



The Enigmatic Connection between Symbols and Thought in African Philosophy: A Journey into the Realm of Meaning and Representation

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Abstract

This inquiry investigates the complex relationship between symbols and thought in African philosophy. Drawing on philosophical and anthropological literature, it investigates the nature of meaning and representation in African cultures, and how symbols are employed to convey and shape human thought. Through a critical examination of various African cultural practices, such as storytelling, ritual, and art, this inquiry uncovers the intricate ways in which symbols are used to communicate and construct meaning. Furthermore, this investigation highlights the distinctive ways in which African cultures conceive of and utilize symbols, and how these practices challenge dominant Western philosophical assumptions about the nature of language, meaning, and representation. Ultimately, this inquiry provides a rich and nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between symbols and thought in African philosophy, and the broader implications of this relationship for our understanding of human cognition and communication.

Keywords: Symbols, Thought, African Philosophy, Nature of Meaning, Representation, Category of knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

African philosophy is a rich and diverse field of study that has been gaining increasing attention in recent years.¹ One of the central themes of African philosophy is the relationship between symbols and thought,² which is the focus of this article. Symbols are an integral part of human communication and have been used throughout history to convey meaning and representation.³ In African philosophy, symbols are often seen as playing a fundamental role in shaping thought and providing a framework for understanding the world.⁴

This article aims to investigate the nature of meaning and representation in African philosophy and explore how symbols are used to convey these concepts. It will examine various theories of symbolism and their application in African philosophy, as well as the cultural and historical context in which symbols are used. Through this inquiry, the article seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between symbols and thought in African philosophy and its implications for our understanding of human cognition and communication.

DEFINITION SYMBOL

A symbol is an object or representation that represents something else. According to the Encyclopedia of Communication Theory, a symbol is “an arbitrary or conventional sign that represents something else”.⁵ This definition highlights the idea that symbols are not inherently connected to the things they represent but are agreed upon by a community of users. It is often used to convey complex

ideas or concepts in a concise and efficient manner. Symbols can take many forms, including letters, numbers, shapes, images, and gestures.

One of the most common types of symbols is a linguistic symbol, which is a word or phrase that represents an idea or concept. For example, the word “love” represents a strong affection or deep attachment to someone or something. In addition to linguistic symbols, there are also visual symbols, such as flags, logos, and religious symbols like the cross or the Star of David. In their book “Visual Communication: Images with Messages,” Paul Martin Lester and Ron Smith write that “visual symbols communicate through signs and images, as opposed to words”⁶ They note that visual symbols can be particularly effective in communicating complex ideas because they bypass language barriers and can evoke emotional responses.

Symbols are powerful tools in communication because they can evoke emotions and convey meaning beyond what words can express. They are often used in art, literature, and advertising to create an emotional response in the audience or to communicate a specific message.

Symbols can also have multiple meanings or interpretations depending on the context in which they are used.⁷ Symbols can have different meanings in different contexts, and their interpretation can be influenced by cultural, social, and historical factors. For example, a red traffic light is a symbol that means “stop” in the context of driving, but it could also be interpreted as a symbol of danger or caution in other contexts.

Symbols are an essential part of human culture and have been used throughout history to represent ideas, concepts, and beliefs. Understanding the meaning and significance of symbols is important in communication, as it can help people better understand and connect with each other.

Symbolism as Science Alternative

Symbols can be seen as an alternative to science in certain contexts, as they have the ability to convey complex ideas and concepts in a succinct and abstract manner. In contrast to scientific language which is often technical and specialized, symbols can communicate across cultural and linguistic barriers. Terrence Deacon notes that symbols are essential for human communication and play a fundamental role in the development of language and culture.⁸

One example of this is the use of religious symbols such as the cross or the Star of David. These symbols carry deep and complex meanings that are instantly recognizable to those who share the same faith. They can serve as a way to express and reinforce beliefs, values, and community identity. As theologian Paul Tillich writes in his book "The Dynamics of Faith," symbols "participate in the reality of that which they symbolize" and serve as a means of "reaching the depth of the human spirit."⁹

Another example is the use of mathematical symbols in the field of mathematics. Mathematical symbols are a shorthand way to represent complex mathematical concepts and relationships, allowing mathematicians to communicate complex ideas in a concise and efficient way. Mathematical symbols can be seen as an alternative to the verbose and technical language used in scientific papers, and they are essential for communication and collaboration among mathematicians. Following this line of thought, the mathematicians Leon Harkleroad and David P. Feldman note that "symbols allow mathematicians to compactly and accurately convey mathematical ideas" and that "the use of symbols in mathematics is essential to mathematical thinking."¹⁰

Symbolism is also used in art and literature to convey deeper meanings and emotions beyond what can be expressed in words alone. Frye thus writes that symbols are a means of conveying "associations of thought and feeling" that are not easily expressed in literal language.¹¹ The use of symbols in poetry, for example, allows poets to communicate complex ideas and emotions through metaphors and allegories, which can be more powerful and resonant than straightforward descriptions.

