COMMUNAL WEBS

Communication and Culture in Contemporary Israel

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Introduction

For the past ten years I have been playing ethnographer in my own back yard, the everyday world of middle-class Israelis, mainly of European heritage, which we tend to think of as mainstream Israeli culture. Making ethnography my strategy for encompassing situations (Burke 1957[1941]), I have paused at various junctures to puzzle over what presented themselves as mundane, taken for granted, but potentially intriguing moments in my own, my friends' and my children's lives. Some of what I have seen, heard, felt, and thought is given in these pages. Some has been written elsewhere (Katriel 1986a).

I have deliberately invoked C. Geertz's famous "spider-web" metaphor in the title of this book, trying to signal my striving toward an ethnographic tale woven out of a set of mutually conversant "symbols and meanings." At the same time, the book's essential organizational pattern involves the juxtaposition of studies that loosely connect cultural symbols and public performances—each one of them a central, though somewhat arbitrary juncture in my ethnographic journey. This organization points to an alternative conception of both culture and the ethnograpic enterprise to the one implied by the spider-web metaphor. Thus, as I turn from chapter to chapter, I move between such diverse studies as the exploration of a key verbal symbol (*gibush*), a central speech mode (griping), a key visual symbol (fire), emotion-laden, semi-ritualized familial occasions (picnics in military zones), hegemonic, mass-mediated pedagogical discourses (radio for young listeners), and children's self-regulated peer group communicative exchanges. The juxtapostion of these ethnographic fragments, which were culled out from the same cultural world, brings forth mutually reinforcing strands of meaning and form. At the same time, they manifest the kind of modernist sensibility J. Clifford (1988:147) has recently spoken of as "ethnographic surrealism," saying: "Ethnography cut with surrealism emerges as the theory and practice of juxtaposition. It studies, and is part of, the invention and interruption of meaningful wholes in works of cultural import-export."

I find myself very much in sympathy with this surrealist conception of the ethnographic enterprise. The collage metaphor Clifford proposes as a paradigm for understanding culture and ethnography seems to me as illuminating in considering the case of an ethnographer studying his or her own culture as it is in the case of the ethnographer venturing into the domain of the cultural 'other.' This metaphor brings out not only the essential constructedness of

cultural accounts, but also highlights the movement of de-familiarization, which I consider to be so basic to my craft. Each of the chapters in this book is the product of such a movement, a gesture of "encirclement" as I like to think of it, the intellectual moment in which an ethnographic exploration begins to take shape as a mundane term (such as *gibush*), or a mundane social practice (such as griping), or a mundane public performance (such as a daily news-for-kids program) inexplicably shed their accustomed air of "naturalness" and become interpretive sites for the exploration of cultural sense. However arduous, intricate, drawn-out and richly textured an ethnographic project may become, it is to this momentary shift of consciousness that it owes its life. The collage metaphor, therefore, by acknowledging that our accounts are inevitably constructed out of cultural fragments, grants that the art of ethnography has its genesis in a disjunctive movement of de-contextualization whose effect is never fully obliterated or smoothed over in our subsequent ethnographic reconstructions.

Thus, even while my work has been an ongoing effort to capture the unifying threads, which underlie cultural members' sense of "Israeliness," the conception of ethnography informing these pages is self-consciously a form of "ethnographic surrealist practice," which "attacks the familiar, provoking the irruption of otherness—the unexpected" (Clifford: 145). The sense of otherness invoked in this case, however, has nothing of the exotic about it. It is, rather, the sense of discovery associated with the experience of delving deep into one's cultural 'self,' and experiencing oneself as an objectified 'other.' Working in one's own culture indeed implies a never ending search for ways to identify, foreground, and estrange aspects of one's deeply felt cultural experience. The use of objectifying, reifying analytic techniques—the identification of "key symbols" and processes of ritualization, the elucidation of native terms, the formulation of communicative rules—has been helpful in accomplishing this gesture of self-estrangement. Thinking of "*gibush*" as a root metaphor, of "griping" as a verbal ritual, of children's exchanges as rule-governed communicative processes has been a way of providing a theoretically grounded interpretation on the one hand, and of establishing the necessary analytic distance on the other.

In R. Williams' (1977) terms, this analytic move marks a process of articulation, a process whereby the pre-emergent "structures of feeling" that shape our lives in so many imperceptible ways become somewhat fixed and given to reflection. To me this implies recognizing the as-yet-unformed but highly potent affective elements of consciousness and relationship that ground our social experience, and make themselves present in our myriad, fleeting communicative exchanges. This very recognition thus begins a new process of cultural formation, so that our ethnographers' voices may become uniquely positioned participants in the larger communal conversation.

