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Symbols, Ecology, and Cultural Variation

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> Every landscape appears first of all as a vast chaos, which leaves one free to choose the meaning one wants to give to it. (Lévi-Strauss 1974: 48)

1. The Symbolic Problem in Prehistory

Robert H. Hall (1978) has suggested recently that archaeologists should consider more seriously the ideological components, in particular the cosmologies, of the prehistoric cultures they investigate. He believes, for example, that he can trace an uninterrupted ideological succession in the archaeological record of the Eastern United States that directly links the Adena "culture" of the first millennium B.C. with several historic Native American groups. This linkage is not necessarily in ethnicity but is rather in "ideas underlying certain symbols, particularly those relating to sun and fire" (1978: 265). In essence, then, Hall proposes that there is a deep structure wich endured for more than two thousand years between prehistoric Adena burial ceremonialism and historically recorded American Indian rituals such as the Sun Dance, the Earth Diver creation myth, the Green Corn Dance, to name but a few.[1]

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Several crucial problems arise in any attempt to join the past and present however. First is the difficulty in isolating the significant individual artifacts or design elements. Which ones were truly meaningful ideologically or cosmologically? Second, because symbols themselves are created by the arbitrary bestowal of meaning, how do we select the correct value(s) from a range of possible interpretations where we lack written records referring directly to these symbols? Neither question has an obvious solution at this time.

Directly related to these issues is the broader problem of methodology. Typically, possible parallels from myths, tales, and the material culture of ethnic units, linguistic units, or both have been assembled, regardless of any probable relationship between the historic or ethnohistoric groups from which these data are originally derived and the prehistoric situation under investigation. These are then, in turn, employed in the construction of ethnographic analogies. We may illustrate this approach with two examples.

A total of 55 conjoined copper tubes, or pan-pipes, have been recovered from 27 Hopewell burial sites in the Eastern United States (ca. 300 B.C. to A.D. 400) (Griffin et al. 1970: 99). They are considered by archaeologists to be ceremonial paraphernalia for either courting rites or rainmaking rituals; they are also interpreted as symbols of plant or animal fertility, or both. Additionally, they are referred to as symbolic of shamans, of other, less

[1] Hall (1978) uses data from a large number of North American tribal groups in his analysis including the Arapaho, Cherokee, Cheyenne, Choctaw, Mandan, Menominee, Ojibwa, Omaha, Osage, and Plains Cree.