Rhetoric, Ritualism, and Totemism in Human Resource Management

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This paper posits an interpretivist approach to the study of human resource management (HRM) by examining how organizational members construct meanings of HRM in everyday life through ritualistic behavior and the use of language. Concepts from language philosophy and socio-anthropology are brought together to develop an analytical premise upon which we can begin to appreciate the seemingly complex issues associated with expressive and ritualistic behavior in organizations. Propositions are posited and subsequently examined through an analysis of statements about teamwork in a Kenyan firm. A thematic analysis reveals that teamwork is a totemic device created by organizational members in everyday life. Through shifts in language games ranging from rhetoric to plain speaking, management uses the totem of teamwork to create and legitimize the desired pattern of power and social relations.

KEY WORDS: language; rhetoric; ritualism; totemism; human resource management; teamwork.

INTRODUCTION

The Subjectivist Nature of Organizational Reality

The analytical approach adopted in this paper is located within the *interpretivist paradigm* which represents a concern to understand the fundamental nature of the social world at the level of subjective experience (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). This paper contends that one way to understand the nature of a phenomenon is to examine what the social actors say about it and the meanings they attach to it. This allows us a view into the or-

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ganization "at the level of meaning." This has been demonstrated in various studies, e.g., the future of work (Gowler & Legge, 1986), the images of human resource management (Kamoche, 1991), productivity bargaining (Ahlstrand, 1990), and the role of accounting (Gambling, 1987).

Our analytical perspective seeks to give prominence to the "taken-for-granted" everyday stock of knowledge (Schutz, 1967; Berger & Luckman, 1966) and to take us closer to the mode of meaning-construction within organizations with regard to the views held about the management of people. These views describe how the stock of knowledge is accumulated and diffused throughout the organization. The analysis focuses on the socioanthropological context within which this reality is shaped, the symbolism and the power and social relations associated with the generation of knowledge.

A MODEL OF LANGUAGE AND RITUAL

The Use of Language and Rhetoric

Our theoretical model is based on the idea that language acts as a medium for creating and sharing intersubjective meanings. Insights from language philosophy reveal how social reality is constituted in the use of language. An example is Wittgenstein's (1963) concept of "language-games" which bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or a "form of life." Also, in the analysis of textual knowledge which is manifest in language, the meaning of language and social acts has to be located within the social context (e.g., Dilthey, 1976). This analytical strand is developed further in the view that language is the objectification of reality—"being is manifest in language" (Gadamer, 1965), and also for example in Giddens' (1976) "duality of structure" whereby language is constituted in human agency and yet serves as the medium of this constitution.

Language originates in and has its primary reference to everyday life (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). As such, the language used by organizational actors to describe human resource management (HRM) initiatives reveals to us the stock of knowledge that constitutes HRM in their organization. This language both describes the meanings they attach to HRM initiatives and further reinforces the beliefs they hold about HRM.

We next examine the role of rhetoric in the manifestation of HRM. Parkin (1975) describes rhetoric as a form of word-delivery, a type of ritual which says something about the speaker, the spoken-to, and the situation, and which goes beyond what is contained in the surface message. Parkin argues that ideology involves rhetoric insofar as it is lavish in symbolism,

and contains the following three elements: it is emotive, it effuses a wide fan of possible meanings or connotations, and offers scope for verbal and ideational creativity.

Parkin represents plain speaking and rhetoric as two ends of a continuum; as symbolic content increases, one moves from "plain speaking" to "rhetoric." Gowler and Legge (1983) have drawn upon Parkin's continuum to show how by constantly shifting from flowerly speech to stark statement, managers use the ambiguity of rhetoric to arouse emotion and the clarity of plain speaking to direct behavior. Parkin observes that "rhetoric, like ritual, may be more than a symbolic reaffirmation of social relations. Through rhetoric people have license, so to speak, to explain and evaluate the causes and consequences of social relations, sometimes to the point of distortion" (p. 119).

This paper develops Parkin's model in order to examine how the two dimensions of "plain speaking" and "rhetoric" define the linguistic arena within which the reality of HRM is constituted. The analysis pursued here goes beyond the notion of *skepticism/cynicism* that is often associated with "rhetoric," whereby HRM is perceived as a verbal construct which does not accord with actual practice. This is found in Skinner's (1981, p. 106) contention that HRM seems to be "mostly good intentions and whistling in the dark or averting unionization," in Keenoy's (1991) view that HRM is a conceptual euphemism to describe changes in employment relations, in Guest's (1990) likening of HRM to "the American dream," and in Armstrong's (1987) analogy of "the emperor's new clothes." Some of these critiques are significant to the extent that they see the rhetoric as a means of "manufacturing meaning" and are as such consistent with the political dimension of rhetoric. They however, reflect the logical conclusion of an analysis that begins from the conception of the world as *objective reality* rather than from the subjective point of view of social actors.