Over the years, I have lived and relived moments of deep anxiety as well as moments of wonderful excitement as I had the opportunity to share my explorations and interpretations with friends and colleagues, students and accidental readers, my fellow "natives." The presentation and discussion of my work, the "aha" responses I often encounter as well as the challenges to render my analyses more nuanced, to venture into regions of meaning and experience I have not thought to explore, have been invaluable resources in my work. Whether experienced as an unmatchable moment of encouragement, or as a test of endurance, each presentation of my work, or even casual conversation relating to it, becomes another step in the ethnography, turning it into an essentially open-ended project. Furthermore, each new project throws fresh, retrospective light on ethnographic studies I had seemingly concluded years earlier, beguiling even the elusive sense of closure that the publication of one's work can bring.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, the questions I am most persistently asked by my fellow Israelis have to do with beginnings and endings: "How on earth did you come upon the term '*gibush*'?" is an example of the kind of question I am repeatedly asked, often with a collusive chuckle, and "Are you still working on 'griping rituals'?" is an example of another question, which often signals more data. I always answer positively to the latter—how can I resist new data—but have never been able to fully respond to the former. Though I often remember the insignificant, whimsical moment when a term or a cultural practice first jumped into view, I cannot fully account for what I have earlier called the "movement of encirclement" in either analytic or experiential terms. But I believe that behind such moments of cultural self-recognition there lies a set of concerns that ground the perspective that unifies these studies, guiding my topical choices and analytic focus.

The set of concerns that informs my inquiries relates to the role of communicative forms and processes in the creation, affirmation, and negotiation of shared identity. G. Philipsen (1987) has proposed the notion of the "cultural communication" function as an umbrella term for the role of community-specific discursive forms (e.g. native terms, speech events, stories) in the ongoing process of linking the individual with a social group, arguing that the individual / community dialectic is a universal dimension of social experience, but is variously shaped and played out in different cultural contexts (Philipsen 1989).

The problematics of cultural identity and communal affiliation are, of course, a central theme in the social sciences, and the role played by symbolic processes in communal integration and identity formation is well recognized. The exploration of the role communicative forms play in articulating the individual / community dialectic therefore makes a great deal of sense from a disciplinary perspective. More importantly, perhaps, the individual / community interplay is experienced as a central point of tension in Israeli cultural

experience. The strong accent on community, on the primacy of the collective voice has been a central strand in the Israeli nation-building ethos. Although this cultural orientation has undergone a gradual shift for many years now, it is still a point of reference for much cultural reflection, whether related to public affairs or to personal choices. It is thus commonplace to talk about sociocultural changes on the Israeli scene in terms of a gradual shift from a communal or collective orientation to a more individualistic focus.

Given my personal participation in this tension filled juncture, which marks the social and personal career of many Israelis of my generation, it is no wonder, therefore, that much of my work has centered on the communicative implications of the individual / communal dialectic. It is also probably no wonder that my outsider's response to the American scene has resulted in ethnographies exploring the contours of the American accent on the 'self' and its relationships through a consideration of the cultural concept of 'communication' (Katriel & Philipsen 1981), or the study of American scrapbooks as a cultural genre of self-articulation (Katriel & Farrell 1991). Moving between the American and the Israeli cultural scenes has given me the opportunity to juxtapose the distinctive shapings given the individual / community dialectic in each of these cultural worlds. I believe this movement between cultures has helped me retain a much needed freshness of outlook, a second-best to the celebrated culture shock ethnographers have traditionally thrived on. In particular, my exposure to American versions of the celebration of the 'self' has helped me recognize the profound communal focus that still permeates Israeli culture despite the much discussed "Americanization of Israel" (cf. Sobel 1986).

Thus, a major theme that runs as a thread through this book involves experiences of solidarity and community as they are played out in the Israeli context. One way or another, the communicative production of community is a central theme in each of the book's chapters: the cultural semantics of *gibush* most clearly defines a communal idiom; griping rituals serve as a grudging affirmation of solidarity; fire rituals celebrate the culturally potent youth movement ethos in terms of a communally shared symbolic idiom; picnics in military zones and mass-mediated radio discourses provide occasions in and through which participants are lured into a communal conversation whose tenor and substance they might not otherwise endorse; children's peer-group engagements communicatively define a world of childhood whose contours, especially the strong accent on group solidarity, define for children and adults alike the roots of their "Israeli experience."

