

Archaeology of sacred symbols: the lost meaning and interpretations

[Art & Culture](#), [Symbolism](#)



Sacred symbols seen as the representation of culture and beliefs of people which describe how they interact with their environment and spiritual being. Some of these symbols represents luck, some represents spiritualities, some represents powers, and some are just emblem. The topic I shall discuss in this essay are: when and how do sacred symbols become part of a culture; why do the meaning of sacred symbols misperceive over time; how archaeology interprets sacred symbols; and how astrology and sacred geometry contribute to the sacred symbol interpretations? The concepts come to my consciousness are the sacred – spiritual/religious symbols which have been used by many group of people within and across cultures for ritual practices or simple expressions through an iconic figure of geometrical patterns or human other-than-human form. It is interlaced with the fundamental values and beliefs associated with strange, mystical and unexplained meaning of astrology. Sacred symbol does not merely signify the image of spiritualities and other religious practices and identities. Sacred symbols conform astrology where the placement and cosmic patterns commonly dictate the way of living and cultural belief of man.

“ The use of symbols to convey knowledge to the initiated and to conceal it from the initiated is as old as civilization. A clear understanding of the symbolic way of thinking is necessary if we would unveil and comprehend the “ esoteric” (hidden or secret) meaning of the symbols of ancient and modern faiths.” – Jack Benjamin

Images, figures or any material symbols represent human or non-human activities which have been common since time immemorial as part of the

non-material culture of human. Man expresses the meaning of what they want to communicate using the language of spoken or written word. This language, as a form of symbols, often employs signs or images that are not strictly descriptive. Some are mere abbreviations or strings of initials; others are familiar trademarks. To understand the military culture, for instance, the hierarchy of ranks and position is commonly represented by military badges and insignias, such as chevrons for enlisted personnel, badges of triangles and sun for higher ranking officers, and stars for the military generals. These symbols represent the man who is carrying it and signifies his place of honor in the entire military unit. The kind of symbol interpretation that military community has made to identify the roles and functions of every member of the military brigade, particularly in doing such commands and orders, and in the exercise of their power over the other.

Granting that these symbols are somehow meaningless in themselves, they have acquired a recognizable meaning through common usage or deliberate intent. Such symbols are signs, and they do no more than denote the objects to which they are attached or represent. What we call a symbol is a term, a name, or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet that possesses specific connotations in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning. It implies something vague, unknown, or hidden from us (Jung, 1988).

This will be a good avenue to have an argument about symbols which can be representational of presentational in meaning. On one hand, representational symbols establish a connection between two things even when there may not be a natural or direct point of contact. Like for instance,

the traffic light the intersection establishes a relationship between the color red and the act of stopping if we are driving a vehicle. There is nothing inherent in red that means stop; Moreover, we can observe more examples of symbol representations in modern times like emoticons which is a combination of keyboard characters that many uses to represent their feelings online or through text messaging, colors of the national flag represent the country.

But, presentational symbols participate in or present or are similar to the thing they symbolize. Symbols are common form of communication between humans, or humans to non-human being. In other words, presentational symbols manifest or make present the sacred. Symbols, more than the examples articulated earlier, have quite significance in religious or spiritual beliefs and culture.

Sacred Symbols as Element of Culture

A sacred symbol is a representation that symbolizes a religion or spirituality, or an idea within a specified spiritual activity. For instance, the cross is a symbol of Christianity, or the moon and the star represent Islam. Both of these are sacred symbols, representing a spirituality; However, there are other religious symbols that people wear, or have. For example, Muslim women wear a Hijab, or a head covering, which is considered a religious symbol. Another example of a religious symbol is the Turban and the Kirpan. These two are sacred symbols of Sikhism. In today's world, religious symbols are very controversial topic. Many people want to ban religious symbols, so that we can have a more secular world, which would reduce a lot of

discrimination; However, other people believe that religious symbols are part of a person's beliefs.

People, with the symbol-making inclination, unconsciously transforms objects or forms into symbols, thereby endowing them with great psychological importance, and expresses them in both religion and visual art. The intertwined history of spirituality and art, reaching back to prehistoric times, is the record that our ancestors have left of the symbols that were meaningful and moving to them. Even today, as modern painting and sculpture show, the interplay of religion and art is still alive. Sacred symbols looked different across cultures and many changes with time as the society evolves. Variety of sacred symbols that is anything carries a specific meaning recognized by people who share exist in every culture. People who share a spiritual belief often attached a specific meaning to an object, gesture, sound, or image. The distinction of mankind to any other species is its ability to use symbols (Renfrew, 2012). A cross that is a significant symbol to Christians, for example. Cross is not just a two-pieces of wood attached to each other nor it's simply an old object of torture and execution. To Christians, it represents the bases of their entire religion and they have great reverence for the symbol. It may be easy to identify the meaning of a sacred symbol and what it represents, but the idea of this essay is to discuss not only the meaning, but also the origin and value of a sacred symbol through an archaeological context.

