

A Study of Visual Symbolic Perception in Shamanic Rituals

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Abstract

Shamanism is a primal shape that transcends ordinary consciousness as a cross-cultural phenomenon. From the universal analysis of Shamanism. During the process of religious rituals, shamans use visual elements, such as costumes and masks, to form a spatially based graphic narrative relationship that generates an experience of sacred perception. However, the study of shamanic rituals has focused on anthropology and neurotheology. Previous research has neglected the importance of religious symbols as a bridge between personal and religious perception. This study, therefore, explores the spatial construction of visual symbols in shamanic rituals as well as the connections and interactions between visual symbols and behavioral perception. In the research process, a sample group was used to experience a model of religious rituals constructed from religious symbols. Thereafter, a questionnaire was administered for the qualitative analysis of the emotional variables of the sample group. The results show that visual symbols significantly generate the perceptual experience in religious rituals. Through abstract and empathic symbols to produce a perceptual experience of arrogance. This research on religious symbols can help understand the inheritance and protection of shamanism. Furthermore, it may provide theoretical support for the visual perception of symbols and transmission of emotions.

Keywords: Shamanism, Religious Rituals, Visual Symbols, Perceptual Experience

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Introduction

In recent years, shamanic research innovations have been revitalized as multiple studies have attempted to reconstruct the shamanism of the past through historical, ethnographic, and archaeological evidence (Dubois, 2011). Research suggests that shamanism, as a primitive form that transcends ordinary consciousness, has elements of cultural representation that are cross-cultural in nature (Winkelman, 2011). Analyzed from a cross-cultural perspective, through an empirical comparison of shamanic territories in the Americas, Africa, and Central Asia, it has been found that the core concept inherent to shamanism is a state of interactive ecstasy in the social and spiritual world (Eliade & Doniger, 2020). This is concretely expressed in the religious rituals formed through social gatherings. In the same vein is Winkelman's transcendentalist reflection on religious ritual based on a neuro-phenomenological perspective. He affirms the cross-cultural attributes of shamanism and interprets the shamanic ecstatic state (spiritual flight) in terms of a transformation of consciousness (Winkelman, 2012), attributing the shamanic perceptual experience to a product of brain function and neural structure (Winkelman, 2011). A common feature is the active use of the body to enter an altered state of consciousness (ASC)—an unusual physical state in which sensations, perceptions, cognitions, and emotions are altered.

Being the centralized experience of shamanic ideology and the subject of perceived objects, the ritual activities surrounding a religion have been the focus of scholarly research. Religious rituals are the centralized manifestation of religious ideology and therefore, the main way individuals perceive the sacred. Furthermore, they represent the irrationality of religious ideas and are the basis for guiding individuals into the ASC. The traditional elements in shamanism are classified on the basis of brain function and the neural structure (Winkelman, 2011). Through the dramatic presentation of traditional elements of shamanism, such as wearing costumes and masks, the real space is transformed into an imaginary space by reconstruction. Through ASC, a narrative relationship based on imaginary space is formed, which transcends rationality and therefore, produces the transmission of shamanic ideology. This is actualized based on the semantic transmission of religious visual signs and samples—the perception of visual signs.

This research reveals that visual symbols act as ideological mirroring of the personal God. An integral part of the construction of ritual space, they serve as a bridge between religious consciousness and religious rituals. In the latter, ritual symbols—the smallest ritual unit—retain the specific attributes of the ritual act (Deflem, 1991). They evoke a strong emotional response and are particularly visual (Renteln, 2004). Geertz points out that religion is a system of symbols (Hori, 1975), resulting from concepts on the general order of existence and the granting of these concepts with an aura of factuality. These concepts make emotions and motivations seem uniquely realistic, thereby creating powerful, pervasive, and enduring emotions and motivations in people's hearts (p. 90). Visual symbols establish pictorial conventions in regions where religion is predominant, allowing a symbolic identity between different individuals to flourish (Bohrer & Mitchell, 1997). The visual experience formed through the religious rituals constructed by the identification with cultural symbols leads to an emotional perception of the reference of visual symbols by the public. Turner proposes a theory of threshold limits to explain how visual symbols are perceived by individuals during religious rituals. He suggests that during such rituals, groups are mobilized because of dominant symbols; people worship and perform other symbolic activities in their vicinity (Turner, 1973). This demonstrates the correlation between religious rituals and visual symbols.

This study is based on semiotic research. It adopts the ritual theory proposed by Victor Turner et al. Furthermore, it uses questionnaires and fieldwork by authors to identify the characteristics of visual symbols in shamanic rituals to assess how visual symbols produce perceptual experiences. This research may open up a new way of thinking about shamanism. Simultaneously, it should enable transmission and preservation of dying shamanism.