This shared thematic thread should not, however, blur the distinctive tonalities associated with the experience of community as variously articulated in the book's chapters. Here I return to the "spider webs" metaphor. This metaphor connotes not only a sense of the active production of symbols and

meanings, but also a sense of cultural members' enmeshment in their own meaning productions. Thus, some of what this book seeks to capture in attending to the weaving of Israeli communal webs responds to Williams' (1976) wry observation that "community" as a term for a social grouping is a word that is never used unfavorably. The focus on the positive aura of the collective, on the weaving of shared communal bonds in both casual and formal encounters is a central aspect of the Israeli experience. It has been noted in one way or another by other students of Israeli mainstream culture and symbolism as well (cf., for example, Rubinstein 1977; Zerubavel 1980; Oring 1981; Even-Zohar 1981; Bruner and Gorfain 1984; Gertz 1984, 1986a, 1986b, 1988; Shamgar-Handelman and Handelman 1986; Weil 1986; Shenhar 1987; Doleve-Gandelman 1987; Shokeid 1988; Dominguez 1989). The sense of enmeshment, the loss of personal voice, the institutionalization of silencing strategies—all these are no less part of Israelis' experience of the culture's communal focus. This dimension of communal experience, the constraining force of the webs no less than their supportive embrace, is attended to in many of the chapters of this book. It is this focus that gives the book its critical perspective, adding the voice of the cultural critic to that of the more traditional, descriptive ethnographer.

I could say my work has responded to recent calls to practice anthropology as a form of cultural critique as well as to study one's own culture (Marcus and Fischer 1986). In fact, I consider the communication-centered brand of anthropology I have been practicing as informed by a much older tradition of rhetorical criticism (cf., for example, Golden, Berquist & Coleman 1978), whose influence on contemporary cultural studies is unmistakable, though it is not always fully or explicitly acknowledged.[1]

It may be the peculiar position of the ethnographer working literally and metaphorically at home that has made it impossible for me to even try and efface my personal voice. The voice of the neutral observer would have been as much a deflection of reality as the voice of the engaged participant. Like all my fellow Israelis I have at least one opinion on every issue. I have tried to make my position explicit wherever such a move seemed relevant. Some of these chapters are thus written with a tinge of painful recognition, some with ironic self-reflection, some—especially the ones dealing with the culture of childhood—with a sense of sheer delight. All these voices are my own, intermingling the participant and the observer, echoing and interpreting my informants' voices and actions, all of which have joined to create the uneasy cultural collage that makes this book.

Thus, throughout this volume I move dialectically between the spider web and the collage as underlying metaphors for the doing of ethnography, shifting between a sensibility that values coherence and systemic connections, and one that values the fragmentary and the unexpected juxtapositions. In so doing,

I attempt to give shape and voice to structures of feeling that have emerged as central to my understanding of the contemporary Israeli scene as a lived cultural reality.

As Clifford points out, however, these very different sensibilities presuppose and reinforce each other. Indeed, it is just by attending to a relatively broad spread of contexts and cultural performances that the common underlying threads and themes that produce an overall sense of coherence for both cultural members and analyst can be most fruitfully identified. On the other hand, as the reading of the book will reveal, however topically varied it is, it offers a series of studies constructed and framed within a particular perspective on communication and culture, as well as a shared methodological stance towards their study. Let me say a few words about my ethnographic procedures before I let the studies speak for themselves.

METHODOLOGICAL REMARKS

The data collection for these studies has involved the standard ethnographic procedures of participant observation, nonparticipant observation, interviewing, and the analysis of public texts, both written and spoken. As noted, the cultural world some of whose contours I have sought to capture is the world of middle-class Jews, largely of Ashkenazi heritage, who would be most appropriately identified as members of mainstream Israeli culture, the socially privileged group, whose self-definition does not involve an "ethnic" component. As is the case in many ethnographic studies of this kind, my sample is not a random but a convenience sample. Most of my informants came from the northern part of Israel, and tended to be city dwellers or inhabitants of middle-class suburban communities. I would like to claim greater generality for the cultural performances I describe, even those that are not a priori nationwide like the radio discourses. They are characteristic of the Israeli middle class at large, and are part and parcel of growing up in Israel and growing up Israeli. Some of these studies, particularly the ones dealing with children's peer-group culture, have also been "replicated" by dozens of my students in small scale fieldwork exercises for ethnography of communication classes at the University of Haifa, thus allowing me to scan a much broader and diversified sociocultural domain. This was an invaluable accompaniment to my work, whether I found myself reinforced in my interpretations, or whether I was prodded to take back to the "field" and clarify matters raised in class. Indeed, I believe the symbols and meanings dramatized in and through the cultural performances considered in this book (and others) are part of what "ethnic" (mainly, Sephardic) groups in Israel have been reacting to in striving to maintain their separate identities, as well as part of what socially mobile ethnic Israelis, as well as newcomers to the land, have been learning about "Israeliness" as they moved closer to the core of the local sociocultural scene.