We further note that the claim often made that HRM is simply a buzz word should be treated with caution. Some people formulate models of HRM, and on being unable subsequently to find these "in real life," proceed to dismiss HRM as sheer rhetoric. We argue that by locating this discourse within the interpretivist paradigm, the reality of HRM is seen to exist in the first instance in the minds of organizational actors, who subsequently *objectify* their subjective experience through language and ritual. From the foregoing we argue that three themes can be isolated from the manifestations of language: language as linguistic performance, language as lived experience and language as communication and distortion. Taken together, these themes suggest the following proposition about the use of language and rhetoric:

Proposition 1. Language provides organizational actors a medium through which to enact experience and to communicate and/or distort the meanings embodied in this experience.

Ritualism and Magico-Religious Behavior

The analysis here draws from Beattie's (1964) insightful treatment of ritualistic behavior. The enactment of rites is a particularly revealing form of meaning-construction within a social milieu as it constitutes the accomplishment of social phenomena. Beattie illustrates this notion by stating that the person who consults a rainmaker and the rainmaker himself are asserting symbolically the importance they attach to rain and their earnest desire that it shall fall when it is required; rites thus enact the state of affairs which it is hoped to bring about. This suggests two characteristics of ritual: the *expressive* and the *instrumental* (Beattie, 1964; Cleverly, 1971; Trice & Beyer, 1985).

For Beattie, to the extent that it largely involves belief and faith, ritual behavior can be regarded as *magico-religious*. He offers three broad psychological and social "consequences" of magico-religious phenomena. These involve beliefs that provide acceptable explanations and act as an antidote to ignorance and doubt; they provide ways of coping with misfortune or danger, and they have important implications for other relevant social institutions. These "consequences" might be operationalized in the modern organization through the following proposition:

Proposition 2. Magico-religious behavior represents individuals' efforts to understand and cope with the hazards of their social world and may often involve attribution theory.

The idea of coping with insecurity and anxiety is vital in enabling us to fathom the motives for actions which might otherwise appear inscrutable. The two "consequences" above suggest that people usually resort to magic in situations of actual or potential danger. Evans-Pritchard (1937) claims that magic works toward its ends by preventing mystical interference; its main purpose is to combat other mystical powers rather than to produce changes favorable to man in the objective world. We however find merit in Beattie's (1964) view that in the absence of an adequate body of empirical knowledge man *spiritualizes the universe*. The instrumental ritualism involved therein is expected to lead to "favorable changes."

The third "consequence" above is consistent with the view expressed earlier about the significance of the social context and the use of language. Just as language serves the purpose of creating and communicating forms of life, the expressiveness of magico-religious behavior implies an audience, actual, perceived, or potential. People who engage in ritualistic behavior

are involved in the creation *and* communication of meaning. This point might be understood in terms of dramaturgy or the enactment of social reality (Weick, 1982). According to Goffman (1959), individuals enact their realities, or put on their show "for the benefit of other people" in social situations. Making accounts of social life understood, and *acceptable* to others is a central aspect of this debate, especially to the extent that this "accounting process" is facilitated and accomplished through the use of language and rhetoric. This implies the following:

Proposition 3. Organizational actors use language and ritual to create/distort, and to communicate meaning to relevant audiences.

TOWARD A TOTEMIC CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

This section illustrates how the insights generated from the foregoing inform our analytical framework. It also offers some rationale for the use of an anthropo-linguistic approach to the study of HRM. Our analysis is not predicated on the simplistic assumption that the magico-religious behavior of earlier times in Africa is particularly endemic in organizations today. We contend, however, that this is a viable approach in the analysis of human behavior be it in modern organizations or in pristine tribal settings. This is because the fortunes and hazards in the business world today are largely analogous to those that existed in earlier times. Traditional communities throughout history attempted to reduce the anxieties bred by the hostile and the unknown through magico-religious behavior. The use of rites, symbols, totems, taboos, and various forms of magic were all attempts both to understand the world and to "tame" it. These are manifest today in the psychological processes underpinning man's efforts to overcome business risks, and in the management of organizational rites and symbols (Cleverly, 1971).