Symbols can, therefore, be a valuable alternative to science in certain contexts, as they can communicate complex ideas in a concise and abstract way. Whether in religion, mathematics, or the arts, symbols are a powerful tool for communication and expression. However, it is important to note that while symbols can convey deep meaning, they may also be subject

to interpretation and may not have the same universal understanding as scientific language. In this vein, Langer notes that symbols are inherently ambiguous and can be understood in multiple ways.¹²

Cultural Symbols

Cultural symbols refer to objects, actions, or events that have acquired significant cultural meaning and importance within a particular society or group of people. These symbols are used to represent and communicate cultural values, beliefs, and traditions, and can often be seen as a form of shorthand that encapsulates complex cultural ideas. According to anthropologist Clifford Geertz, cultural symbols are "vehicles of meaning," and are used to communicate the "web of significance" that exists within a particular culture. In his seminal work "The Interpretation of Cultures," Geertz argues that cultural symbols are essential to understanding the complex layers of meaning that underlie human behaviour.¹³

Cultural symbols can take many forms, such as artifacts, language, rituals, stories, and images. For example, the American flag is a cultural symbol that represents the values of freedom, democracy, and patriotism, while the Japanese tea ceremony is a ritualistic cultural symbol that embodies concepts such as simplicity, harmony, and respect. Thus, a sociologist Emile Durkheim emphasizes the role of cultural symbols in shaping collective consciousness and social cohesion. In his book "The Elementary Forms of Religious Life," Durkheim argues that religious symbols are particularly powerful because they are imbued with a sacred quality that reinforces social norms and values.¹⁴

Cultural symbols can be divided into two categories: universal and specific. Universal symbols are those that are recognized and understood by people all over the world, regardless of their cultural background. Examples of universal symbols include the heart, which is commonly associated with love and affection, and the skull, which is often used to represent death.

Specific cultural symbols, on the other hand, are unique to a particular culture or group of people. These symbols are often tied to specific historical events, religious beliefs, or social customs. For instance, the yin-yang symbol is a specific cultural symbol that represents the balance and harmony of the universe in traditional Chinese philosophy, while the Christian cross is a specific cultural symbol that represents the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and the promise of salvation in Christianity.

Cultural symbols can also be used as a form of cultural resistance or activism. For example, the rainbow flag is a cultural symbol that has been adopted by the LGBTQ+ community as a sign of pride and solidarity, while the raised fist is a symbol of resistance and solidarity often used by marginalized groups in political protests.

Universalized Symbols

Universalized symbols are visual representations that have been widely recognized and understood across different cultures and languages. These symbols have the ability to convey a specific meaning or message without the use of words or language, making them accessible to people from diverse backgrounds and linguistic abilities.

One of the most well-known examples of universalized symbols is the peace symbol, which was designed in 1958 by British artist Gerald Holtom for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.¹⁵ The symbol features a circle with three lines, with the center line elongated and angled downwards. Despite its origins in a specific social and political movement, the peace symbol has come to represent a broader message of nonviolence and harmony, and is recognized around the world as a symbol of peace.

Another example of a universalized symbol is the heart shape,¹⁶ which is widely used to represent love, affection, and emotions. While the origin of the heart symbol is uncertain, it has been used in art and literature for centuries, and has become ubiquitous in modern culture as a representation of romantic love and affection.

Other universalized symbols include the red cross,¹⁷ which is used to represent medical and emergency services; the no smoking symbol,¹⁸ which is used to indicate that smoking is prohibited in a particular area; and the recycling symbol,¹⁹ which is used to promote environmental sustainability and waste reduction.

The use of universalized symbols has become increasingly important in today's globalized world, where people from different cultures and linguistic backgrounds interact with each other on a regular basis. By using symbols that are recognized and understood across different cultures, organizations and businesses can communicate more effectively and efficiently with their audiences, and help to bridge cultural and linguistic barriers.