The level and nature of my participation in the communicative activities and cultural worlds I describe has naturally been variable. At times, my voice is that of the participant observer (e.g. my position as a "native griper"); at times that of the observing participant (e.g. my parental position as non-focal participant in family picnics or "fire rituals"). At times, I have played the role of nonparticipant observer, notably in the studies of children's peer-group culture. In all cases, I have supplemented my participant role with a researcher's removed stance, probing into others' perceptions in a concerted and at least partially systematic fashion through the use of formal interviews (many of them taped) and consistent recording of casual conversations. I also considered relevant mass-mediated materials, whether artistic (the novel considered in the chapter on "*gibush*") or more ephemeral media material (radio discourses and a variety of press commentary used in different chapters of the book). Given the various contexts in which the studies were conducted, the nature of my participation varied as well—from full-fledged, undifferentiated participation in griping rituals to partial, role-differentiated participation in fire rituals and family picnics. My adult (parental) role in these occasions has positioned me in a particular way with respect to my field of inquiry, although I have tried to enlarge my field of vision in each case so as to gain access to other participants' experiences and points of view.

Even though I have been working within my own cultural group, the research process was always attended by a sense of discovery. Through a willful act of suspending familiarity, and the intellectual effort of noting, framing, and articulating my familiar world I could retain some of the riddling quality (a sense of "breakdown" in M. Agar's [1986] terms), which is so much part of the anthropological experience. The children's studies were the closest I got to the traditional ethnographer's position of studying the 'other,' though they, too, were permeated with the profound sense of familiarity, even a somewhat nostalgic flavor.[2]

Anchoring my inquiry in widely recognized "native terms" has been most helpful, as this provided a way to discuss common realities even while inducing a sense of distance from them, talking about them in a way that was new to both myself and my informants. The many interviews I held, both formal and informal, some of them in my own home, some in the respondents' homes, some in public places, were always animated and revealing. I talked to both men and women, people I knew well, casual acquaintances as well as total strangers, whom I would engage in conversation as I joined friends in a cafe, or on an outing. I often found myself being introduced as a person who studies interesting things, at times a particular study being cited as an example (the "griping" study would be a frequent one), which made such conversations all the more natural and easygoing. Thus, although the first draft of a paper would be written after I had satisfied myself of my interpretation based on

data derived from observations and interviews with about twenty to thirty informants, by the time the paper went into print I lost count of the number of people I had talked to, constantly testing my understanding of the phenomena I was interested in with new audiences, either as readers or conversational partners. I couldn't help keeping alert to new variations or what appeared to be attitudinal changes over time. Life and work became so utterly blurred that one memorable morning at breakfast, my (then) ten-year-old daughter, Irit, suddenly interrupted our talk, her almond eyes filled with a questioning look, as she asked: "Mummy, are we talking or are we interviewing?" As we both burst into laughter, she promptly continued her story: "Never mind, and she said . . ."

This conversation was one of many we had been having about herself, her friends, who did what to whom, who said what about whom, who was *brogez* with whom, who refused to share a treat, who had a marvelous collection of stationary paper (full description of each item), or who cheated whom (and how) in trading a collectible. For a whole year I took notes of the events and concerns that such conversations with my children and their friends brought to light. I told them I was writing a book about children, which they interpreted as writing a children's book. This gave me a more elevated status in their eyes than these pages would probably warrant. In any event, when I culled from my notes what emerged as central communication-related junctures in the children's social life and was ready to conduct more focused interviews, many children were quite ready to discuss with me the culturally "named" social-communicative institutions of *brogez, ḥibudim, haḥlafot* and *sodot*. Most of the interviews were conducted in groups of two and three children, usually in my home, with one child selecting friends he or she would like to bring along. This provided a congenial atmosphere and an opportunity to have not just a child's accounts and stories but also other children's immediate reactions to them. Children's willingness to participate was not only a matter of being given an opportunity to talk to an adult about themselves and their world in their own terms (a rare enough opportunity for many of them), but also the impetus and context this gave them for self-reflection. Children I had interviewed, like some adults I interviewed for the other studies, would come up to me a week or two following an interview and offer more stories, more examples. Once I told my daughter how grateful I was to all the kids who were willing to spend whole summer afternoons in our home, talking about all these things they do all the time, and she responded: "Oh, they like it. It is as if we stand on the side (*omdim batsad*) and look at ourselves. It's fun."

The children she was talking about belonged to the preadolescent group (about 9 to 11 years old). I found that it was among children of this age that peer-group life was communicatively sustained with the greatest vitality and zest. I have also interviewed children aged five to seven, in an attempt to capture

the kind of learning children have to do in order to become full-fledged members of their peer group. In some cases I could identify partial learnings, and these are indicated in the text. I also interviewed some teenagers (around fifteen) to see how they would talk about the child-marked patterns I had been studying. They were quite familiar with them but considered them "babyish" stuff, not something they would engage in. When I had formulated my interpretations, I always proceeded to check them with some key informants, children or adults, as the case may be, and used their commentaries to further refine and extend my analysis. This process, as indicated earlier, was to repeat itself with other "natives" many times as I had occasion to talk about my work both informally and formally, to both lay and professional audiences.

