

Naming Names:

The Power to Control the Meaning of Media Symbols

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Shoghi Effendi: We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed, everything will be improved.

Beginning with Charles Peirce, sociolinguists have said we inhabit a shared universe of meaning. The 19th century French thinker Ferdinand deSaussure elaborated a system to investigate the nature of signs and the laws governing them, which has evolved into the science of semiotics. Beginning as a study of language and psychology, it has developed into a way of looking at symbolic messages embedded in all kinds of human structures – images, architecture, social events and media texts, as well as culture in general. Semiotics looks at human culture as not existing in the world of the senses, in the diverse outward activities of peoples – their food, entertainment, religions, laws, family structures, etc. Instead, culture exists in our minds. This notion echoes the words of Abdu'l-Bahá who said, “The reality of man is his thought, not his material body” (Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 17). ; it is useful to conceptualize culture first as thought and secondly as action: Outward activities can be seen as symbolic and indicative of beliefs and values. Thus, culture is a system of meaning built upon beliefs and values held in common:

Furthermore, where anthropologists have often regarded culture as a response to comprehending the universe and have theorized that human rituals have been created to explain birth, death, seasonal changes and so on, the Bahá'í writings focus not on ritual acts, but on fundamental spiritual truths giving rise to actions: “True religion is the basis of divine civilization. Material civilization is like unto the body; divine civilization is like unto the spirit” (Abdu'l-Bahá, *Divine Philosophy*, p. 160). Thus, culture has its inception in the revelation of a manifestation of God:

The enlightenment of the world of thought comes from these centers of light and sources of mysteries. Without the bounty of the splendor and the instructions of these Holy

Beings the world of souls and thoughts would be opaque darkness. Without the irrefutable teachings of those sources of mysteries the human world would become the pasture of animal appetites and qualities, the existence of everything would be unreal, and there would be no true life. That is why it is said in the Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word," meaning that it became the cause of all life.[1 John 1:1.] (Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 162-163)

With the coming of a Manifestation, the world of thought is regenerated (*Bahá'í World Faith*, 224); extraordinary progress occurs in minds, thoughts and spirits (*Some Answered Questions*, 163); thoughts and hearts become exhilarated (Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 256); and cultures flower in different forms (Importance of the Arts compilation). Cultures, or systems of meaning, have emerged in different places at different times and receive from messengers of God social teachings that make sense for that time, place, people and age.

Our minds deal in symbols attached to meanings. Collectively we learn the meanings of words and symbols and teach them to our children, Language is one such symbol system. But within cultures agreements are reached about the meanings of other symbols and structures. In the 1890s, theories were developed by Charles Peirce in the United States (semiotics), and Ferdinand deSaussure in France (semiology) who described the self-contained system of signs and symbols wherein everything interconnects perhaps like its own separate kingdom of names, a term that frequently appears in the Bahá'í writings.

Blumer's theory of symbolic interaction says that meanings arise out of our interactions – they exist not in things, not in individuals, but among groups, among cultural members. Together we agree on what symbols mean – a 5-pointed star, a cow, an X, a dog. Two of these exist in nature and take on different meanings in different culture systems. Symbols build upon one another, like the objects to which they're attached, creating complete environments. They are fundamental to human culture and remain hidden in plain sight like the air we breathe. We dwell among symbols of all sorts and rarely think about what some of them mean – the shapes and

styles of our homes and cities, our clothes, all the visible ways we organize our lives contain meanings which we learn, usually unconsciously. “Know thou that every created thing is a sign of the revelation of God.”

There are all kinds of implications here, especially when we compare these theories to Bahá'u'lláh's principles of consultation. Consonant with the theory of culture as existing collectively in our minds, Abdu'l-Bahá explains (*Some Answered Questions*) how so much of our human experience relies on examples drawn from the world of nature to depict internal states, but cautions us not to mistake the symbol for the concept it signals. In other words, we rely on words that represent sensible phenomena to symbolize internal states and must use concrete terms to describe abstract concepts, like “the reality of the spirit.” Abdu'l-Bahá says that human knowledge is two-fold – knowledge about what we can sense and intellectual knowledge that exists only in our minds. Concepts can only be understood via language. We reach agreements among ourselves about what words mean. This can be tested simply by traveling to a place of another language system and see how tenuous word systems are. Language gives us the ability to find the essence of solid objects and relate them to intangibles, as in My love is like a red, red, rose; solid as rock; strong as an ox. To give a current example: When President Obama nominated Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court of the United States, discourse about this event focused on her as a woman, as of Latino heritage, as Puerto Rican, as a Democrat, a liberal, fatherless, a child who grew up poor in public housing. As in most political discussions, each symbol is used to predict her behavior and ultimately, her character. She is not just an individual, but exists in a system of symbols in the Kingdom of Names. Imagine an American who packs up and moves to Italy. She may learn the cultural ways among the Italians; but although she leaves behind her country, she does not leave behind the cultural

system she has learned since infancy. Rather, she encounters Italy as another system whose code must be cracked in order to be understood. Perhaps we can refer to each different cultural system as a “kingdom of names.”

