

Cultural Aspects of Peacekeeping: Notes on the Substance of Symbols

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In 1957, following the truce which ended the Suez War, the United Nations deployed its first peacekeeping force to monitor the separation of Egyptian and Israeli troops in Gaza and in the Sinai. On the first evening that the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) was deployed in Gaza, UNEF troops sprayed with machine gun fire a minaret from which a muezzin was calling the faithful to prayer. The UNEF soldiers, not understanding Arabic or Islam, had mistaken this as a call for civil disorder.¹ Ten years later UNEF withdrew from Gaza and the Sinai at the behest of the Egyptian President Nasser. This withdrawal was a key factor leading to the June 1967 Arab-Israeli War and was widely cited as evidence of the failure of the United Nations' foray into the field of peacekeeping. Further, it set off a continuing debate about what Nasser's statements and actions *really* meant, underscoring the importance of cultural questions to the establishment and success of peacekeeping.²

Since this inauspicious event the United Nations has organised dozens of peacekeeping missions, in every hemisphere of the globe. In 1988 the significant contribution of these efforts to the maintenance of peace and international security was recognised when the United Nations peacekeeping forces were collectively awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Since that award there have been many changes in the world, including the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the increasing gravity of inter-ethnic conflicts.

Peacekeeping missions have traditionally been deployed to separate fighting groups that are motivated to cease their military conflict, to maintain a buffer zone between these groups and to monitor the subsequent cease-fire, however

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1. B. Urquhart, *A Life in Peace and War* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1987), p. 136.

2. R. Cohen, *Culture and Conflict in Egyptian-Israeli Relations: A Dialogue of the Deaf* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 98-110; I.J. Rikhye, *The Sinai Blunder: Withdrawal of the United Nations Emergency Force Leading to the Six Day War June, 1967* (New Delhi: Oxford and IBH Publishing Company, 1978), p. 240.

imperfect this may have been. During the past five years, peacekeeping missions have been contemplated, and some actually deployed, which create new roles for peacekeeping, like the monitoring of local elections, the delivery of humanitarian aid and the mediation of civil conflicts at more local levels.³ The renewed promise that multilateral peacekeeping operations appears to hold is widely attributed to the end of the Cold War and the opportunity that this affords for the construction of a 'new world order'. It is said that the end of the Cold War will bring about an era of cooperation in the United Nations Security Council which will make for a 'virtually unanimous international constituency for promoting the concept of international authority through consensus and joint action, conciliation, diplomatic pressure, and where necessary, peacekeeping operations to monitor and tranquilise the area of conflict'.⁴ Indeed, peacekeeping is being widely cited as perhaps the major instrument of diplomacy available to the United Nations for insuring peace and international security.⁵

There is no doubt that the change in relations between the 'big powers' has had a salutary effect on international relations in general. Yet, it seems to me that discussions of the promise of peacekeeping are being carried out in an idiom that perpetuates a limited view of inter-group relations that unfortunately dominated international relations during the Cold War. Elsewhere I have argued that foreign policy establishments—especially those of the 'big powers'—had institutionalised a short-sighted view of the kinds of information necessary for wise decision-making.⁶ Mary LeCron Foster and I showed how this institutionalised view led to outcomes that were often contrary to those intended by the policies that had brought them about. I further argued that the policies themselves were unrealistic because they did not integrate an understanding of the social and cultural dynamics of the groups in conflict.⁷ One point of this

3. I.J. Rikhye and K. Skjelsbaek (eds.), *The United Nations and Peacekeeping: Results, Limitations and Prospects: Issues in Peacekeeping and Peacemaking* (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 199; T.G. Weiss (ed.), *Humanitarian Emergencies and Military Help in Africa: Issues in Peacekeeping and Peacemaking* (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 136; and I.J. Rikhye, *Strengthening UN Peacekeeping: New Challenges and Proposals* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 1992), p. 48.

4. B. Urquhart, *Decolonization and World Peace* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1989), p. 105.

5. C.W. Maynes, 'Containing Ethnic Conflict', *Foreign Affairs* (Vol. 90, No. 3, 1993), pp. 3-21.

6. R.A. Rubinstein and S. Tax, 'Power, Powerlessness, and the Failure of "Political Realism"', in J. Brøsted, et al., (eds.), *Native Power: The Quest for Autonomy and Nationhood of Indigenous People* (Bergen: Universitetsforlaget AS, 1985), pp. 301-8; R.A. Rubinstein, 'International Conflict, Decision-Making, and Anthropology', *Anthropology Today* (Vol. 2, No. 1, 1986), p. 14; and R.A. Rubinstein, 'The Collapse of Strategy: Understanding Ideological Bias in Policy Decisions', in M.L. Foster and R.A. Rubinstein (eds.), *Peace and War: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1986), pp. 343-51.