Interviews, of course, are a major source for what V. Turner (1977) has called "exegetical meanings," that is, the meanings attributed by cultural participants themselves to elements of their symbolic conduct. These are not sufficient, however. A full-scale symbolic analysis must also incorporate "operational meanings," as Turner calls them, the meanings constructed by the analyst based on what he or she hears, but also on observed events whose analysis forms the basis for interpretation even if participants are not able to verbalize all of their dimensions. Thus, I have conducted a variety of observations related to the phenomena I have been studying and these were incorporated in each of the chapters as relevant. This observational component implies not only an additional fieldwork technique and source of data concerning members' communicative behaviors, but also the incorporation of an analytic perspective, which is distinct from (though it will articulate with) the exegetical meanings provided by cultural members. Finally, an analysis of symbolic expressions, according to Turner, would also attend to "positional meanings," that is, the meanings symbols can be said to derive from their relationship to other cultural symbols. I have tried to indicate this dimension of sense-making both within the text and in the conclusion to each chapter, as I attempted to consider my analyses of the various experiential domains they demarcate in relation to each other.

These pages thus present selected portions of Israeli everyday life as I and my informants have experienced it, reflected upon it, and communicated it to ourselves and to others. Although the ideological idioms, which so often dominate discussions of Israeli reality are echoed in many of the book's chapters, I hope they communicate a sense of Israeli ideology not as official political stance but as lived experience, as embedded within humanly shaped and negotiated communication processes, and their attendant costs and rewards.[3]

Notes Chapter 1: Introduction:

1. Cf. D. Conquergood's, "Rhetoric and Ritual: Implications of Victor Turner's Dramaturgical Theory for Rhetorical Criticism." Paper presented

at the Western Speech Communication Association Convention (1984), Seattle, Washington. This paper examines strands of affinity between two major intellectual traditions I have drawn upon in my ethnographic work in exploring the symbolic dimensions of Israeli ways of speaking.

2. The communication patterns studied here represent ritualized dimensions of Israeli children's peer-group culture within a sociolinguistic framework, incorporating (where relevant) discussion of folkloristic elements of the kind documented in I. Opie and P. Opie, *The Lore and Language of School Children* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959) and M. Knapp and H. Knapp, *One Potato, Two Potato: The Folklore of American Children* (N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Company, 1976).

3. All translations from Hebrew are my own. I have used the notation ḥ for Hebrew ḥet (rather than x) so as to facilitate the reading.

2

Gibush:
The Crystallization Metaphor in Israeli Cultural Semantics

INTRODUCTION

The distinctive tonalities attending the notion of *gibush* in Israeli discourse have initially come to my attention in listening to massive doses of talk about social problems in school classes in which I was making observations as part of an educational project. Very often, the problems teachers and children were having were described as difficulties in attaining *gibush* in the class, and the image of a crystallized school class (*kita megubeshet*) loomed large as an educational ideal in their talk. Indeed, as an ethnosociological term "*gibush*" is extremely salient in Israeli discourse, part of the taken for granted vocabulary of all participants on the Israeli educational scene. It routinely appears in conversations concerning students' experience of their social life in school, and is immediately recognized by native informants as an emotionally and ideationally loaded term. It is also widely employed in Israeli colloquial speech with reference to a variety of out-of-school social groupings. In fact, where Americans are likely to complain about lack of communication (Katriel and Philipsen 1981), Israelis may be heard to complain about lack of *gibush*. Given its salience in members' discourse, tracing the uses of the term "*gibush*" in its various contexts of deployment can thus provide some important insights into central domains of Israeli cultural organization, just as tracing the uses of "communication" has illuminated significant aspects of the American cultural scene. Both these terms are, in S. Ortner's (1973:1338) formulation, "key cultural symbols," each of them an item that "in an ill-defined way, is crucial to its [a culture's] distinctive organization."

Ortner's discussion of "key symbols" addresses two issues: (1) the question of how one determines the "key" status of a symbol, and (2) the nature of symbols with repect to the ways in which they operate in relation to cultural thought and action. She offers a (non-exhaustive) list of "indicators of cultural interest" that suggest the key position of a cultural element. Such elements come up in a variety of semantic contexts and are subject to considerable discursive elaboration; cultural members consider them important and they carry strong evaluative and emotional accents.