Pictorial Turn of Language In Shamanism

In natural societies, any linguistic description is a manifestation of textuality. Linguistics, semiotics, and rhetoric are all concrete applications of textuality, and even the unconscious is structured like a language (Bohrer & Mitchell, 1997). The transformative relationship between language and the visible can be called the turn of the image. With the development of art history, French pioneers, such as Roland Barthes, have proposed the doctrine of structuralism, which focuses on the structural theory of meaning in culture. This led to the gradual acceptance of the theory of the turn of the image. They found that visual art was a system of symbols influenced by “conventions” (Bohrer & Mitchell, 1997). Sculpture, painting, and photography—these are all imbued with “textuality” and “discourse.” In depicting images, language is bound by linguistic conventions. Therefore, different linguistic conventions of text give birth to different systems of symbolic graphics.

Shamanism is influenced by the geographical environment, and its visual symbol system is dominated by symbols. From the perspective of the distribution area, shamanism is mainly popular in relatively primitive areas. For example, the Haze, Oroqen, Evenki, among others in northern China still inherit shamanic practices in the way of clan tribes. To this day, traditional religious practices have been maintained. Due to the harsh natural conditions, the visual symbolism of shamanism is predominantly primitive. It is expressed as a hieroglyphic symbol and a relationship between the visible and the describable, such as the shamanic script symbols. Unlike other language families, Shamanic cultures did not give birth to writing but mostly reproduced the image symbols. By constructing a contractual relationship between image and symbol, a surrogate reference to the symbol is produced. At the same time, an idiomatic form is generated between the subject of viewing—the viewer—and the object's visual symbol. When the individual understands the symbolic form of the image, visual perception is created around the image in what Panofsky describes as a “symbolic form”(Újvári, 2021). It is based on this process of visual symbolism of shamanism taking the turn from language to image, producing a religious symbolic perception in a regional context. This births a system of visual symbols unique to shamanism.

Characteristics of Shamanistic Religious Symbols

Shamanism is one of the earliest and most far-reaching religious traditions, the remnants of which still form the basis of the major religious beliefs in the modern world. The shaman shows their people the unseen forces behind the mere appearances of nature, which are experienced through intuition, trance states, or ecstatic mystical visions (Stutley, 2020). The religious system of symbols resulting from the pictorial turn based on the language of shamanism has religious symbolic elements expressed in an order and structure. The overall construction of the symbolic domain in the ritualistic process of religion is accomplished in a specific natural space under the guidance of shamans who use the visual elements, such as religious costumes, drums, and masks. These different types of symbols are accepted by the tribal clans through the contractual relationship constructed by language and images. A communal perception is formed, generating the transmission of symbolic semantics.

From the perspective of shamanism's universality, it can be found that the religious symbols are influenced by the core concept of "animism," and that its symbols are inherently practical and highly recognizable (Winkelman, 2002). For example, in the rock art of northern China and Siberia, the shaman's image is an important subject. The discovery of a large number of petroglyphs showed multiple aspects of the ancient man's social life and ideology. Contrarily, the symbolic structure of images in shamanic culture is relatively monotonous, because of the unique geographical context in which it was developed. Consequently, shamanism's graphic symbols can reflect more accurately the different emotions of individuals. Symbols that appear in religious rituals can also be found. Although it has a single shape, it is a linguistic image that is infinitely scalable and speaks for itself. It is the meta-image of visual images (Brown & Mitchell, 1986). For example, in the shamanic costumes worn by the Manchu people in northern China, the symbols are mainly "heavenly diagrams" and ornaments. The "heavenly diagram" is the main part of the symbolic composition of shamanic patterns. The shaman tree is the symbol of the "heavenly diagram," which was formed from the belief of the clan in the shaman tree. The tree totem, as an important meta-image in shamanism, is widely used in different parts of religious symbolism. These include the shape of the solon pole in religious rituals and the curling of iron sheets into plant motifs on frames of animal hats worn by shamans, which are a direct reflection of the shamanic concept of the heavenly diagram (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Sauron rod and shaman hat

From a semiotic perspective, based on the theoretical foundations of Saussure's semiotics, we discovered that the religious symbols of shamanism were mostly symbolic. An example is the religious costumes worn by shamans during religious ceremonies (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 Shaman's costume

This research found that the designs of religious costumes are mostly embroidered with animal hair, sewn with sinew and cut and pasted, and carved on wood, bone, and metal. The designs are either simple or complex in material, content, and craftsmanship, but not decorative for aesthetic purposes. However, they are a symbol of the shamanic god system and their religious concepts, and are a pictorial representation of shamanic religious culture. Additionally, the religious symbols of shamanism are based on the realization of their own functional properties, manifested in abstract and empathic symbols (Worringer, 1921). Abstract symbols can be seen as a rational reflection of symbols, while empathic symbols are an irrational transformation of sensuality.