Taking Parkin's (1975) continuum of rhetoric and plain speaking, we demonstrate how organizational members combine language and ritual to construct an organizational phenomenon in the form of a *totem*. The term *totem* is taken from an indigenous North American language. It symbolizes relationships between individuals in a clan or other social group (Levi-Strauss, 1964). Similarly, Beattie (1964) observes that as a magico-religious institution, it symbolizes the unity and solidarity of a group. He further notes that a totem can be little more than a clan symbol or emblem, or the object of a ritual avoidance. The religious nature of the totem and the significance of the clan and kinship ties are likewise emphasized by Durkheim (1975), who also identifies the totem as an emblem and a coat-of-arms. Ritual behavior and rhetoric have been widely explored in organization studies but to the best of our knowledge, the concept of totemism has been largely

ignored. We argue here that totemism in organizations exists to the extent that organizational actors create or invent symbolic assertions that represent for them a common identity and common interests, the meaning of which is communicated to perceived relevant audiences in a dramaturgical manner.

For our purposes, rhetoric encompasses the three themes in the use of language captured in Proposition 1. We suggest that the use of language as linguistic performance and as lived experience facilitates the accomplishment of magico-religious behavior. The expressiveness of magico-religious behavior often goes hand-in-hand with language which is lavish in symbolism and imagery. It is this rapprochement of language and ritualism which leads to the totemic construction of organizational reality. The plain-speaking end of the continuum involves the use of power and politics to control and direct behavior. This point is examined within the following proposition:

Proposition 4. The art of plain-speaking aims to communicate clear, unambiguous information to guide and direct behavior, and achieve organizational control.

It should be pointed out, however, that the dimensions of this continuum are not irreconcilable. We argue, therefore, that control of behavior might be achieved not merely through plain speaking but also through symbolism. Hence our final proposition:

Proposition 5. Control and direction of behavior can be achieved by the subtle manipulation of the symbolism inherent in rhetoric and ritual behavior.

The Case Study

We next consider the totemic nature of a firm's efforts to create teamwork and a team spirit in its day-to-day activities. The company, which we shall call Autoco, is a subsidiary of an American car manufacturer. The Kenyan government held a nominal controlling interest through a proxy public corporation. In 1991, Autoco had gross annual sales of U.S. $50 million and employed about 400 people. The statements analyzed here are part of a study conducted in summer 1989 and later in winter 1991 (see also Kamoche, 1992). Formal interviews were held with five managers. The main contact was the Training Manager—due to organizational changes, this position was held by two different people in the duration of the research. Less formal discussions were also held with the managers and with other officers and employees during the visits.

Taperecording interviews was viewed with mistrust, which necessitated painstaking notetaking. This was achieved to the best of our ability, with frequent double-checking to maintain as accurate a record as possible.

Contact was subsequently maintained for an 18-month period during which clarification and further information were sought as the analysis progressed. A second source of information was the quarterly newsletters covering the same research period. The correspondents and writers are ordinary Autoco managers and employees. The firm introduced a contemporary HRM approach with the guidance of its U.S. parent company in the late 1980s. A thematic analysis to examine the emergent form of HRM at Autoco revealed that the firm sought to capture the ethos of its HRM initiative through *teamwork* and that this was achieved through variations in the forms of word-delivery.

Teamwork has been built into the organizational culture of Autoco to engender the belief that everyone in the firm is a member not just of the many functional and departmental teams but of the "Autoco team." The term "Autoco family" was also often used. The notion of a team is repeated over and over again in day-to-day conversation and in the newsletters. This aims to serve as a constant reminder to all that *the team* is their emblem and coat-of-arms, their trademark and salvation. Teamwork thus emerges as a totem which is held up to symbolize unified interests. The members of Autoco see themselves pitted against hostile forces and uncertainties.

These include market competition, government interference (e.g., through the appointment of a chairman on political grounds rather than on merit), "unpredictable supplier behavior patterns," and foreign exchange shortages. The complexities of the business environment in Africa have been analyzed elsewhere (e.g., Munene, 1991), and will not be discussed here.

By huddling together under their totem, the members of Autoco expect to generate the hope, strength, and courage to meet these challenges. The notion of teamwork is particularly relevant on the shopfloor where quality circles (QCs) exist. QCs are referred to as "quality teams," employees as "quality makers," and quality as "pride in performance". The analysis below reveals how language facilitates the achievement of teamwork and the degree to which the language games of teamwork have been accepted as a "form of life."