Sacred Symbols and Archaeological Interpretations

Earlier in the twentieth century, the common impression in archaeology, based on a simple analogy with language, was that certain material objects or designs had a meaning that was to be decrypted and interpreted. Material symbols, or any of these objects or motifs are often seen as obscure representations of phenomena belonging to the domain of reality or nature, such as a design that represents the sun or the earth. Contrariwise, objects can also be seen to serve as material symbols for something that is non-material (Gillespie, nd).

Archaeologists are unsure what the sacred symbols mean. Some of the uncertainty lies in the mystery of what Celticism, Paganism, ancient astrology and other structures like it was intended to be. IrishCentral (2017) stated the debate whether Newgrange served as a site for religious ceremonies or as a final resting place for the community's deceased. In spite of the mystery, the symbol's meaning has annoyed interest and several people have put forth their own suggestions of the intention behind some of the common symbols. Lot of postulations to sacred symbols has stimulated and brought confusion to people.

Sterelny and Hiscock (2014) stated the archaeologists claim that before this time, there were no cave paintings, statues, or figurines; no jewelry; no musical instruments; no utilitarian objects that are incised and decorated; no burials with grave goods; no sites made or modified for ritual activities.

Moreover, material symbols become a highly visible part of the archaeological record. People have come to multiple and various perception

and interpretations of symbol as part of their culture and daily living. One material symbol may have various and complex meaning as to its cosmology. The metaphysical characteristics of symbols brought confusion to archaeologists by giving definition and description on what was happening in the early human culture.

The argument at this point is how archaeology interprets the meaning of sacred symbols in the concept of spiritualities or religion. Archaeologists may probably disagree about symbols more than anything else they dig up and however we are wasting our time, symbols are important trying to recover mental phenomena archaeologically. On the other traditional viewpoint, others believe that symbols are irrelevant to the larger systems that have constructed human life over the centuries (Robb, 1998). This argument shows the position of sacred symbol to people across cultures. In the interpretation and meaning of symbols does not depict on what they are made of and what are their functions as material artifact, yet on the metaphysical aspect whereas the origin and power it may represent and these symbols relate to the way of living of those who believe and understand it.

Western religious paradigms, especially Judaeo-Christian monotheistic frameworks, contributes on archaeological approaches to the study of religion. Archaeologists have seldom considered on how these approaches have outlined and constrained their research questions, hypotheses, definitions, methodologies, interpretations and analyses (Rountree, Morris & Peatfield, 2012).

The Philippine context of amulet, as my example, is a symbol for power to many and eternity to some. Man believes that this piece of stone, metal, bone, or wood will spare him to any harm or danger which may occur. On the other way around, modern society found these pieces of amulet as an outlet of expressing themselves, or for many is just a piece of contemporary art and display which gives more on its aesthetic value. At this state, the disposition of archaeologists on non-material culture which refers to the nonphysical ideas that people have about their culture, including beliefs, values, rules, norms, morals, language, organizations, and institutions as depicted from various material symbols is being rejected. For instance, the symbols such as cross - in different variations, moon, and other heavenly bodies, fish, flowers, goats, horns for non-material cultural concept of religion like a set of ideas and beliefs about God, worship, morals, and ethics are now worn just for its aesthetic value.

Archaeologists give importance on these symbols, then, determine how the culture responds to its religious topics, issues, and events. Example, Oakes and Gahlin (2006) noted that lotus or lily is the symbol of the South - Upper Egypt that was commonly depicted and was usually described as the sacred lotus. Due to its significance, this sacred lotus was also an important element in the design of temple column. But the modern society is in the transposition of the paradigm in creating beliefs and culture as representations of these material symbols. In this perspective, usually only non-utilitarian artifacts and artworks are considered to have symbolic

functions, primarily pertaining to religion and cosmology, as opposed to objects used for sustenance or other practical purposes.

Sacred Symbols, Sacred Geometry and Ancient Astrology

Astrology, as an ancient practice, contributes to the human activities in terms that the cosmic patterns, movement and activities have significant effect on human personality, behavior and fate. This belief led almost inevitably to the development of astrology, or the art of foretelling events by the positions and movements of the stars. As the phases of the heavenly bodies were believed to be related to events on earth, it was thought knowledge of these phenomena would reveal the moods, humors, and actions of the ruling deities and make possible the foretelling of events. Babylonian astrology was based upon the belief that the earth was but small scale counterpart of the heavens. Everything that exists or occurs in the heavens was believed to be duplicated in the objects and events on earth.