However, it's important to note that while many symbols may be widely recognized, their meanings can still vary in different cultural contexts. For example, the thumbs-up gesture is commonly used in Western cultures to indicate approval or agreement, but in some other cultures, it may be seen as a rude or offensive gesture. Therefore, it's important to be mindful of cultural differences and to use universalized symbols with sensitivity and respect.

LIMITS OF SYMBOLISM

The idea that there are symbols beyond which signs cannot go refers to the limitations of language and communication.²⁰ Symbols are a type of sign that carries a more complex meaning than simply representing an object or concept. They can convey abstract ideas, emotions, and cultural values.²¹ However, even symbols have limits, as there are certain

concepts and ideas that cannot be fully expressed through language.²²

This limitation is where the function of symbolism comes in. Symbols allow us to convey more than just basic information. They allow us to communicate deeper, more complex meanings that are essential to human culture and thought. For example, the symbol of a heart represents not just the physical organ, but also emotions such as love and compassion.²³

However, the theoretical entities that symbols represent are unverifiable. This means that they cannot be proven or tested through empirical means. They exist as concepts and ideas that we accept based on faith, intuition, or cultural tradition. For example, the concept of justice is a theoretical entity that cannot be measured or quantified, yet it is essential to our understanding of law and ethics.

Despite their unverifiability, theoretical entities and symbols have practical value to science and thought.²⁴ They allow us to develop models and theories that help us understand and make predictions about the world around us. They also provide a framework for moral and ethical decision-making, as well as cultural expression.

In Africa, symbols and theoretical entities have particular practical value in areas such as ethics, politics, religion, agriculture, science, and life generally.²⁵ For example, African communalism, which emphasizes the importance of community and collective responsibility, is a theoretical concept that has practical implications for social organization and governance. African religions use symbols and mythology to convey spiritual beliefs and values. Traditional African agriculture also involves the use of symbolic rituals and practices that connect farmers with the natural world.

SYMBOLISM AS CATEGORY OF KNOWLEDGE

Because of the apparent need for man to exhaust all avenues of knowing, there is now a resumption of enquiries into the metaphysics and epistemology of symbolism as a category of knowledge. Both in the African, Western and African Contemporary thought, what was previously regarded as primitive and hedonistic practices in the ancient world especially in Africa is now being revisited for the sake of appreciating the theoretical and scientific functions of symbolism as a category of faculty of knowing (Para scientific).²⁶ Such practices in Africa include among others: the cago cults in the East Africa; zamgbeto cult among the Ogu people in Lagos; and the mmonwu cult among the Igbo. These cults depend a lot on symbolism.

The statement highlights the renewed interest in exploring the metaphysics and epistemology of symbolism as a category of knowledge. This interest is attributed to the perceived need for humans to exhaust all avenues of knowing.²⁷ The statement also notes that practices that were once considered primitive and hedonistic in Africa,

such as the cago cults in East Africa, zamgbeto cult among the Ogu people in Lagos, and the mmonwu cult among the Igbo, are now being revisited to appreciate the theoretical and scientific functions of symbolism as a category of faculty of knowing, which is often considered para-scientific.

Symbolism refers to the use of symbols to represent abstract or complex concepts, ideas, or feelings. It is a form of communication that goes beyond words and involves the use of images, colors, sounds, and other sensory elements to convey meaning. Symbolism is a fundamental aspect of human culture and is present in various forms, including art, literature, religion, and science.²⁸ The study of symbolism has a long history and has been explored by various fields of study, including philosophy, psychology, anthropology, and linguistics.

Metaphysics and epistemology are branches of philosophy that deal with the nature of reality and knowledge, respectively. Metaphysics explores the fundamental nature of existence, including the relationship between mind and matter, the nature of time and space, and the existence of God.²⁹ Epistemology, on the other hand, deals with the nature of knowledge and how we acquire it. It explores the different ways in which we can know things, the limits of knowledge, and the relationship between knowledge and belief.

The renewed interest in exploring the metaphysics and epistemology of symbolism is driven by the recognition that symbolism plays a significant role in how we perceive and understand the world around us. Symbolism provides a way of representing abstract concepts and ideas that cannot be expressed in words. It is also a way of communicating emotions, feelings, and experiences that are difficult to articulate.³⁰ In this sense, symbolism is seen as a para-scientific way of knowing that complements and enriches traditional scientific methods.