7. R.A. Rubinstein, 'Cultural Analysis and International Security', *Alternatives* (Vol. 13, No. 4, 1988), pp. 529-42; R.A. Rubinstein, 'Ritual Process and Images of the Other in Arms Control Negotiations', *Human Peace* (Vol. 6, No. 2, 1988), pp. 3-7; R.A. Rubinstein, 'Culture, International Affairs and Peacekeeping: Confusing Process and Pattern', *Cultural Dynamics* (Vol. 2, No. 1, 1989), pp. 41-61; R.A. Rubinstein,

work was to suggest that anthropological analysis could provide a much needed corrective because anthropologists learn about a group's system of implicit meanings by listening to and observing the ways group members express themselves. In doing this we seek to understand a group's symbolic environment and learn how symbols are manipulated. We see how some symbols evoke powerful affective and cognitive responses from group members.⁸

A hallmark of the views of the international security communities that we examined was a tendency to arrive at models and methods that were intended to be applied interchangeably to different problem situations.⁹ Moreover, when local knowledge seemed necessary to qualify the formal models, it too often came in an ethnocentric, self-absorbed form. One striking example of this is a RAND study of constraints on United States policy in relation to conflicts in the Third World which are largely instances of ethnic conflict. The report treats the policy constraints from a military perspective and, although it is 130 pages long, cites not a single local concern, focusing instead on supposed Soviet or Chinese interests.¹⁰ This idiom of ethnocentric, formal analyses focused on military concerns is being extended to discussions of the new roles that United Nations Peacekeeping Forces might assume now that the Cold War is over. Put simply, many analysts in the international affairs community are moving to extend its methods and models to the all too common ethnic and other local-level conflicts that now hold our attention, despite the failure of those approaches to treat adequately the social dynamics of conflicts during the Cold War. This movement is seen in at least two areas. Firstly, in discussions which seek to define new rules for United Nations Peacekeeping in a 'new world order', the concept of *collective security* is increasingly being glossed as the need for the United Nations to field a militarily effective force for imposing order. Secondly, models of strategic negotiation that in the past have produced fundamentally flawed agreements are being extended to problems of ethnic conflicts and preventive diplomacy.¹¹

It is wrong to try to understand the recent flourishing in the prospects of multilateral peacekeeping in the old idiom of international affairs. Because

'Methodological Challenges in the Ethnographic Study of Multilateral Peacekeeping', paper presented at the 1989 Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Washington, D.C., 15 to 19 November; and R.A. Rubinstein, 'Culture and Negotiation', in E.W. Fernea and M.E. Hocking (eds.), *The Struggle for Peace: Israelis and Palestinians* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1992), pp. 116-29.

8. R.A. Rubinstein and M.L. Foster, 'Revitalizing International Security Analysis: Contributions from Culture and Symbolism', in R.A. Rubinstein and M.L. Foster (eds.), *The Social Dynamics of Peace and Conflict: Culture in International Security* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1988), pp. 1-14.

9. P.K. Davis and J.A. Winnefeld, *The RAND Strategy Assessment Center: An Overview and Interim Conclusion about the Utility and Development of Options* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1983), p. vii.

10. S. Hosmer, *Constraints on U.S. Strategy in Third World Conflict* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1985), p. 130.

11. C.W. Maynes, *op. cit.*, in note 5, pp. 3-21; and R.A. Rubinstein, 'Culture and Negotiation', *op. cit.* in note 7, pp. 116-29.

discussions in international affairs often focus on dramatic, high profile issues of broad policy scope, it may seem difficult to see why attention ought to be paid to the rather mundane (and apparently trivial) anthropological concern with culture and symbolism.¹² I argue that in contrast, the conditions necessary for the establishment and success of peacekeeping are to be found in large measure in the smaller, ordinary activities of daily life.

The position developed in this paper is part of an analysis which seeks a revitalised role for culture in international affairs by updating the way culture is treated in analyses. Currently, in most instances where culture is considered in international affairs discussions, it is taken to be relatively stable patterns of behaviour, actions and customs. I discussed in detail elsewhere the reasons for the use of this view of culture in the international affairs literature: the 'culture as behaviour' view characterised anthropological and sociological thought during the post-Second World War period up until about 1960 and fit particularly well with the then emerging paradigm of political realism.¹³ In the past thirty years, however, anthropological analyses have shifted emphasis and recognised the fundamental role of meaning construction, symbolism and rituals in human social life. The result is a conception of culture as 'meaning'. R.G. d'Andrade for instance sees:

culture as consisting of learned systems of meaning, communicated by means of natural language and other symbol systems, having representational, directive, and affective functions, and capable of creating cultural entities and particular senses of reality. Through these systems of meaning, groups of people adapt to their environment and structure interpersonal activities.¹⁴

There have been many attempts to codify formal definitions of culture during the past fifty years.¹⁵ These efforts have not been particularly fruitful, in part because, as LeVine points out, 'clarification [of culture] is only possible through

12. R.A. Rubinstein and M.L. Foster, *op. cit.* in note 8, pp. 3-5.

13. Political realism is an approach which privileges certain kinds of information in the analysis of political relations. Especially it: (1) treats the state as the unit of analysis; (2) construes useful knowledge as objective fact; (3) treats the state as a rational actor the behaviour of which conforms to the objective realities; and (4) restricts calculations of power and interest to material resources. See Rubinstein, 'Cultural Analysis', *op. cit.*, in note 7, pp. 530-2; and Y.H. Ferguson and R.W. Mansbach, *The Elusive Quest: Theory in International Politics* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), p. 300.