Ortner further distinguishes between two major categories of "key symbols," or better still, two dimensions of symbolic expression, which she

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conceives as ordered along a continuum, and whose two ends are
"summarizing" vs. "elaborating" symbols:
Summarizing symbols. These are symbols "which are seen as summing up,
expressing, representing for the participants in an emotionally powerful and
relatively undifferentiated way, what the system means to them" (1973:1339).
This condensation of meaning into symbolic forms is the hallmark of the domain
of the sacred in the broadest sense of the term (e.g. the cross, the flag, etc.),
and it speaks primarily to the shaping of attitudes, to the crystallization of
commitment.
Elaborating symbols. These symbols are essentially analytic, providing
"vehicles for sorting out complex and undifferentiated feelings and ideas,
making them comprehensible to oneself, communicable to others, and
translatable into orderly action" (1973:1340). The "key" status of these
symbols is predicated upon their capacity to order experience, and is indicated
by their recurrence in cultural behavior or cultural symbolic systems, not by
the aura of sacredness attending them. Ortner further distinguishes two modes
in which symbols can have elaborating power: "They may have primarily con-
ceptual elaborating power, that is, they are valued as implying mechanisms
for successful social action" (1973:1340). A prime example of symbols with
great conceptual elaborating power, Ortner argues, are the "root metaphors,"
which have an integrative function within a cultural system, that is, they
formulate the unity, or coherence, of a cultural orientation by virtue of the
fact that central aspects of experience can be likened to it. She says: "A root
metaphor, then, is one type of key symbol in the elaborating mode, i.e., a
symbol which operates to sort out experience, to place it in cultural categories,
and to help us think how it all hangs together. They are symbols which are
'good to think'.... in that one can conceptualize the relationships among
phenomena by analogy to the interrelations among the parts of the root
metaphor" (1973:1341).

In sum, the term "*gibush*," as it is employed in Israeli cultural discourse,
functions as a "key symbol" in both the elaborating and the summarizing
modes. On the one hand, it is a root metaphor that anchors members' discourses
of self and society, of intentional action as well as of artistic expression. The
gibush metaphor also has action elaborating power, at least in some of the
cultural domains in which it figures. Specifically, in Israeli ethnosociology
the *gibush* metaphor offers not only an image of order but also what Ortner
calls "key scenarios," which suggest socially valued modes of action designed
to promote *gibush*. On the other hand, the term "*gibush*" has assumed the
power of a summarizing symbol as it has come to be viewed as "a value in
itself," in the words of a school administrator.

In what follows, I will elaborate on this claim, and probe into the cultural
understandings it can yield. I begin with a closer examination of the

discursive contexts in which the term "*gibush*" is typically found. The systematic exploration of the discursive uses of "*gibush*," in which attention will be paid to both its contexts of occurrence and to domains in which its non-applicability is instructive, will serve to identify themes that are central to Israeli ethnosociology and ethnopsychology. By way of conclusion, I will offer a cultural, necessarily partial, reading of a novel by a contemporary Israeli author (*Daniel's Trials* [1973] by Yitshak Orpaz), demonstrating that a fuller appreciation of the novel's symbolism can be gained through a recognition of the cultural force of the *gibush* metaphor as discussed in this chapter.

'GIBUSH' IN ISRAELI ETHNOSOCIOLOGY

Educational contexts are prime settings in which the notion of *gibush* as an ethnosociological metaphor is played out. I will therefore attempt to unpack its cultural meanings by examining the rhetoric of cohesion in Israeli school culture, weaving my account around the study of the term "*gibush*" and its derivatives as they are routinely employed within and outside the classroom walls.

Since the notion of *gibush* is so commonly applied to the school class, exploring the semantics of the terms as used in educational contexts will highlight the cultural presumptions that underlie the notion of the school class as a social unit in mainstream Israeli school culture. In Israel, as in many Western schooling systems, the school class is a central structural unit, and is considered "the constituent cell of the school structure" (Aries 1962:176). It is so much part of the schooling scene that it tends to be treated as an organizational fixture rather than as a culturally constituted phenomenon. It is therefore rather sobering to learn that in European education "this structure, without which it is hard to imagine school life, dates back no further than the sixteenth or late fifteenth century, and did not assume its final form until the beginning of the seventeenth" (ibid., p. 176).

The modern school class, according to Aries, corresponds (a) to a stage in the progressive acquisition of knowledge (represented by the curriculum); (b) to an average age; (c) to a physical, spatial unit; and (d) to a period of time. Interestingly, this account leaves out an additional sense of the term "class" as it is currently employed both in everyday and in scholarly educational discourse: the "class" also corresponds (e) to a particular grouping of students. This latter understanding of the notion of the class as an emergent, transcendent social unit—that is, as a collective possessing properties that are not reducible to the properties of the individual students in it—is already hinted at in Aries's observation that "each class acquires from its curriculum, its classroom and its master a distinctive complexion" (ibid., p. 176), but the idea of the class as a social grouping in the sense discussed in this paper does not come in. Aries's discussion is thus of particular interest both for what it

does and does not do. This chapter, in a sense, begins where Aries's leaves off, making an essentially similar interrogating move, though in the direction of cultural rather than historical analysis. It likewise emphasizes that the school class is a sociohistorical phenomenon shaped by and shaping the cultural world of which it is a part. By focusing on the crystallization metaphor, it will undertake to demonstrate that an understanding of the school class as a socializing agent must take into account its culturally coded nature as a social grouping, which is articulated in the particular forms of sociation promoted in the classroom context.