The African, Western, and African Contemporary thought are now revisiting practices that depend on symbolism, such as the cago cults, zamgbeto cult, and mmonwu cult. These practices are being revisited to appreciate the theoretical and scientific functions of symbolism as a category of faculty of knowing. For instance, the cago cults in East Africa use symbolic gestures, dances, and songs to communicate with the spirits and ancestors. The zamgbeto cult among the Ogu people in Lagos uses masks and costumes to represent different spirits and deities. The mmonwu cult among the Igbo also uses masks and costumes to represent different spirits and deities.

SIGNS VERSUS SYMBOLS

The distinction between signs and symbols is a fundamental concept in semiotics, the study of signs and symbols and how they convey meaning. The idea that signs signify while symbols represent is an important principle that underpins this field of study. Semioticians have traditionally distinguished

between signs and symbols. Signs are regarded as conveying meaning by virtue of their natural, causal, or conventional relation to what they signify. Symbols, on the other hand, are said to derive their meaning from conventional or cultural agreement.³¹

Signs can be defined as any object, action, or event that communicates meaning to a perceiver. Signs are usually understood to be directly connected to the thing they signify. For example, smoke can be a sign of fire, a red traffic light is a sign to stop, and a smile can be a sign of happiness. Signs are typically simple and direct, and they often rely on a shared cultural understanding between the sender and receiver.

Symbols, on the other hand, are more complex and abstract than signs. Symbols are objects, images, or words that stand for or represent something else, often something abstract or intangible. Unlike signs, symbols are not directly connected to the thing they represent; rather, they rely on a shared understanding or agreement between the sender and receiver. For example, a heart symbol can represent love, a national flag can represent a country, and a cross can represent Christianity.

One important characteristic of symbols is their ability to convey multiple meanings or levels of meaning. Symbols are multivalent in that they can stand for many different things or represent different aspects of a single idea. This is because symbols often carry cultural, historical, or emotional associations that can add depth and complexity to their meaning.³² For example, the symbol of a dove can represent peace, but it can also represent the Holy Spirit in Christianity, or the dove that returned to Noah's ark in the biblical story.

Signs signify while symbols represent. Signs are Phenomenological while symbols are epistemological. Sign subsist in appearance, symbol is epistemic- has to do with the generation of knowledge.

The distinction between signs and symbols lies in the way they relate to what they represent. Signs are generally considered to be more concrete and direct, while symbols are more abstract and indirect. According to Peirce's theory of signs, signs are divided into three categories: icons, indexes, and symbols. Icons are signs that resemble what they signify, indexes are signs that have a direct causal relationship with what they signify, and symbols are signs that are arbitrarily linked to what they signify.³³

When we say that signs signify, we mean that they are directly connected to the thing or concept that they represent. For example, a red traffic light is a sign that signifies that drivers should stop. Similarly, smoke is a sign that signifies that there is a fire. Signs are rooted in the sensory perception of the world around us and are often based on observable characteristics or features of objects.

On the other hand, symbols represent something beyond their physical form. They are often abstract or arbitrary, and

their meaning is not immediately apparent. For example, a heart symbol is often used to represent love, even though there is no inherent connection between a physical heart and the concept of love. Symbols rely on shared cultural associations and are often created through language or social convention.³⁴

The distinction between signs and symbols can also be understood in terms of their relationship to knowledge. Signs are considered to be phenomenological because they are grounded in our direct experience of the world. They exist as physical entities that we can perceive and understand through our senses. Symbols, on the other hand, are epistemological because they are associated with the generation of knowledge. They require interpretation and understanding, and their meaning is often learned through socialization or education.

KANT NOUMENON IS UNQUESTIONABLE REALITY

The concept of Kant's "noumenon" refers to an unknowable reality beyond our sensory experience. In contrast, the "phenomenon" refers to the reality that we can perceive and experience through our senses. According to Kant, the noumenon is beyond the realm of our understanding and can never be known with certainty.³⁵

Kant believed that the noumenon is an unquestionable reality, meaning that it exists independently of our perceptions and interpretations. It is a reality that is beyond our grasp, and we can only infer its existence through our experiences of the phenomenon. Thus, Kant believed that we can never have direct knowledge of the noumenon, but can only speculate about it based on our experiences of the phenomenon.

Kant's distinction between the noumenon and the phenomenon has important implications for how we understand the nature of reality. According to Kant, the phenomenal world that we experience is only a partial representation of reality, as it is filtered through our senses and limited by the categories of our understanding. In contrast, the noumenal world is the true reality that exists beyond our perceptions and is independent of our knowledge of it.