I am an Oriental and on this account I am shut out from your thoughts and you likewise from mine. A mutual language will become the mightiest means toward universal progress, for it will cement the east and the west. (Abdu'l-Bahá, *Divine Philosophy*, p.144).

If we believe that Bahá'u'lláh's teaching about the equality of women and men became dispersed throughout people's ideas, we can see its effects even in the 1970s in the United States arose an effort to create gender-neutral language.

Messages come to us through some form of mediation such that we encounter much information about the world indirectly. Public discourse about media are usually carried on in outmoded ways using outdated terms. For example, during the time of empires where aristocratic and peasant classes existed, “high culture” referred to the type of art, language and expression of an elite aristocracy whereas the poorer classes enjoy an inferior, “low culture” of the uneducated. Such terms have been outdated since World War I toppled the aristocracies and though they gasped again as totalitarian states arose again and led us into World War II, we now live in a world that is predominantly democratic. This point is fundamental to this discussion because in discussing television, the term low culture is frequently used which tends to dismiss what appears on television as insignificant and not worth studying. This paper prefers the term dominant culture – and despite how multicultural the United States or Canada may seem, there is a culture that predominates nationwide. A dominant culture has evolved in this country, molded by shared history, but seen through lenses not dissimilar from those used by our founders. We tell ourselves stories about who we are – land of opportunity, all men are created equal, anyone can grow up to become president, *e pluribus unum*.

To give concrete examples of what dominant culture looks like: People can say “Happy holidays” in December, but it basically means Merry Christmas. Jews have found a way to adjust with Hanukkah and its bush. Bahá’ís have their own holidays and may be able to observe them at work, but they are usually charged against your allotted personal time, whereas the Christmas holiday is woven into the schedules of businesses and schools. Ayyám-í-há has yet to shine out as a contender in a culture with so much weight pushing against it. Bahá’ís who have internalized Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings confront many areas in dominant culture. The Bahá’í community is alcohol-free but abstaining from drink in the United States is perceived mostly through the lens of Christianity which considers wine a holy sacrament. Consultation is another concept where dominant culture trumps Bahá’í approaches – one is expected to take credit in the competitive world of work, in order to gain recognition and “get ahead.”

Meanings change and cultures change, but slowly. Given the definition of culture as a universe of shared meaning, one can appreciate how difficult is this change, as difficult as the effort suggested in the statement attributed to Christ, “if you have faith, you can move mountains.” (Adib Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh* v 3, p. 192)

Those who create cultural change and move mountains with their words are the Manifestations. We are now privileged to witness what happens to cultures at their very onset, when a Manifestation infuses ideas into the world: “The world’s equilibrium has been upset.”

Although we live in a world constructed of words and symbols shared among ourselves, we usually remain unconscious of the symbolic nature of items in everyday life. Still, it is inconceivable that humankind could have evolved to its present complex civilization without the usage of symbols systems in language, writing, and visual images. We also read other symbols,

such as nonverbal expressions, gestures, clothing, space, architecture, images, nature, smell, and the way we use time.

Kingdom of Names

The great Bahá'í scholar Adib Taherzadeh (*Bahá'u'lláh*) explores how the term kingdom of names may describe one's attachment to any of the names or attributes of God. Another possible meaning for the term is the symbol system in which human culture exists. There are many references in the Bahá'í Writings to the kingdom of names. The concept of "naming" is important enough in the Faith that we have the month of "Names." The practice of naming infants as done, for example, in Christening, has played ritual roles in many cultures. God is ruler and Lord of the kingdom of names. Bahá'u'lláh says He manifested himself in the kingdom of names and is a "mirror to the kingdom of names." He is called Husayn in the kingdom of names which was "convulsed with his appearance."

Adam was given the power to name. Genesis tells how he classified and applied words to the things of the earth. As we name and classify, we also assign value and meaning to things. Since God gave Adam the power to name, humans have connected symbols to phenomena, and endowed the symbols with meaning. "His name, 'the Manifest' became distinguished from the Hidden, and the Last could be discerned from the First." Thus words are attached to concepts. The symbolic environment in which we dwell sustains human life, giving humans a power unknown to animals.

Individuals become caught up in the symbol system while ignoring the parallel Kingdom of Names it reflects. "The dwellers of the kingdom of names have busied themselves with the

gay livery of the world.” As Taherzadeh elaborates, the names of spiritual attributes take on material connotations when people get stuck in the kingdom of names.

Thou seest, O my God, how thy servants have been cleaving fast to Thy names and have been calling on them in the daytime and in the night season. No sooner, however, had He been made manifest through Whose word the kingdom of names and the heaven of eternity were created than they broke away from Him and disbelieved in the greatest of Thy signs (Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations* CXVIII p. 201).

Today is Saturday, August 15th. The dollar is worth xxx yen. Newscorp is valued at \$xxx and Disney is selling at \$xxx (more about these two companies later). In the symbol system, everything interrelates, and these symbols are understood within a web of other symbols and meanings. A coin has no existence in the world of nature, but symbolizes a transaction among individuals in a specific culture and time. A date has no existence outside a cultural system of time telling, which exists as an agreement among ourselves. To change any one of these symbols would affect all the other ones. Would that be like moving a mountain?