The Totemic Construction of Teamwork at Autoco

The discussion below assesses how the members of Autoco have created the totem of teamwork through verbal and symbolic assertions. The analysis follows Parkin's (1975) language continuum and the propositions posited above.

HIGH SYMBOLIC CONTENT IN LANGUAGE: RHETORIC

Communication and/or distortion. This first section analyzes Proposition 1 with regard to the use of language to create, define and communicate the experience of HRM. The Training Manager observed that: "We are tying to create a culture where we can all see ourselves as members of a team."

The idea of a culture gives us some initial impression of the nature of the clan. The members wish to "see" themselves as a team, and therefore to foster and inculcate the sorts of mores that enhance this image and identity. This image is accentuated further by the Managing Director's (MD) appeal to the team: "All of us on the Autoco team must now commit ourselves to doing the best in our respective areas to contribute to a strong finish in Calendar year 1990. . . We have the vision; we have the tools."

The above statement captures the twin elements of the symbolic, i.e., the vision, and the more tangible, the technology and structure to achieve this. A central characteristic of rhetoric is its ability to arouse emotion and to spawn ideational creativity (Parkin, 1975). This is evident in the MD's effort to generate the enthusiasm necessary for success, which is akin to a pep talk to a sports team. Everyday conversation was characterized by talk about the vision, determination, goals, positive spirits, and so forth. For example, an employee said: "The future belongs to any company with the vision to see it. . .and the drive, dedication and determination to get there. Today, perhaps more so than ever before, we have that vision and that drive."

Another employee interprets the company's vision as follows: "We know that technology is applied knowledge. We believe that through teamwork and technology we multiply our power to offer superior products to customers and to maintain leadership in the industry."

The views above illustrate how the organizational members perceive the reality of the team, and therefore what the team means to them. Interest in the team was sustained by a form of word-delivery which was emotive and which sought to generate inspiration among the organizational members in order for them to develop an attachment to the concept. Parkin (1975) observes that the emotional force of an ideology engages attention but at the cost of depth. We suggest therefore, that depth must be found in the lucid, stark statements made in plain speaking.

Coping with the Social World. In its efforts to create the phenomenon of a team, Autoco has to negotiate hazards in the business world—such as market competition and foreign exchange uncertainties. In this section we focus on the purpose of magico-religious behavior as posited in Proposition 2. Team performance serves as the magic potion to provide the needed

protection. The necessary rituals are stage-managed by a top management council, the Human Resource Committee (HRC) which includes the Managing Director, Finance Director, Factory Director, and Personnel Manager. The thrust of Proposition 2 is exemplified in the Personnel Manager's view that: "The main objective of the HR Committee is to review policies and procedures to ensure that the external environment is beneficial to the company and to the employee."

After a company tour by an executive from headquarters, a manager praised the employees' competence, i.e., the internal source of good fortune: "Proud employees paraded their organization and demonstrated their mastery of their work environment. . .an environment that is respectful of the dignity and worth of all employees, an environment that enables all employees to realize their capacities for growth in individual and team performance."

The visiting executive in turn endorsed the firm's good fortune by stating that: "Autoco's enabling environment has enabled all employees to realize their capacities for growth and team performance."

Autoco created the notion of "an enabling environment" to facilitate the achievement of acceptable results. This concept was a double-edged sword. It defined the social circumstances within which teamwork would be achieved within the firm. At the same time, it shielded the firm from the ill-fortunes of the external environment. This reflects the tendency for man to attribute good fortune to himself (or to internal causes) and ill fortune to others (or to external causes). Bettman and Weitz (1983) define this tendency as "attribution egotism."

Related to the foregoing is our observation of the conspicuous avoidance of anything that suggested blemish on the totem. Totemism is not all about hope and inspiration; it also involves taboo, abomination, profanity, and ritual avoidance. At Autoco, we found the ritual avoidance of bad news. Pressed to discuss setbacks to the team, managers either vaguely alluded to foreign exchange shortages and unreliable suppliers, or demonstrated the firm's resilience despite hardships. There was, however, an admission of pilferage on the shopfloor, which was attributed to social malaise, a cause which was perceived to be external to the firm.

