributed as "a king" in telling their stories. That character, and every character of every literary genre of those times in fact, has been based on Aristotle's thought of a plot of the story as something which is more important than its characters themselves, wherefrom the typology of characters was based on the assignment of the particular characters to illustrate their general features by their behavior, i.e. to satisfy the expectations of the audience with regard to the type of the character in itself (Smith 2006: 263 et passim).

Each king should have been king of the country in such literature, and should have acted according to cultural representations of his character, and I dare say that such character of king has been based on cognitive scheme of ruling of its time, where crucial for that scheme used to be the quality of ruling, and not grammatical implications of elements (word categories) it consisted from: the ruling was featured as a tyranny, and the ruler as a tyrant⁷. Elements of typology which

⁷ The terms "tyrant" and "tyranny" did not possess the same meaning in the time Gospels were written as they have nowadays, see Smith 2006 for details.

patterned cultural cognitive pattern of king as the tyrant have been: the tyrant's paranoia, the tyrant's maintenance of the bodyguard, the tyrant's being prone to excess, and the tyrant's encounter with philosopher (Smith 2006: 271).

Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels does not fit that frame, on the other hand, where it is hard to think that it is possible to confuse the concepts of "King in Heaven" and of "King of Judea (King on the Earth)" in the process of identification of any kind, and certainly not in the process of religious/ ritual identification. There is a contradiction between those concepts, of course, but I doubt it seriously that contradiction matters for the category of the communicants – as Leached called it – i.e. for the believers and worshippers. Believing and/or worshipping means focusing individual and collective resources and attention on the precise figure, representing precise cognitive model of a cultural hero to whom somebody or the group is identifying with, and it does not mean cognitive wasting of such resources on the puzzles postulated by the binary oppositions. Binary codes are embedded in myths and religious stories, but they are not embedded in the practices that surround products of such tales, like religious rituals or cultural heroes. When there is no contradiction as the description of the facticity, there is no ambiguity in practice as the reaction to the contradiction.

If Jesus does not fit in the cognitive scheme of king from ancient Greek, Hellenistic, or early Christian culture, Elvis Presley surprisingly does, or at least he does so in his representation as a cultural hero. Some of many possible elements of such scheme were his often openly and publicly expressed and repeated concerns for the condition of the American nation in 1960's and his claims that he is capable of breaking social and cultural consequences of 1960's counter-culture, as well as his parading around and showing off with his bodyguards, and extreme food consuming, described by some authors as an addiction to food (cf. Plasketes 1997, Guthman 2009, Adler 1993, Fernández-Armesto 1995, Cooper 2005).

Elvis's encounter with Richard Nixon in 1970 could be described as the element of the scheme too, the one in which king/ tyrant meets the philosopher. One could ask, obviously, who was the king/ tyrant, and who was the philosopher when those two met, and especially as they are reported to have changed their roles in regard to attributing each of them with being one character or another (Jeansonne and Luhrssen 2007), and that inversion of the inner quality of the element of the scheme known as the encounter of tyrant with the philosopher is important for my case, because it gives an example of inner contradiction, with which identities of cultural heroes are usually abundant. Remember Jesus' fury when he cast the moneychangers out of the temple, overthrowing their tables and expressing his anger verbally in a manner that is so different to the essence of his preaching (Mt: 21), or Herod's respect

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for St. Joseph and feeling uneasy to kill him (Mk: 6)⁸. Contradictions like that represent inseparable elements of the identity of cultural hero, and those who tend to follow the model of certain cultural hero review them not as something which should be resolved because it is supposedly contrary to the central norm of the model, but as something which is integral part of the model, and whose interpretation could not be understood without recognition of the model as a whole, which means, without relating it to its norm.

Cultural hero represents a metaphor of that cultural cognitive model whose representation it is, and whose part it makes: Jesus stands as a metaphor for cultural cognitive model of religion, Elvis for the model of popular culture, while in the context of this essay Herod really is a ruler of some physical space. Each of their characters possesses some inner contradictions, as the character of any cultural hero does, but those contradictions are not of any consequence in worshippers' decision towards identification with a cultural hero, or with a cultural model or values, when striving to "improve their status", but play part in reasoning which precedes an engagement in that process. They are the inner qualities of the cultural heroes' characters, elements without which the totality of those characters could not be imagined and constructed.