14. R.G. d'Andrade, 'Cultural Meaning Systems,' in R. Shweder and R. LeVine (eds.), *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self, and Emotion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 88-119. Similarly, in his *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1973), p. 89, Clifford Geertz defines culture as 'an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life'.

15. See, for instance, G. Weiss, 'A Scientific Concept of Culture', *American Anthropologist* (Vol. 75, No. 5, 1973), pp. 1376-413.

ethnography'.¹⁶ The culture as meaning view, then, requires that analysis proceeds by examining social life as a communicative construction and enactment of meaning, and gives prominence to methods which explore the dynamics of the symbolic system.¹⁷

In addition to describing some of the symbolic material of peacekeeping, I describe some activities, especially rituals, that help shape social cognition in relation to peacekeeping and international affairs. Ritual behaviours are: (1) conventionalised, *i.e.*, their performance adheres to some specific set of rules which cannot be easily breached; (2) repetitive, both in their performance and their occurrence; (3) essentially social, *i.e.*, they evoke communal experience; (4) emotionally involving, because they shape participants' affective images of themselves and of others; and (5) convey meaning on several levels simultaneously.¹⁸ Of particular interest with regards to peacekeeping are rites of reversal. These are ritualised activities that induce ideological shifts so that the impossible or unthought of becomes possible and acceptable. I argue here that the proper understanding of the emergence and potential for the continuation of peacekeeping as a respected instrument of diplomacy depends on recognising the crucial role of symbolic forms of representation and behaviour in shaping political perceptions about and within peacekeeping missions. I will show in a preliminary way how the legitimacy of peacekeeping in general, and of its ability to play a nonpartisan role in mediating conflicts in particular, results from the symbolic transformation of the political contexts within which peacekeeping is carried out. In large measure, peacekeeping has attained, and may retain, its legitimacy by restructuring the context of political action through developing and manipulating symbolic representations of international consensus and joint action and by elaborating and repeating ritual behaviour which reinforces these representations. There are many levels at which the use of symbols and ritualised behaviour effects ideological shifts in relation to peacekeeping. Among these, for example, can be the 'temporary ceding' of national sovereignty over a nation's military when mission command and control functions are held by officers from another country, the sharing of information and daily duties with troops from countries that are potential adversaries, and the renunciation of military force by military units. My comments in this paper are intended to set out in a

16. R.A. LeVine, 'Properties of Culture', in R. Shweder and R. LeVine (eds.), *loc. cit.*, in note 14, p. 67.

17. For surveys of the importance of symbolism to cultural analysis, see M.L. Foster and S. Brandes (eds.), *Symbol as Sense: New Approaches to the Analysis of Meaning* (New York, NY: Academic Press, 1980), p. 416; J.L. Dolgin, D.S. Kemnitzer and D.M. Schneider (eds.) *Symbolic Anthropology: A Reader in the Study of Symbols and Meanings* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1977), p. 523; and R. Shweder and R.A. LeVine (eds.) *loc. cit.*, in note 14, p. 359.

18. For discussions of the nature of ritual symbolism see, E. d'Aquili, *et al.*, *The Spectrum of Ritual* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1979); C.D. Laughlin, *et al.*, 'The Ritual Transformation of Experience', *Studies in Symbolic Interaction* (Vol. 7, No. A, 1986), pp. 107-36; and D.I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 235.

preliminary way how a meaningful link might be made between such seemingly mundane activities and the more sweeping policy concerns involved in constructing international order.

Symbol and Ritual in Peacekeeping

The most obvious sense in which symbols have invested legitimacy in peacekeeping is that the Blue Beret or Blue Helmet is now widely recognised as denoting United Nations peacekeeping troops. This was not always so. Rather the creation of this most durable symbol of peacekeeping was constructed out of the hurried need to distinguish United Nations troops from those of the other armed forces they were separating during the 1956 Suez Crisis, when surplus allied combat helmet liners were painted blue.¹⁹ Following on the *ad hoc* origin of this and other peacekeeping symbolism, the legitimacy accorded to peacekeeping today has grown through nearly forty years of relatively ordinary symbolic representation and ritual repetition.

The substance of symbolic action in day-to-day transformations of political perceptions is often overlooked because it is not especially glamorous. Likewise, for peacekeeping, it is easy to overlook the importance of symbols and rituals for legitimating peacekeeping because its symbols and rituals are individually unremarkable.²⁰ Yet, it is not from the isolated symbols and rituals that the legitimacy of peacekeeping is constructed. Rather, the power of peacekeeping symbolism derives from the deployment of symbols and rituals in a variety of arenas, and from the symbolic restructuring this often entails.