"*KITA MEGUBESHET*": PORTRAIT OF A COHESIVE SCHOOL CLASS

As a first step, I will attempt to clarify the meanings and images that underlie the notion of a "crystallized" or cohesive class in Israeli school culture.[1] As the term jumped out at me from the flow of everyday discourse, and became encircled through ethnographic attention, it lost much of its taken-for-granted air, and I often found myself wondering, "What exactly do they mean?" when I heard it used as part of the unquestioned vocabulary of cultural members.

For example, how should one interpret the published advice of a psychologist in a national children's monthly magazine to a reader's question about how to deal with conflicts and violence among the children in his class, which reads: "In your case, the best way would be to approach your homeroom teacher,[2] tell her about the tension in the class, and together plan some activities designed to promote better *gibush* and cohesion in the class, and to create a more pleasant atmosphere. It is important to note that, in approaching her, you should avoid accusations and simply ask her to help "crystallize" the social group in which you study and spend time." (*Mashehu*, Sept. 1988:51) Or, how should one understand the image of the school class that impelled a student teacher to shout with obvious agitation following a lecture dealing with the principles of Individualized Instruction, "Where is the class in all this? Where is the social cohesion?" ("*Eifo kan hakita? Eifo hagibush haḥevrati?*") Similarly, how should one understand the statement of a senior high school teacher who said in private conversation: "I've thought about these things a lot. Senior high school students nowadays often resent the pressure to make the class a social grouping (*ḥevra*). They say they come to school to learn, that's all. But I don't agree. I think if we give up the goal of cohesion in the class (*gibush ḥevrati bakita*), the state will fall apart (*hamedina titporer*). We can't afford it, the way things are." This position was apparently upheld by the mother of a seventh grader who, in the first teacher-parents meeting of the year, responded to a query about her expectations for her daughter's new school by stating the wish that "there should be social cohesion in the class" (*gibush ḥevrati bakita*). Expressed disappointments about school life leave one similarly wondering about the cultural injunction to promote *gibush*

in the classroom. Thus, one could ask, what were the unmet expectations behind a seventh grader's statement, "We have a lousy class. There's no cohesion at all" (*ein gibush biḥlal*), or behind a teacher's self-deprecation when, on evaluating a whole year's educational work, he declared: "It is a total failure!" The class, of which he was the homeroom teacher, had not become "crystallized."

Clearly, the attainment of social cohesion in the class is a generally recognized educational goal, shared to different degrees by the various participants in the educational enterprise on the Israeli scene. The particular form of students' "social career" in the Israeli school is interesting to consider in relation to the educational goal of achieving *gibush*. A child who enters first grade is arbitrarily assigned to a class that will go together as one group till the end of the sixth grade, when they graduate from elementary school. Usually, the same teacher accompanies an elementary school class for two or three years. Changing a homeroom teacher every year is considered educationally undesirable and detrimental to the attainment of children's social and emotional stability.

After transfer to junior high school, where students from several elementary schools come together, new classes are formed and care is taken to mix students from different schools. This point of transition is marked by concerted efforts to promote *gibush* in the newly formed class, and the initial period is filled with conflicts over competing loyalties between the current and the previous class, conflicts that have been known to embroil not only the children but also their homeroom teacher. The breaking up and reforming of the class is repeated at entry to the senior high school, although, at this stage, the increased emphasis on academic matters serves to attenuate the social strain accompanying the transition.

From the point of view of this study, this organizational arrangement serves a two-pronged socializing function. On the one hand, the school class provides a context for the promulgation of a long-term, stable social structure. On the other hand, the inevitable transitions from one institution to another, as well as the quasi-utopian ideal of *gibush*, suggest that social life is not a given, but something that must be continuously made and remade. By actively participating in the social constitution of their school class—not only in its informal but also in its formal aspects—children learn that the form and quality of group life are a product of an ongoing social dynamic rather than an expression of a preestablished pattern.

Let me now turn to an interpretive reading of several cultural texts, both written and spoken, in order to explicate in as systematic a fashion as possible the cultural understandings and emotive coloring that ground the notion of *gibush* in the universe of discourse under investigation. The texts cited have been selected as typical from a much larger data base. They give voice to the various participants in the educational scene.