The Social Context and the Perceived Audience. Proposition 3 brings to the fore the fact that communication and the enactment of organizational activities are directed at an audience. The statements below are pertinent to the first two propositions; however, in this section we wish to emphasize how the meaning of teamwork at Autoco is communicated to "significant others" within the social context. The statements below refer to the experiences of a team of sales executives who travelled the country

in 1990 exhibiting Autoco products at trade fairs. The opening comments of a newsletter reported:

> A pride of managers led by [Mr. X] . . . has been traveling all over Kenya displaying the [Model M] range of products in what is popularly referred to as the "[Model M] Caravan." And the caravan has not only been touring and displaying products, they have been performing well and scooping the highest honors and trophies . . . As expected, the team took the provinces by storm and scooped prizes for best motor vehicle display and originality . . . The mood has been eminently upbeat, employees afire with the team spirit hinged on the belief that they can perform well, and so far the achievements have been olympian.

Several managers reiterated the "pride of lions" analogy, which connotes the bravery of the Autoco team in a harsh environment. On receiving the winning trophy, the leader of the Caravan captured the imagination of the audience by describing the potency of Autoco through flowery language that is both illustrative of linguistic performance and is manifestly obscurantist. "It is Autoco's tenacity for hard work, quality and excellence, a source of vast and shifting energies that manifests itself in business and engineering expertise that makes us a giant of substance, sprawl and splendor incarnate."

Several months later, the Model M Caravan won another prize. The newsletter reported:

> Once again, the master performers at Autoco have done it and their performance dubbed terrific . . . For the second time in a row this year, the team . . . received a first prize . . . presented to them by the President . . . in style and glory . . . The team went out to win and for them the world of competition was second. There has been a magic about their unequalled performance and in the fact that everything has been working quite flawlessly which has left competition in the dust.

A member of the pride of managers said: "Employees are feeling good about their power, their destiny and achievement and the brilliant performance has become a spectacular dramatization of the great Autoco's entrepreneurial energy and optimism."

The managers recognize that customer service involves performing for the customers, both linguistically and in high quality manufacturing. The audience includes a multiplicity of stakeholders. Actual and potential customers in the audience are being assured of high product quality; competitors are being intimidated by the might of the firm, and employees are being congratulated for a job well done. The verbosity in the comments serves to mystify and project the desired and possibly inaccurate image of the team. The ambiguity inherent in the rhetoric facilitates the wilful distortion of the reality. The high dramatic content in the rhetoric illustrates how the totem of the team is held up with pride, for all to admire, envy, and even emulate. A similar example is found in the Head Nurse's com-

ment on the firm's health scheme and clinical facilities after the firm had been selected by an international health body for a study. "The fact that our government, various companies and other organizations have used Autoco's clinic as their model should be cherished by all of us. It is yet another example of how teamwork can be effective in our day-to-day operations."

The language used to describe the reality of teamwork and the "Autoco team" is evidently lavish in symbolism, imagery, and allegory. This use of language allows the organizational members to reveal their emotional attachment to the totem. Speeches made at the award ceremonies are particularly extravagant in the claims made about the totem. We argue here that even though the members of Autoco may well recognize that the firm is not a "giant of substance. . .," the use of flowery imagery and analogy anticipates such an eventuality, and is consistent with instrumental ritualism.

LOW SYMBOLIC CONTENT IN LANGUAGE: PLAIN SPEAKING

Directing and Controlling Behavior. This section is concerned with plain speaking with little recourse to symbolism and rich imagery as suggested in Proposition 4. We see plain speaking here as the communication of clear and lucid information either to define factual "objective" reality, or to direct behavior along some desired path. These two are interrelated. Top management has a clearly laid down policy on what constitutes teamwork and what objectives it is supposed to serve. In order to achieve these objectives, the members are required to understand and accept the policy and to implement it through day-to-day HRM activities. There is no room for ambiguity where instructions about required behavior are issued. In a sense, plain speaking facilitates the accomplishment of the core structure of the totem pole while rhetoric represents both the impressionistic embellishments on the surface as well as the underlying sociopsychological impulses that account for the existence of the totem.

The teamwork campaign was based on creating the "right" culture and customer service. The reality of customer service is accentuated through trade fairs, donations to charity, and seminars for suppliers and dealers to educate them on the firm's high quality standards. The latter are considered particularly vital because they represent "the point of contact with the customer," and according to the MD, they are the ones "who really hear directly the 'voice of our customers.'"