In order to illustrate this, I briefly describe some of the symbols and rituals which have channeled perceptions of peacekeeping during the decade prior to 1992. The material presented is drawn from data collected during an ongoing research project on cultural aspects of peacekeeping, begun in 1987. The field sites for this project have been diverse: from formal diplomatic settings in New York, Vienna, Cairo, Jerusalem and elsewhere to isolated outposts in the Sinai desert. I have had formal and informal interviews with scores of diplomats and hundreds of military personnel who serve or served with United Nations or other peacekeeping missions.

I do not intend here to give an exhaustive account of the operation of ritual and symbol in peacekeeping; my purpose is exploratory and suggestive. Here I propose that in discussing the effect of peacekeeping on political relations (and of political relations on peacekeeping), it is hard to separate its material success from its symbolic success. To some degree, the descriptions of peacekeeping ritual and symbolism presented here are selective and a composite of many

19. B. Urquhart, *op. cit.* in note 1, p. 134.

20. This is equally true whether considering the construction of legitimacy for local populations, diplomats, the international community generally or peacekeeping troops themselves. For discussions of the importance of ritual in international diplomacy and political life, see R.A. Rubinstein, 'Ritual Process', *op. cit.*, in note 7; and D. Kertzer, *op. cit.*, in note 18.

missions. Because of its unique role in United Nations peacekeeping, I have concentrated my study on the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) and on its several Observer Groups, which therefore figure disproportionately in my descriptions.²¹ Observer Groups and Peacekeeping forces differ in their missions and in their formal organisation, and these differences are important.²² Nevertheless, to a great degree, both rely on an overlapping set of rituals and symbolism for their legitimacy and coherence.

The ritual symbolism of peacekeeping is evident in the conventionalised actions through which peacekeeping missions are created, such as: those of the Security Council consultations and resolutions authorising missions; the tasks assigned to peacekeeping troops, the uniforms, insignia and accoutrements associated with peacekeeping in general and with particular missions; and the social activities organised under the auspices of peacekeeping missions.²³

Peacekeeping involves the use of military personnel to establish and maintain order. The diplomatic rationale often expressed is that by bringing together troops from many nations to work under one command, the deployment of a peacekeeping mission directs international attention on a crisis area. The deployment of a peacekeeping mission is thus said to be a visible demonstration of international consensus and joint action. In fact establishing a peacekeeping mission may mean many different things to different people, because each may have a different political understanding of the situation.²⁴ Peacekeeping operations take place in the context of the daily lives of multiple communities: diplomatic, military and local. Each of these communities embodies culturally constituted ways of behaving and understanding the objectives and practices of the operation. Sometimes the intersection of these cultural spheres is problematic. In order to fully appreciate how peacekeeping has become a legitimate instrument of diplomacy, it is important to understand the problems entailed by the overlapping of the multiple cultural spheres concerned and the ritual and symbolic mechanisms that to a great extent resolve them.

21. I am grateful to the International Peace Academy (IPA) for permitting me to conduct research through their training seminars and meetings which bring together senior diplomats and military officers involved in multilateral peacekeeping. From January 1989 until June 1992 I conducted an intensive study of the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), especially Observer Group Egypt (OGE), which involved participant observation, a questionnaire survey and formal and informal interviews of Military Observers, United Nations personnel and regional diplomats. I am grateful for the support and encouragement given to this project by General Indarjit Rikhye, former President of the IPA, Lieutenant General Martin Vadset, formerly Chief of Staff of the UNTSO, Lieutenant Colonel Alen D. Clarke, formerly Chief OGE, and Lieutenant Commander James Robinson, formerly Senior Liaison Officer United Nations Liaison Office in Cairo. The methodological challenges of the ethnographic study of peacekeeping are described in R.A. Rubinstein, 'Methodological Challenges', *op. cit.*, in note 7.

22. See I.J. Rikhye, *The Theory and Practice of Peacekeeping* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1984), p. 255.

23. R.A. Rubinstein, 'Culture, International Affairs and Peacekeeping', *op. cit.*, in note 7.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 52-4.

For instance, the meaning of serving in a Middle East mission of UNTSO for a military officer may reflect a commitment to a vision of global order based on universal principles of social justice. Equally, however, that service may represent, among other things: (1) an opportunity for financial gain; (2) a chance to see the Holy Land; (3) a strategy in planning for career advancement; (4) an opportunity to improve one's skills as a foreign area officer; (5) a chance to see how one would react under fire; or (6) an unfortunate posting. One of the most immediate problems facing the institution of peacekeeping then is the need to integrate individuals with diverse backgrounds, understandings and agendas into a quasi-corporate entity: 'the mission'. In such situations, the use of symbols which can carry multiple meanings is an extremely useful tool for coordinating perceptions.²⁵ Since symbols represent and unify disparate meanings they can be used to embody and bring together diverse ideas. Through symbolic representation, 'these various ideas are not just simultaneously elicited but also interact with one another so that they become associated together in the individual's mind'.²⁶