Text 1 is the "classroom contract" (*heskem kitati*) found on the wall of
a seventh grade classroom in the junior high school of a small, predominantly
middle-class town in the greater Haifa area. It was composed in the first days
of September 1984 by the children as their first collective activity in their new
school. This text reflects, in an authentically scrambled fashion, the discursive
and ideational domain of which *gibush* forms a part:

> "Expectations: To get to know the school and its surroundings / To get
> to know the teachers and new friends / That there will be sports and fun
> activities / Mutual acquaintance / That they will be nice and cohesive
> [*megubashim*] / That there will be discussions and parties / That there will
> be friendly relations / That there will be cooperation / That there will be
> fairness to friends and teachers / That there will be no fights. How shall we
> do it? In theory: To be good friends / That there will be no inner divisions
> in the class / Cooperation / Understanding between teachers and students /
> No fighting, mutual respect, fairness, cohesion [*gibush*], equal treatment.
> In practice: That there will be trips on foot and on bike / Parties, class evenings
> [*arvei kita*, that is, parties held at the homes of the students on Friday nights],
> bonfires [*kumzitsim*] / No fighting / Sports contests / Not much homework
> / Not taking advantage of other kids / Regular committees and activities /
> No fighting during the break."

Note that in articulating their expectations of school life, the children (as
well as their teacher) naturally assumed the class to be the social arena in which
their hopes, desires, and moral ideals could be acted out, and that no expecta-
tions concerning academic matters were mentioned (with the exception of a
plea for little homework). The expectations articulated in this document
involved a range of issues and levels of abstraction: moral issues such as fairness
and equality were mentioned alongside interpersonal issues such as friendliness
and cooperation or organizational issues such as the establishment of commit-
tees, as well as leisure activities such as sports and parties.

The same issues and expectations were articulated in children's written
and spoken accounts of what a cohesive class was like, as the following texts,
written by ninth graders in a junior high school in the city of Haifa, illustrate:

> *Text 2*: "A cohesive class, in my opinion, is a class where everybody
> is part of the society, is active in it, and contributes to it. The whole class
> is a single and cohesive body [*guf ehad umgubash*] and not several groups.
> A class should be cohesive. Cohesion is an advantage and not a disadvantage."
>
> *Text 3*: "In my opinion a cohesive class is one in which every individual
> has a feeling of belonging to the class as a whole [*shajahut el klal hakita*].
> Each child has to feel a sense of closeness, even to the smallest degree, to
> every other child in the class and to avoid forming separate groups or
> associations within the body of the class. It is pleasant to learn and live in
> a friendly, agreeable and warm class."
>
> *Text 4*: "A cohesive class, in my opinion, is a class in which relations
> among students are as good as among citizens: relations of consideration,

understanding, help, etc. . . . The class is not divided into different subclasses (economic, social and all that this implies) but there is understanding and liking among the students. There are joint social activities such as parties, class evenings, or just shared activities in the afternoons. In such a class no cliques form as a result of engaging in separate social activities.''

Text 5: ''A cohesive class is in my opinion a class that holds extracurricular activities. All the students in it are equal and there is no group of students that holds itself above the other students. Such a class has its own private framework and its own rules.''

These descriptions are typical and could be multiplied many times; although each child had his or her own way of expressing the idea of a ''cohesive class,'' emphasizing the elements that he or she felt were salient, these formulations were indeed variations on a common theme. The youngsters' accounts of *gibush* in the classroom were basically congruent with those given by the adults interviewed. They similarly stressed the elements of togetherness (*hajaḥad*), involvement (*meoravut*), or caring (*iḥpatijut*), all terms carrying highly positive connotations in Israeli discourse. Intragroup harmony, as measured by little fighting and group pride, was also considered a concomitant of a cohesive class.

Both teachers and students, however, suggested that this image of a cohesive class was an idealized one, not to be found in real life school situations. ''This is, of course, an ideal.'' One teacher concluded her account of what a cohesive class would be like, ''but we can talk of degrees of cohesiveness, a class can be more or less cohesive.'' One of the ninth graders followed his account of a cohesive class with the following comment: ''But to my mind this is a utopia that cannot be put into effect.'' Similarly, in a written note that was brought to my attention, an eleventh grade student, the leader of a school-sponsored social group of ninth graders, responded to one of the girls' complaints about lack of cohesion in the group, saying, ''You are right, but you must remember that ultimate cohesion is not something that can be attained, but something we must strive for all the time.''

The above descriptions bring out central elements of the historical roots to the communal utopia of socialist Zionism, which has been an important strand in the formation of mainstream Israeli culture and whose traces can be found in dominant social and educational ideologies to this day (Even-Zohar 1981; Liebman and Don-Yehia 1983; Gertz 1988; Shapira 1989). Thus, the rhetoric of cohesion in Israeli school culture is both an outgrowth of a particular cultural view of social being and a contributing factor in its sustainment. This vision of sociality is encapsulated in the root metaphor of ''crystallization,'' which is one that participants in mainstream Israeli culture ''live by'' (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). The foregoing portrait of a ''well-crystallized'' school class has suggested some of what is entailed by this concept. The next section is