The MD relied on clear, unambiguous language to communicate the customer service message. Organizational members attested to his effectiveness in capturing their imagination through emotive speeches, and his

articulate clarification of what he stood for and what he expected of the team. Gowler and Legge (1983) have shown how such shifts serve to arouse emotion and to direct behavior. As noted above, rhetoric has the capacity to engender emotional attachment to the management objective, and once this has been achieved, support for the objective can be elicited with ease in plain, simple language. For example, the MD talked in general terms about the need to consistently meet and even exceed the customers' needs without specifying what such needs might entail. He then calmly and in plain terms explains who a customer might be, either within or outside the firm. On another occasion the MD talks about the parent company's vision for Africa:

> Several members of Autoco's staff and I attended an Autoco Inc. meeting in Cairo. The objective of this meeting was to review Autoco Inc's performance in Africa and to discuss (its) future in Africa. Participants included key individuals from all Autoco Inc. African operations and several people from support agencies, such as Citibank and the World Bank . . . Autoco Inc. is recommitting to growing its businesses in Africa.

The visionary picture which includes important major players is designed to impress; it assures the employees that they are a part of a grand scheme of things and thus captures their attention. The MD then reverts to plain language:

> So what does the above mean for Autoco? . . . We must now actively pursue a strategy of growth—that is, we must increase our factory output. We must increase from our recent average of 2400 units per year to our one-shift production capacity of 3500 units per year . . . As we pursue a strategy of growth, we must work as a team to achieve our objectives.

He then shifts to symbolic language: "Success in the initial stages will bring about success in subsequent projects. So, although the early stages may be difficult as we plough new ground, we must pursue our plans doggedly to succeed from the start."

He concludes on a familiar theme: "If you need more details on how we plan to grow, and especially what is expected of you, talk with your immediate supervisor. Because only through effective teamwork will we succeed."

Such shifts in the use of language act as a vehicle for the realization of political and ideological ends. The concept of teamwork is management's effort to order and construct a desired pattern of social relations at work: to create the *meaning* of HRM at Autoco. Initiatives to define, mold and propagate a particular conception of reality represent the management of meaning, which Cohen and Comaroff (1976) see as an expression of power. The acceptance of this *meaning* and power relation is exemplified by two employees' comments:

> Total customer satisfaction is the master plan for us. To achieve the goals of the plan we are committed to the improvement of every aspect of the business. The foundations of this commitment are employees working together for the customer.
>
> Joined as a team in a spirit of cooperation, we are working to achieve a common goal . . . total customer satisfaction.

Plain speaking thus facilitates the acceptance of the ideology of team work.

SYMBOLISM IN BEHAVIOR CONTROL

We now turn to the situation where the management of social relations can be achieved through symbolism in rhetoric and magico-religious behavior. This position is captured in Proposition 5. Gowler and Legge (1981) see rhetoric in language as "political" in three ways: it justifies and legitimizes actual or potential power and exchange relationships; it eliminates actual or potential challenges to such relationships, and it expresses those contradictions in power and exchange relationships that cannot be openly admitted or resolved. We elaborate this argument by contending that while the political dimension in plain speaking is directive and forthright, in rhetoric it is characterized by subtlety and prevarication. A good example is found in symbolic reversal which refers to those social activities where traditional roles are reversed and "status structures" challenged (Babcock, 1978).

The political dimension in symbolic language and ritual acts as a built-in countervailing force toward the potential excesses of symbolic reversal and as such, succeeds in reinforcing the eminence of the status structures that it purports to deny. According to Gluckman (1963) ritualized rebellions actually preserve and defend the political systems within which they occur. Therefore, their carthartic expressiveness offers the arena for the enactment of a regularized and controlled form of protest. Gluckman notes that the institutionalization and codification of ritual is testimony to the capacity of established order to contain and defuse disorder. A similar purpose is served by the nature of rhetoric as argued above. The MD typically makes the comment to the effect that everyone is a winner and that it is not the winning that counts but participation. There is an overriding impression of equality, and the supposed harmony in social relations. A manager described a Christmas group photograph thus: "The MD is seen here rubbing shoulders with some employees."

The rhetoric of leadership parallels that of winning. Both illustrate how the management of meaning is achieved by masking unpalatable inequalities, fostering kinship ties and assuming that losers and followers do not exist. An employee said: "It's the responsibility of everyone to be a

leader. In Autoco we believe in leadership by example and in sharing the leadership task. And the test of leadership is the extent to which we contribute and work effectively as a team."

In a similar vein, a member of the Model M Caravan announced that: "Autoco employees are full partners in the business and the company believes in fully utilizing the talents of its employees because what they do is vital to the success of the organization."