Naming the Names – Interpreting Media messages

The aforementioned theories are useful in examining the role media play in informing individual and group identities. They also connect with the prescription Bahá'u'lláh provides for detaching ourselves from the kingdom of names. The Universal House of Justice (in a letter dated 1994 May 19, to the US National Spiritual Assembly) describes American culture as displaying “entrenched habits” that contain, among other things, an “aggressiveness and competitiveness” in “a dominantly capitalist culture” and a “cynical disregard of the moderating principles and rules of civilized human relationships resulting from an excessive liberalism and its immoral consequences.” They say that we “live in a society caught in the tightening grip of moral decadence on a vast scale” that is a “consequence of a pervasive godlessness.” The

Universal House of Justice notes how materialism emerged in the 20th century as a sort of creed that views reality as material and the human purpose as that of satisfying material needs and wants “Society exists to facilitate this quest, and the collective concern of humankind should be an ongoing refinement of the system, aimed at rendering it ever more efficient in carrying out its assigned task.” (Commissioned by The Universal House of Justice, *Century of Light*, p. 88).

Young people particularly have difficulty as they jump in and attempt to read the symbols of our world: right/left, conservative/liberal; fair/unjust. What is right? How do you know? Where do you go for information? Whom do you believe? Being able to return to the Word, the ruler of the Kingdom of Names, provides a standard that allows one to unravel the threads and begin to figure out the complexities of the world.

Discussions about media typically overlook the cultural system in which they exist and regard them as forces separate from oneself that impose “their” values, particularly on young minds, warping them. Such discussions overlook the individual’s role in the conversation with media, from television to film to music to videogames, and rather see media as some vague “they.” But there IS someone there. And yes, she may want your money or your vote. Whoever is behind the media message knows that in order for it to be understood, they must use understandable symbols. Television dramas, song lyrics, film, and videogames often use easily understood messages – stereotypes, archetypes, and story genres – each of which carry symbolic meaning. Here are some examples that carry powerful cultural significance in the English speaking world:

- The good white knight and the evil black knight of Medieval times appear in 20th century American film iconography in Westerns (and *Star Wars*), with good guys in white and bad guys in black. White and black carry over their connotations into racial divisions.

- Cinderella is a deeply entrenched story – some say it originates in ancient China where women’s feet were bound. How many brides project themselves as the fairy-tale princess awaiting the prince to sweep her away to live happily ever after?

Besides values, media carry messages about cultural identities, including gender roles, racial and ethnic stereotypes, and hierarchies of power. Television markets have been increasingly dividing viewers for their own commercial purposes. As an example, compare radio and television programming in the 1960s with now. Back then, on a single local station (which was AM) one could hear the gamut of music being produced at the time: Top-selling rock and roll, country, rhythm and blues, popular jazz, The Singing Nun, and even easy listening. Today marketing has perfected a means of taking each of these genres to “narrowcast” (as opposed to broadcast) them, targeting its own niche audience with their psychographic and demographic preferences, profiles, tastes and buying habits. Companies with products and services to sell speak to their viewers as potential buyers for their products, as though the viewers had specific predetermined and stable personality characteristics and lifestyles. And though broadcasters like to say they do this for the benefit of the listening public who are promised they’ll hear only the kinds of music they’re predisposed to listen to, it’s actually done for the benefit of companies who buy the ads so as to more easily find an audience likely to buy their products. This is the commercial system.

Stations that are shown to attract the largest audiences are able to charge the most money per minute of air time. This capitalistic ratings system relates to other meanings in the United States – it’s often referred to as “democratic” because, the reasoning goes, only the most popular music and television shows are seen in this “marketplace of ideas.” What it omits from this equation is that not every production, TV show, or type of music has an equal chance of

competing. Public discourse in the U.S. used to mock the former Soviet Union for putting up only one candidate for any election. U.S. media do something similar but it's also often referred to as a democratic and "free market" which is misleading because the terms democratic and free have connotations that would not include a system that is so restricted.

As previously stated, public discourse about the media often includes "the media make us" do, say, or believe something. However, commercial media are very conservative – they tend to prefer those images and stories that individuals respond to and that are likely to attract attention. They are not behaving irrationally. If there is sex and violence in the media, it's because media producers have seen that audiences pay for it at the box office and watch and listen to it at home. If there are images of women being rescued by men, or waiting for Prince Charming, or of men who are unnecessarily aggressive, or who act as vigilantes, it's because we tell ourselves cultural stories that contain these stereotypes. The media that speak through film, recorded music, music videos, books, magazines, broadcast and cable television programs, are produced by individuals who inhabit the same culture as their audiences.

Because the symbolic world of media is very sensitive to audiences, it can also respond to the particular interpretations of its viewers. Audiences who know who is attempting to control the symbolic meanings of the world are more equipped to counter those attempts with meanings of their own.

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