United Nations Military Observers (UNMOs) in UNTSO wear the Blue Beret and display the United Nations Flag. These symbols serve to integrate the local activity of the mission with higher levels of political organisation. More locally, however, UNMOs share a number of symbols which serve to establish an individual's identification with the group. For instance, each wears on his uniform a badge unique to the mission. These badges are designed specifically for the mission and often are locally produced. These badges help to integrate members from many different national services into the mission. All denote the international nature of the operation by including reference to the United Nations through its symbols or in words. Sometimes, the integrative task is explicit and the badge includes symbols of national identity as well. Wearing these symbols of the mission helps UNMOs to be recognised as a member of 'a group' and integrates them into it. For instance, in 1990, the People's Republic of China began to contribute troops to UNTSO. Nine officers joined the Observer Groups. At one, Observer Detachment Damascus (ODD), the Chinese presence led to the redesign of the mission badge. Previously the ODD badge showed the United Nations symbol as well as elements of the French, Soviet and American flags. To this was added the Chinese flag.

These and other symbols help integrate individuals into peacekeeping missions. Such symbols help to establish continuity in the mission despite changes in the political environment or shifts in the purpose of the organisation. After the 1973 war, UNTSO deployed a group of observers to monitor the military situation in the Sinai. This Sinai Observer Group (SOG) worked with the second United

25. E. d'Aquili, *et. al.*, *op. cit.* in note 18, p. 29.

26. D. Kertzer, *op. cit.* in note 18, p. 11. See also V. Turner, 'Ritual Aspects of Conflict Control in African Micropolitics', in M. Swartz, V. Turner and A. Tuden (eds.), *Political Anthropology* (Chicago, IL: Aldine, 1966), pp. 239-46; V. Turner, *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967); and V. Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Chicago, IL: Aldine, 1969).

Nations Emergency Force (UNEFII). Following the Camp David Accords UNEFII had to withdraw. The Egyptian government asked UNTSO to maintain its presence in Egypt, and the Sinai Observer Group was reorganised as Observer Group Egypt (OGE). The operational tasks assigned to the OGE differed substantially from those of the SOG, yet the continuing presence of an observer group in the mission area projects an image of continuity of concern and purpose locally and internationally.

Another symbolic means of establishing continuity for the mission as operational realities change is in the names used to describe revised duties. Although OGE no longer has significant official observing and reporting functions, its members still go 'on patrol,' and they do so from 'OPs,' as did the SOG, but now patrols have no operational elements beyond their execution and they originate from outposts rather than observation posts. Patrolling and manning OPs are two activities that are shared with all other UNTSO Observer Groups as well, though in other Groups patrolling includes the operational responsibilities of inspecting troop concentrations, monitoring cease fire agreements and reporting on these. Patrols and OPs thus link the local activities of UNMOs and OGE with those of other Groups, providing for a kind of internal continuity.

The symbols and ceremonies used in peacekeeping are not original to it. Rather as peacekeeping has developed, well-known symbols from other spheres of social life—especially from military organisations and some from family and community life—have been appropriated and invested with new meanings. This borrowing improves rather than diminishes the efficacy of these symbols because when encountering them people draw on their stock of past experiences and associations with such symbols.²⁷

Symbols are most effective when they are experienced in ritual context. Just as peacekeeping has appropriated symbols from other domains of social life, it has appropriated rituals. Together with symbols which signal group membership and organisational continuity, life in an Observer Group is marked by activities that are ritually delineated. It is not an exaggeration to say that much of the activity at an Observer Group follows a ritual cycle which marks off various life events, like comings and goings and changes in status. It is a fact of life in an Observer Group that people are constantly arriving and departing. This is partially related to movement between the station headquarters and week-long OP duty. These kinds of arrivals and departures are marked off by regular events within the station including, before leaving, a general briefing and planning of logistics for the week and, upon returning, debriefing and perhaps a free drink at the station bar. It is interesting that OP duties conform neatly to the steps of rites of passage: separation, transition, incorporation. These rituals have powerful effects on those experiencing them, adjusting their cognitive and affective perceptions and integrating them into a corporate group.²⁸

27. D. Kertzer, *op. cit.*, in note 18, p. 45.

28. E. d'Aquili, *et al.*, *op. cit.*, in note 18, pp. 250-1.

In part the constant movement also results from that fact that the tour of duty for officers serving as UNMOs with UNTSO is relatively short, varying in length of posting at a particular Observer Group from six months to 3 years. Although total length of United Nations service varies from country to country, in the Middle East UNMOs are usually required to spend half of their tour posted in an Arab country and half posted in Israel. Because of this, every week new UNMOs arrive and current members leave from a given Observer Group. The military custom of *hail and farewell* has been appropriated in the ritual cycle of the Observer Groups in a fashion directed at incorporating UNMOs into the larger group at the station (not just into their country detachment).