Kant's concept of the noumenon has been a subject of much debate and interpretation among philosophers. Some have criticized Kant's notion of the noumenon as being unfalsifiable and untestable,³⁶ while others have argued that it is a necessary concept for understanding the limits of human knowledge and perception.³⁷

It is the unquestionable reality that is beyond our sensory perceptions, the things that cannot be subjected to laboratory tests, the extra mental realities that symbolism can bring us in touch with.

SYMBOLISM IN PHILOSOPHY

Symbolism has been an area of interest in philosophy for centuries, with philosophers attempting to understand how

symbols function and their potential for universalization.³⁸ Symbolism is the use of symbols or images to represent ideas, concepts, or objects, and it is an essential aspect of human communication and culture.³⁹ Philosophers are interested in symbolism because it provides a means of understanding the complex relationship between language, meaning, and the world.

The idea of universalization of symbols is a key concern for philosophers studying symbolism. One key question that philosophers ask when investigating symbolism is whether or not it can be universalized.⁴⁰ In other words, can symbols have the same meaning and function across different cultures and languages? This question is important because it has implications for epistemology, which is the branch of philosophy concerned with knowledge and belief. If symbols cannot be universalized, then they may be limited to certain cultural contexts and may not be useful for building knowledge and understanding that can be shared across different communities.

The idea of symbolism arose from the limitations of science, which was unable to explain certain phenomena beyond what was observable or measurable. This led to the use of symbols and theoretical entities as a means of representing and understanding the world beyond what could be directly observed. In Africa, for example, many traditional beliefs are based on the idea of symbolic entities such as gods, ancestors, and spirits that are believed to exist beyond the physical realm.⁴¹

In science, theoretical entities are also used as a means of explaining phenomena that cannot be directly observed or measured.⁴² These entities are often used to aid experimentation and provide a theoretical framework for understanding complex systems. Theoretical entities in science may include concepts such as dark matter, which is used to explain the observed behaviour of galaxies despite the fact that it cannot be directly observed.

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

Evaluation

The exploration of African storytelling has illuminated the power of symbols to communicate complex ideas and moral lessons. Through the use of metaphor, allegory, and myth, African cultures employ symbols to evoke deep emotions, provoke critical thinking, and foster a sense of communal identity. The narrative traditions passed down through generations serve not only as repositories of wisdom but also as catalysts for individual and collective reflection, allowing individuals to engage with profound philosophical questions about the nature of existence, morality, and the human condition.

Moreover, the investigation of ritual practices in African cultures has highlighted the transformative power of symbols. Rituals, whether they are initiation ceremonies, healing

rituals, or rites of passage, often involve the use of symbolic objects, gestures, and performances. These symbols are believed to possess inherent powers and qualities that can affect and shape human consciousness. They serve as vehicles for personal and communal transformation, facilitating the connection between individuals, their ancestors, and the spiritual realm. Through rituals, symbols become a means of transcending the boundaries of everyday experience and accessing deeper levels of understanding and meaning.

The examination of African art has further revealed the intricate ways in which symbols are employed to represent and express complex ideas. African artists utilize a wide range of visual symbols and motifs to convey cultural values, historical events, spiritual beliefs, and social commentary. These symbols transcend linguistic barriers and communicate across diverse communities, serving as a universal language that unites individuals and fosters dialogue. African art demonstrates that symbols have the power to transcend the limitations of verbal communication and evoke profound emotional responses, fostering a deeper understanding of the world and one's place within it.

In light of these findings, it is clear that African cultures conceive of and utilize symbols in distinctive ways that challenge dominant Western philosophical assumptions about language, meaning, and representation. African philosophy presents an alternative framework that recognizes the inherent interconnectedness of symbols and thought, emphasizing the importance of context, experience, and embodiment in the process of meaning-making. By acknowledging the significance of symbols in human cognition and communication, African philosophy offers valuable insights that expand our understanding of the nature of knowledge and the complexities of human experience.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this inquiry has provided a nuanced understanding of the intricate relationship between symbols and thought in African philosophy. It has shed light on the diverse ways in which symbols are employed to convey and shape meaning within African cultures, challenging Western philosophical paradigms and offering alternative perspectives on language, representation, and cognition. By recognizing the power of symbols in human thought and communication, we gain a deeper appreciation for the richness and diversity of human cultures and their unique ways of understanding the world. This inquiry serves as an invitation to engage in cross-cultural dialogue, fostering mutual understanding and appreciation for the multiplicity of human experiences and the myriad ways in which symbols enrich our lives.

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