The significance of astrology to sacred symbols is intertwined with the sacred geometry which involves sacred universal patterns used in the design of everything in our reality, most often seen in sacred architecture, arts and symbols. The patterns of creation of sacred geometry derived from the divine science of astrology. Let say for example, the vesica piscis which signifies duality - the universe is created by division represents balance (yin and yang, male and female, good and evil). Scholars who have written on these subjects have been more or less specialists. Some of them have emphasized the influence of astrology upon ancient and early culture. Others

have been inclined to emphasize the influence of symbology, mythology or some other subjects (Busenbark, 1997).

As an example, the birth sequence of Jesus is completely astrological. The star in the east is Sirius, the brightest star in the sky at night, which on the 24th of December aligns with the three brightest stars in Orion's Belt. These three bright stars are referred today what they were called in ancient times, The three wise men and the brightest star Sirius, all point to the place of the sunrise on the 25th of December. This is why the wise men followed the star in the east, in order to locate the sunrise or the birth of the sun.

Not only the that, All Answers (2017) elicited that Paganism has a broader influence in our lives than we might care to think. For instance, the simple wedding ring has profound Pagan origins yet is considered an essential part of the wedding ceremony by many Christians. Looking at the perspective of the cross of the Zodiac, the figurative life of the Sun, this was not an artistic expression or tool to track the Sun's movements.

It is a Pagan adaptation of the cross of the Zodiac. That is why Jesus in early occult art is shown with his head on the cross the sun of God, the light of the world, the risen savior, who will come again, as it is every morning, the glory of God who battles against the works of darkness, as he is born again every morning, and can be seen coming in the clouds, up in heaven, with his crown of thorns, or, sun rays. Overemphasizing the relevance and importance of sacred symbols as a representation of a culture can lead to conflict without considering its astrological origin. Consider the tensions that rose in France

during 2004 to 2005, following the banning of Muslim headscarves, Sikh turbans, Jewish skullcaps, large Christian crucifixes, and other conspicuous sacred symbols that don't blend into secular state schools.

After Astrology was introduced, Pagan Astrologers concealed the divinely appointed prophetic and spiritual meanings of the constellations and their principal stars. At various times in history and in various countries, royal court Astrologers assigned new meanings to the twelve signs of the Zodiac. They also fashioned false religious myths about the Sun, Moon, and planets, depicting them as gods. The myths that were fabricated to deify the objects in our Solar System and the Zodiac effectively obscured the original divinely ordained meanings given to the planets and constellations. This is partly why many of the current names used for the objects in our Solar System and for the forty-eight ancient constellations come from Greek, Roman, or Babylonian mythology instead of from Semitic sources.

Every state of society continues from the point of development at which its predecessor left off. Every statement of beliefs takes on in the course of time different values or interpretations. The god of the ancient Hebrews or Christians is certainly not the god of modern believers, and present day religious worship embodies many departures from that which the ancients accepted as the ultimate standard. To understand the nature of this cultural change requires study of the development and migration of symbols and their utilization to express spiritual or supernatural concepts.

The social environment usually makes such study seem inadvisable. As all culture is inter-related, the accumulation of symbols throughout the ages has resulted in a kind of condensed version, which is offered to the worshipers of the various faiths. The secret of the origin of the symbols, however, has been zealously guarded from the public. Doubtless it is feared that such knowledge may weaken confidence in theological dogmas. Be that as it may, the fact remains that at the heart of religious belief we find the ever-present symbol.

The relationship of symbols to power and prestige has become an important theme of this essay. In this modern era, symbols could be a design placed on an artifact to indicate one's lineage membership, a costume item that designates a rank or office, or an object with ritual implications, representing specific religious or cosmological beliefs. Sacred symbols have its origin from the science of astrology.

Having observed a relation between the movements, positions, and other aspects of the sun and moon, the varying length of the days, movement of tides, changes of seasons, periods of growth, some primitive peoples believed that all life and activity on earth were influenced or controlled by these heavenly bodies, which were personified as divinities.

This belief led almost inevitably to the development of astrology, or the art of foretelling events by the positions and movements of the stars. As Sacred geometry or pattern of creation through astrology seen as a study of how events on earth correspond to the positions and movements of astronomical

bodies which are the moon, sun, planets and the stars were represented by sacred symbols, has a unity and oneness to the human activities and culture. Sacred symbols are not simply a representation of spiritual culture or any religious activities. Sacred symbols were an eminence of sacred geometric patterns derived from cosmic activities of planets and stars and not merely a representation of culture.