The military custom acknowledging arriving and departing individuals in a public ritual has not, however, simply been transferred unchanged to the peacekeeping context. Rather, it has been reinterpreted and fitted into the ritual cycle of the Group. At OGE, for instance, the hail and farewell is part of a weekly rite of intensification which serves to reinforce identification with the group. Each Friday evening the Observer Group assembles for a *Happy Hour*, which is sponsored by one of the national contingents.²⁹ These have a regular structure throughout the month and each happy hour has a regular internal structure. The hail and farewell takes place in the context of this repetitive group activity. Not only are arriving and departing members identified, but the activity is used to structure and reinforce perceptions of the nature of OGE and of UNTSO. For instance, in addition to providing information about arriving members, the happy hour is also an occasion where it is stressed that the UNMO is entering the 'OGE family' or the 'OGE community.' During farewells there is nearly always explicit reference to the ways in which the departing UNMO contributed to dissolving the boundaries of nationality and of service branch between himself and others in the group. Metaphors of family and community are woven throughout these occasions and serve to focus perceptions of the group. Since local diplomatic and military personnel are frequent guests at these activities, their perceptions of OGE are also shaped in part by this shared experience.

The themes supported by the ritual cycle of the local Group also link the activity at the station to the larger UNTSO organisation. In the magazine *UNTSO News* for instance, which is distributed to UNMOs and to a limited number of local diplomats and military officers, there are repeated references to the metaphoric peacekeeping family. The message redundantly delivered is that UNTSO is a stable organisation, with historical continuity, that has bridged gaps in national understandings in order to provide neutral, nonpartisan observers of the political situation in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Traditional military ritual and symbolism is appropriated and given new meanings in the context of peacekeeping. This allows for those who serve in

29. A fuller description of the Happy Hour Cycle and of the internal organisation of OGE is presented in R.A. Rubinstein, 'Methodological Challenges in the Ethnographic Study of Peacekeeping', *op. cit.*, in note 7.

them and for those who are aware of them for the elaboration of a myth of stability, continuity, joint action and neutrality. In addition to the structuring of perceptions that result from activities within peacekeeping missions, additional legitimacy has resulted from the cognitive restructuring entailed by peacekeeping missions collectively as rites of reversal. The use of unarmed military personnel for peacekeeping missions has not simply been logistically useful. Rather, because it involves a certain amount of ritualised activity to authorise and field a peacekeeping mission, physical separation from their national armed forces and ceding of command sovereignty to the force commander, the use of military personnel buttresses a system of cultural reversals. These reversals symbolically allay fears of domination and promote the restructuring of political perceptions to legitimate actions that would otherwise be unacceptable.³⁰ Through the use of symbols and rituals the instrument of United Nations peacekeeping develops and maintains an authority and legitimacy that it would otherwise lack. This makes it possible to substitute into the position of 'neutral observer' a changing set of individuals each of whom may personally hold a partisan view.

Peacekeeping and the Substance of Symbols

In calculating the effect of peacekeeping on political relations it is hard to distinguish its 'real' success from its symbolic success. While some peacekeeping missions have been very successful in mediating conflicts, many of the peacekeeping missions deployed by the United Nations have been less successful in concrete outcome. In those partial successes, which include some of the most prominent missions, the problems which the peacekeeping mission were to address have remained unresolved or even worsened.

Three examples of the partial success of United Nations peacekeeping will suffice here.³¹ The United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) was established in March 1964 to prevent Greek and Turkish Cypriot inter-communal fighting. In the nearly thirty years since that time the Force has maintained a presence on the island, but order has not always prevailed. Indeed, during this period, relations between the communities periodically have deteriorated and fighting requiring stronger UNFICYP action has broken out. In 1974 cease-fire lines were redrawn, and the Force now patrols a 180 kilometer long buffer zone between the sides. Although attempts to mediate the conflict continue, with occasional promise of success, it seems unlikely that a solution to the root problem will be worked out in the near term. What UNFICYP does is provide an administrative structure and a measure of calm amidst the general belligerence.

30. M.L. Foster, 'Reversal Theory and the Institutionalisation of War', in J. Kerr, S. Murgatroyd and M. Apter (eds.), *Advances in Reversal Theory* (Amsterdam: Swets and Zeitlinger, 1993), pp. 67-74; and D.I. Kertzer, *op. cit.*, in note 18, p. 132.

31. See I.J. Rikhye, *op. cit.*, in note 22, for details of some of the various United Nations missions.

The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) is a second example. Established in 1978 following Israeli incursions into Southern Lebanon, its mission is to confirm the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the area, to establish peace there and to assist the Lebanese government in regaining effective control of the area. Rather than withdrawing, in 1982 Israeli troops moved beyond the UNIFIL mission area. Now, Israeli troops move through the mission area at will and the political situation in Southern Lebanon is inherently unstable. While the Force has not succeeded in achieving its mission, its 5,800 troops now try to contain violence as best they can and to provide humanitarian assistance in the area. Over the years of its existence UNIFIL troops have been drawn into the local social, economic and political life. According to one observer, 'UNIFIL has come to function as a pseudo-government for the south whose chances of being replaced by the appropriate authorities in the foreseeable future seems remote.'³²

The United Nations Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP) was set up in January 1949. Its operational charge included observing and reporting the India-Pakistan cease-fire line and investigating violations of that cease fire. As recently as the Fall of 1989, Sir Brian Urquhart described UNMOGIP as 'a backwater of peacekeeping'.³³ Within the following year renewed fighting in the area forced a reassessment of the nature of that mission.