The view of reality that all are equal under the totem is facilitated by the ambiguity of rhetoric. The notion of equality—as in full partners—justifies the contention that the utilization of human resources can be a source of strategic value to the firm. Employee participation at Autoco is limited to QCs, a suggestion scheme and an "open-door policy." Therefore, the denial of the existence of followers and losers can be interpreted either as an adornment on the totem or a manifestation of ritual avoidance. The symbolic assertions embody the acceptance of the ideology of teamwork, illustrating the subtlety with which employee compliance has been achieved. Efforts to dispel possible acrimony in the status structure are found in the institution of certain elements of the rule structure that governs social relations in the clan. This is depicted in an employee's view that: "Mutual trust binds the Autoco team and prevails throughout the organization. Trust creates an openness in problem solving relationships and for this to flourish there must be openness, honesty and respect."

The rule structure ensures that the totem does not collapse or disintegrate. In addition to the assertations of symbolic reversal which help to contain potential disorder, management has also sought employee compliance by magnifying the "importance" of employees through the rhetoric of the "valued employee." The comment to the effect that employees are the most valuable resource was made often in various forms. It had gained mythological status and often seemed like a platitude that managers had conspired to employ whenever they discussed HRM with visitors, i.e., with an external audience. An intuitively appropriate context for this notion was the employees' physical health, as in the Head Nurse's comment: "The Nursing team's main objective is that of promoting and maintaining the health of all Autoco employees. This stems from our belief that healthy employees are valuable assets to our organization."

In its world-wide use, the notion of the "valued employee" has largely become a hackneyed conception of labor. This has no doubt lent credence to the skeptical and cynical views expressed about HRM. At Autoco it was a central part of the kinship ties that held the clan together. Testifying to this shared experience, an employee said: "We believe we are the organization's greatest strength. Through our dedication and commitment to excellence, we are the key to achieving customer satisfaction goals."

Both management and employees had become ensnared by the rhetoric of the "valued employee." This particular language game considerably legitimized the extant social relations.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The discussion below examines the ubiquity and significance of the construal of teamwork at Autoco and the implications for HRM. Although this study relates to one firm, which limits its generalizability, we believe that the analysis has vital implications for HRM. The acceptance of the notion of teamwork is partly due to the fact that this was a concept that organizational members found they could relate to and partly due to management's ingenious use of language and ritual. The concept of teamwork was not simply a verbal construct; it represented a way of life at Autoco. HRM issues were handled by a multifunctional management team, which was symbolic in itself because it demonstrated leadership by example, and managers frequently described their task in terms of "enhancing and maintaining a team spirit."

Much of the day-to-day work was carried out by teams or project groups. National quality awards would suggest that the objectives of teamwork were being achieved; but this is only a subjective inference. Recruitment looked for individuals who, in addition to possessing good technical and academic qualifications, were also perceived to be "team players." Post-selection orientation speeches by managers were replete with exhortations to enhance quality, teamwork, and customer service.

Allowing for subjectivity in assessing the above traits in an interview, managers reported that the perceived quality of "team player" did influence their selection decisions. Performance appraisal criteria included ability to work with others, quality consciousness, attendance record, adaptability, conduct, initiative and drive, and communication skills. A method of "Team Audits/appraisal" was used on a limited scale for employees working in the same team to evaluate each other. Rewarding was strictly individual merit-based, which raises some concern about its consistency with the espoused team ethos. The Personnel Manager's explanation was that the team spirit at the group level and the mild rivalry between teams were incentives for all employees to put in the effort that merited high individual reward.

Also, an annual bonus based on "the Autoco team's overall profitability" is payable to unionizable staff. A symbolic form of reward consisted of free lunch for all employees in the event of a defect-free vehicle. Training takes various forms: all new hires attend a four half-day intensive program. Subsequent training for ordinary employees is largely on-the-job, and formal training depends on needs identified at performance appraisal.

Conceding that an *ad hoc* approach to training might jeopardize the teams' capabilities, managers explained that skill levels were determined by the level of technology, which they did not consider to be very advanced. On the other hand, officer and manager training was much more rigorous, and was based on long-term career planning. This reality is inconsistent with the espoused notion of equality.

QCs serve both organizational and psychological needs. The former relates to day-to-day work design whereby the "quality-makers" set their quality and production targets and organize monthly quality and production competitions. Psychological and welfare needs were satisfied to the extent that these workers brought their personal and family problems to the daily planning and review sessions. This practice made the team a reality and turned it into something that the employees felt was in their interest to sustain. It is noteworthy that when QCs were first introduced in 1982, they failed because they were only concerned with quality and productivity. This underlines the need to let teamwork emerge from the social context of work, especially where the ethos is compatible with extant kinship or clan-like ties. Seeing themselves as a "family" justified the acceptance of the social relations. Further research might, however, examine whether teamwork is more likely to succeed in societies characterized by strong kinship and social ties which engender interdependences.