It hardly makes any analytical purpose to relate different cultural heroes head-to-head, and to conceive their relation as the "switch situation", i.e. like there is one *or* another solution of such situation. What is faced off are different cultural cognitive models, and they are meant to be different, to represent cultural thought of and cultural answers to different spheres of human life in society and culture, including different ontological levels, different layers of abstraction etc. There is no ambiguity when bringing different cultural heroes together in considering the identification process because there is no need for an answer which is meant to be instructive concerning overcoming the contradiction. Cultural models of religion, popular culture, or the state are mutually different obviously and people tending to identify with norms and values postulated by such models usually do not need any further guidance external to model. Their decisions have been made in advance mostly. A worshipper knows that "becoming like king" does not mean identification with any king. The identity he/she is striving to depends on the contextual positioning of the king: king represents something which is pre-modeled, and identification with the king means that worshipper is ready to accept anything connoted by the model; and to do so, the worshipper must be certain about the model. Analytical need for ambiguity ends there.

⁸ The Holy Gospels According to Mark and Matthew refer to *The Holy Bible*. 1974. Belgrade: Biblical Society (orig. Библија или Свето писмо Старога и Новога завета, Београд: Библијско друштво, 1974).

Religion, popular culture, or politics do not organize their part of cultural communication to be critical towards issues inherent to those domains of social and cultural life. Believers, worshippers, fans, communicants – however we put it – do not engage themselves into rituals, fandom, or ideology otherwise than by being uncritical to the objects of their identification; even if there are contradictions in such objects, they opt not to see them or to consider them. Contradiction is an alien concept to devotees of any kind. Cultural cognitive models are unquestionable in what they point to in reality. Their purpose is to guide, to equip an individual with the tools of social orientation and cultural navigation, and not to confuse them by asking enigmatic questions. And when the answers are pre-given, then there is no need for an ambiguity.

If we want to study what people think and do, and not to replace our informants and their worlds with the picture of how we think they look like – as it is part of a credo of cognitive anthropology (cf. D'Andrade 1995, Жикић 2008), we should accept that studying behavior which is irrational by our norms means that we are discussing something which perhaps does not make very much sense in our own terms, but if we want to understand why it does make sense for those who follow "irrational" models or patterns of thinking and acting, we should relate to the way people we study think of things and organize their worlds accordingly. If those whom we study really communicate cultural messages to themselves (Leach 1976), then it is upon an anthropologist to decide whether his/her interpretation is after what he/she thinks people are doing, after what those people think they are doing, or after what those people are really doing (cf. Humphreys and Laidlaw 1994). Ambiguity then turns to be the thought concept of anthropology in itself: we are sure of our interpretations when they are contextually bound by our theory and method. Within such context they are firm and solid, logically coherent; out of it they are easy to contest and appear sometimes to be even disputable. *Ambiguity* and *contradiction* operate perfectly within the context of structural anthropology analysis, for example, but stop making sense when discussed out of it.

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DA DOĐE CARSTVO TVOJE... ALI KO JE CAR? ESEJ O KONCEPTU DVOSMISLENOSTI PREMA E. R. LIČU

Diskutujem analitičku upotrebu termina dvosmislenost u upotrebi E. R. Liča, u pitanjima koja se tiču identifikacije sa kulturnim herojima. Kulturni heroji predstavljaju kulturne kognitivne modele, koji u stvarnom životu predstavljaju neosporne norme i vrednosti, uprkos tome što spoljašnji posmatrač može primeti njihove nedoslednosti. Ljudi, težeći da unaprede svoj status - prema Liču - putem identifikacije sa figurama kulturnih heroja, ne uzimaju u obzir takve nedoslednosti, uzimajući model i njegovog predstavnika, kulturnog heroja, kao date oblike za predmet svoje identifikacije. Ako istražujemo šta ti ljudi misle i kako se ponašaju u skladu sa tim, a ne šta mi kao antropolozi mislimo da oni misle i rade, tvrdim da je termin dvosmislenost analitički zastareo.

Ključne reči: dvosmislenost, nedoslednosti, identifikacija, kulturni heroj, strukturalna antropologija, kognitivna antropologija.