Since the success of peacekeeping missions has been partial at best, the perception of the success of peacekeeping depends largely on the symbolic restructuring of the field of political action that has been achieved through the use of symbols and rituals. To the extent that this has been achieved it has been accomplished through the elaboration of symbols and activities that assert the consensual, nonpartisan nature of missions. In contrast to this ideal, individuals serving in missions have strong personal political feelings. These views are sometimes affected by service in a mission area and also affect service there as well. UNMOs in OGE, for instance, report a wide range of reactions to the activities they witness while serving with the Observer Group and in other UNTSO Middle East stations. It is widely acknowledged by UNMOs that their views of the local political situation have changed during their UN service. For instance, UNMOs serving with UNTSO in the Middle East report that their experiences restructured their understanding of Arab-Israeli affairs. Most frequently reported was a shift away from a pro-Israeli stand, held prior to UNTSO and UNIFIL service, to a more neutral or pro-Arab position. These shifts are based on a variety of specific experiences, including observation of the relative strengths of Arab and Israeli militaries, disparagement of UN missions

32. M. Heiberg, 'Peacekeepers and Local Populations: Some Comments on UNIFIL', in I.J. Rikhye and K. Skjelsbaek (eds.), *The United Nations and Peacekeeping: Results, Limitations and Prospects* (London: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 151. See also E.A. Erskine, *Mission with UNIFIL: An African Soldier's Reflections* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1989).

33. Personal communication, Cairo, Egypt, October 1989.

by Israeli border guards and military officials, and interactions with local populations. In addition, it is clear that these altered views are carried home and influence public opinion there, especially for Western observers, like those from Canada, Ireland and the Scandinavian countries.³⁴

The fact that United Nations peacekeeping as an institution is perceived as independent of those who make it up and that it is viewed as implementing joint consensus and nonpartisan action allows the institution to be accepted as a fair witness. This perception derives at least as much from the symbolism and ritualisation of peacekeeping as it does from the mixed record of the success of various missions. The legitimacy of peacekeeping depends upon a radical restructuring of political perceptions in such a way that the unthinkable is rendered plausible. Moreover, because this reframing is emotionally charged it must be done in a way that insulates it from ordinary critiques. A mechanism for this process, ritual reversal, is found in nearly all human societies.³⁵ Ritual reversals provide culturally legitimate social space in which actions are sanctioned that would at other times not be allowed.³⁶ In the case of United Nations peacekeeping, the rituals in the individual missions and in the Security Council create the ritualised social space where activities, like the surrender of control over elements of a nation's armed forces, are possible.

Civil Conflict: Challenges for Peacekeeping

Among the more intransigent conflict situations for peacekeeping are civil conflicts, especially ethnic conflict below the national level. Such civil conflicts are the most common source of warfare today. These often lead to situations in which civilian populations are at great risk due to the effects of conflict on food supplies or access to clean water, and are in need of humanitarian aid. For example, in the South of Sudan war has meant the near cessation of drilling of boreholes for fresh water, exceptionally high infant mortality and prevalent malnutrition among children twelve and younger. In Zimbabwe, from 1978 to 1980 the military destroyed crops, live stock and food supplies as a means of dealing with civil conflict there. This resulted in widespread malnutrition and increased infant and childhood mortality. In Guatemala, civil conflict and military responses to it have distorted the economy causing food costs to soar which

34. See also M. Heiberg, *op. cit.*, in note 32. The relation of these shifts in political perception to their service in UNTSO and afterward is itself an interesting case study of the role of symbols in shaping political perceptions.

35. M.L. Foster, 'The Growth of Symbolism in Culture', in M.L. Foster and S. Brandes (eds.), *Symbol as Sense: New Approaches to the Analysis of Meaning* (New York, NY: Academic Press, 1980), pp. 367-97. For discussion of ritualised role reversal in human societies, see also E. Leach, *Rethinking Anthropology* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 132-6.

36. See M. Bloch, 'Ritual Symbolism and the Nonrepresentation of Society', in M.L. Foster and S. Brandes (eds.), *loc. cit.*, in note 35, pp. 93-5.

resulted in extreme nutritional consequences for the local population.³⁷ It is in the context of dealing with such civil conflicts that new roles for peacekeeping are being explored.

It is well recognised that such new roles will not be a simple extension of the traditional concept of multilateral peacekeeping. In part this is because traditionally peacekeeping has depended upon obtaining the consent of the parties to the conflict. With this foundation, the myths, symbols and rituals of peacekeeping could be brought to bear on the restructuring of political perceptions. In the situation of civil conflict, obtaining such agreement is often not possible. Furthermore, it is sometimes difficult to determine who speaks for the local belligerents. Additionally, the political environment is made more complex by the intersection of cultural groups. It is thus especially important in contemplating new missions to take account of the important role that ritual symbolism plays in legitimating peacekeeping missions. It is only under the auspices of a peacekeeping organisation which has an established reputation as neutral and nonpartisan that such interventions can hope to succeed. This representation depends upon symbolically developing the desired view of political order in which the mission is to operate.