The sociolinguistic framework adopted here illustrates how through the use of language, management can achieve HRM objectives and acquire legitimacy both for the methods and the outcomes. In an analysis of selected excerpts from interviews, documents and newsletters, Sackman (1989) found that metaphors provided vivid images on a cognitive, emotional, and behavioral level, and that their use can legitimize behavior. She identified two types of metaphors: "adaptive" for example philosophizing, which are emergent, and lack clear-cut goals, and "targeted," such as in engineering, with clear-cut goals. There is a similarity between Sackman's metaphors and the forms of language delivery analyzed in this paper. It was evident in Autoco that rhetoric generated cognitive and emotional attachment to teamwork, which management subsequently capitalized on by defining and prescribing the "acceptable" forms of behavior in plain language.

Therefore we can manage human resource initiatives through language if we accept that language is a form of life, and as Berger and Luckman (1966) point out, it is firmly located within everyday life. Man is conceived of as rhetorician (Harre, 1980), and it follows from this that the realization of social phenomena is largely an oral or verbal accomplishment. Gowler and Legge (1983) argue that management is based on an oral tradition; in the current study, we find that the verbal arts are not restricted

to managers. All organizational actors are engaged in using language to create and share meaning. To dismiss HRM as "sheer rhetoric" is to misconstrue the essence and meaning of language in everyday life, and to ignore the ideational and political purposes of those who engage in the verbal arts to create and propagate social phenomena. Further research in this genre might examine how the competing interests of different groups in an organizational setting are mediated.

We do not consider useful the question as to whether rhetoric or plain speaking was more effective. Instead, we emphasize the mutually complementary use of both as a tool to ensure the acceptance of the ideology of teamwork. It may be that rhetoric is suitable in the initial stages of a change program, while plain speaking deals with the more concrete question of implementation. These may then be used alternatively to regenerate interest and to assure action.

The "relative mix" of rhetoric and plain speaking is likely to vary from organization to organization, depending on the perceived appropriateness of symbolism in speech, management's ability to sustain a coherent verbal crusade, and the credibility of the crusade in the eyes of those being managed. Wilson (1992) argues that metaphors engender an acceptance of the situation and a justification of actions that may hitherto have been considered as unacceptable. Through actual participation and by succumbing to a managerial ideology, employees at Autoco felt they were members of a clan. The power dimension in rhetoric affirms the hierarchical nature of the social context (Silverman & Jones, 1976), and at the same time, the choice of language games serves to deny the existence of such a hierarchy. In these particular circumstances, managers are able to dispense with bureaucratic and abrasive forms of control, and to legitimize the desired structure of power and social relations through language games.

This brings us to the final question about the implications of a totemic construction of social reality and how this might guide future research. Our analysis revealed that teamwork at Autoco had taken on the conceptual shape of a totem, the reality and purpose of which have been demonstrated in this paper. Similarly, Berg (1986) recommends that management should create and manage unifying symbols like totems that give meaning to the organizational members and impel them to take action according to the overall strategy of the company. This view would appear to have been borne out at Autoco. Further research might focus on the possibly broad range of organizational phenomena which might lend themselves to a totemic conception by virtue of their unifying symbolism.

Many organizations today engage in varying degrees of totemic behavior, elementary manifestations of which are found in mission statements, emblems, slogans, songs, and various management nostrums. In a world in

which organizations are constantly searching for meaning, totemism might be found to contain strengths which surpass current concerns with organizational commitment, employee involvement, culture and so forth, and we suggest that it is ripe for further investigation.

CONCLUSION

We have attempted in this paper to explore the meaning of HRM from the point of view of individual organizational actors who are concerned to define and create their reality from subjective experience. By locating our argument within the interpretive paradigm we hope to offer an analytical perspective which starts from the level of *meaning*, i.e., the meaning that social actors attach to their activities and beliefs. It has been argued, therefore, that looked at from this perspective, HRM is a linguistic construct as well as a manifestation of magico-religious behavior. Social actors are seeking to make sense of the world around them and engaging in activities to communicate to "significant others." They use language to make "real" the thoughts that go on in their minds, and they develop totems to foster kinship and a shared identity. The concept of the team emerges as a totemic unifying device and a subtle way to achieve the *integration* of all the members of the organization.

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