The symbolic restructuring of the field of political action is especially important because neutrality in any given conflict situation is context specific. Neutrality is a social construct. An act that may appear to outsiders to be nonpartisan may be thought highly biased by others. While this may include the traditional peacekeeping activities of observing and reporting, in nontraditional peacekeeping contexts it may apply to the delivery of humanitarian aid.³⁸ For instance in the Sudan withholding of food and access to humanitarian aid has been used as a weapon in the war between the Muslim north and the non-Muslim south.³⁹

It is only in a situation where the particular peacekeeping mission can be symbolically assimilated to an institution with a history of perceived nonpartisan activity that intervention can hope to work. The recent unfortunate intervention in Liberia of the West African Peacekeeping Force (ECOWAS) provides grim evidence of this. ECOWAS was fielded by a consortium of neighbouring countries, the governments of which had a stake in the pacification of Liberia.⁴⁰ Conceived as a humanitarian relief effort to a country where people were 'becoming increasingly desperate as food supplies ran out, with no end of

37. R.A. Rubinstein and S.D. Lane, 'International Health and Development', in T.M. Johnson and C.F. Sargent (eds.), *Medical Anthropology: A Handbook of Theory and Method* (New York, NY: Greenwood Press, 1990), p. 380.

38. See R. Cohen, *op. cit.*, in note 2.

39. R.A. Rubinstein and S.D. Lane, *op. cit.*, in note 37.

40. ECOWAS was not a United Nations Force. Scant attention appears to have been paid to forming the ECOWAS troops into a corporate group independent of national governments and their interests. Indeed, accounts of the development of ECOWAS often highlighted the nationalities of different troops. ECOWAS's failure undercuts analyses which contend that the success of the Multinational Force and Observers in the Sinai is directly due to its independence from the United Nations bureaucracy.

fighting in sight',⁴¹ the development of the force paid insufficient attention to the symbolic relations among its troop contributors and the Liberian belligerents. Despite its multilateral nature and even before its first deployment, the West African Peacekeeping force was perceived as partisan by all of the Liberian belligerents. In part because there was no institutionalised structure for joint neutral action that could be symbolically legitimated, the force was soon embroiled in the local conflict and fought as desperately as the combatants they were meant to disarm. The current United Nations intervention in Somalia appears to be repeating this experience, in no small measure because of efforts to 'put teeth' into the mission, efforts that are allowing the symbolic legitimacy of the mission to dissolve. This dissolution is evidenced by, among other things, the decreasing willingness of participating nations to submit their troops to joint United Nations command and control and in the growing belief among some Somalis that the mission is a neocolonial effort to Christianise their country.

Conclusion

Much current political commentary anticipates the onset of a new world order because of the end of the Cold War. As part of this new order, many envision an increased role for multilateral peacekeeping in the maintenance of international peace and security. In this paper I have suggested that realising such a role will depend upon developing an adequate understanding of the role of symbol and ritual in the structuring of political perceptions.

Civil and ethnic conflicts are now the most frequent and important threat to international security.⁴² These conflicts have not proved amenable to solution by a 'power politics' which focuses on military power to the exclusion of symbolic and normative considerations.⁴³ Some analysts have expressed a growing dissatisfaction with the political realist view and there are escalating calls for alternatives to it.⁴⁴ Anthropological analyses show that in many instances understanding ethnic and civil conflicts depends upon taking account of the dynamics of cultural meaning systems.⁴⁵

Understanding the prospects for peacekeeping is then a special case of a broader choice that now confronts us. This 'new era' presents us with the opportunity to develop a more complex, complete and adequate view of political relations than that which has prevailed in the past. We can, on the one hand, continue to pursue the understanding of political relations through the technical-

41. *The Times*, 4 August 1990, page 22.

42. E.E. Rice, *Wars of the Third Kind: Conflict in Underdeveloped Societies* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), p. 186.

43. R.A. Rubinstein and S. Tax, *op. cit.*, in note 6; and R.A. Rubinstein, 'Cultural Analysis', *op. cit.*, in note 7.

44. See for example, D.P. Moynihan, *Pandaemonium: Ethnicity in International Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 22; and Z. Brzezinski, *Out of Control: Global Turmoil on the Eve of the 21st Century* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner, 1993), p. 240.

45. See the papers in R.A. Rubinstein and M.L. Foster (eds.), *loc. cit.*, in note 8.

rationalist analysis of self-interests embodied in the philosophy and method of political realism. Or, on the other hand, we can develop fuller accounts of the role of culture—and the place of symbols and rituals—in contemporary international affairs. By pursuing this second direction, we can, I hope, develop more satisfactory and humane ways of confronting as well as resolving situations of conflict, both among nations and at more local levels.

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