Based on fieldwork, we classified shamanic religious symbols by their functional properties. The empathic symbols are primarily used in religious rituals and the abstract symbols in everyday life. In the course of religious rituals, shamans perform religious activities by wearing costumes, masks, and alternative objects made from paper cutouts. This is achieved through the imitation of primitive symbols and reflected in the religious objects' design in the human body shape as well as through primitive sewing. There is an emotional transference of the individual to the alternative objects. In this way, the shamanic concept of religion is transformed by empathic symbols. Analyzed from a visual point of view, these empathic symbols, which appear in religious rituals, achieve a transformation in their properties and substitute completely the emotions of the original symbols. For example, shamanic costumes are generally in red, yellow, and blue, representing earth, man, and sky, respectively. Another example is the shaman wearing a mask during religious ceremonies. All are visualized through the visualization of religious symbols. The individual is made to feel the presence of a personal deity, creating a mirror image of the deity's ideology that is a way of achieving an emotional experience of substitution. Additionally, the many symbols of life recorded in shamanism are collectively known as abstract symbols, an example of which is the emergence of shamanic petroglyphs. Numerous studies have shown that the rock art paintings of shamans are mostly records of religious rituals. The symbols are single-shaped and an abstract representation of a primitive two-dimensional image. The abstract symbols are primarily used in written records. In the Tungus language group, where shamanism is

practiced, the symbols are often pictographs—they are dots and lines, using the most basic stylistic symbols to record the daily life of the shaman, both anthropomorphically and figuratively.

In religious rituals, visual symbols by their characteristic properties enable the individual to create a pictorial narrative relationship with religious symbols through the combined use of abstract symbols and empathic symbols. It enables the individual to be fully immersed in the symbolic system constructed by the shaman through the religious symbolic domain in the trance-like religious experience. This results in a different emotionally and psychologically stimulating experience.

Symbolic Visual Perceptual Experience

Bataille suggests two ways of perceiving the sacred. The first is to aspire to something higher, such as art or religious practice, to exceed the boundaries of a part of humanity that is beyond one's reach and to experience another dimension, thus producing divinity. The other is erotic, sexual, and violent. During sexual intercourse, the body reverts to its original bestiality and through the self-denial of bestiality gives rise to the divine erotic. From this a rapid experience of divine perception can occur (Bataille, 1970). Two forms of excretion contribute to the human experience of perception. Using Hegel's phenomenology of mind as a theoretical basis, it can be said that human consciousness is a spiraling process of dialectical negation (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, 1988). Early humans generated the perceptual experience of divine bestiality through the negation of their animalistic nature. In terms of the emergence and development of consciousness, an image's first perception arises when the individual consciousness is received through an external medium. In this process, consciousness generates self-denial, and thus, absolute consciousness emerges. The human being, in order to distinguish itself from other animals, thus, negates the animalistic nature of existence. This process is accompanied by the taboo of images that arises from visual symbols. It is in this process of negation that the perceptual experience of arrogating divinity arises. Divinity, in this case, is divine bestiality and a manifestation of objectification and self-denial that arises with human evolution. It can be summed up as the negation of the natural world that gives rise to divinity.

Based on Hegel and Bataille's point of view on conscious perception. To learn more about the way visual symbols produce perceptual experiences, we visited areas where shamanism is still preserved and practiced. Furthermore, we conducted participant observation of shamanic religious rituals. After collecting relevant data, it was found that there were three ways to acquire perception during shamanic rituals.

The first kind of religious perception is generated through the stimulation of an individual's senses. It was found that shamanic religious rituals are dramatic and can stimulate strong emotional experiences in the individual. During the religious ceremony, the shaman excitedly beats drums, sings, and dances while recounting the battle with the spirits. In the end, the shaman is exhausted and in a state of ecstasy as he communicates with the spirits and seeks their cooperation (Winkelman, 2012). Therefore, when an individual is in a dramatic religious ritual, the shaman offers a unique perceptual experience to the masses by resonating with the individual's five senses.

The second is a combination of geopolitical attributes and spatial fields. For example, Shamanism located in the north of China has a remote geographical location and harsh

natural conditions. The social ideology has retained its primitive character. This provides the means to disseminate geographical symbols. Through the establishment of pictorial conventions and construction of cognitive images, the visual perception is made available among the clan that has a perception of the same symbols (Snyder & Panofsky, 1995). From this, a system based on the perception of empirical images is formed. The metaphor of conscious experience is completed with the integration of religious rituals (Bohrer & Mitchell, 1997). This ultimately leads to a perceptual experience.

The last of these relies on the perception of the sacred in religious rituals and the usurpation that follows the breaking of taboos. In a comparative study of shamanism in the Lascaux culture, it was found that the murals in the Lascaux caves were full of visual elements representative of taboos, blood, beasts, and violence (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3 A bison with an open stomach

The Lascaux people were shocked by such representations and developed a visual perception of emotions (Bataille, 1970). The source of this perception is usurpation of the unnatural, which produces a perceptual experience of the divine. The divinity generated by breaking taboos is not personal divinity, but divine bestiality derived from the negation of humanity itself. In the course of shamanic religious rituals, the shaman acts as a medium of communication with the personal divinity. By using empathic symbols, such as masks and distinctive costumes with different rhythmic drums, the transformation of humanity and divinity is thus accomplished. The individual is made to perceive the arrogance of the divine, leading to a perceptual experience.

These three ways of perceiving religious rituals are closely related to the visual symbols used in religious rituals and were hence, used as the basis for our study and as an important dimension of this questionnaire research. Additionally, unstructured interviews with shamanic bearers were conducted, based on which six factors that influence the perception of visual symbols in shamanic rituals were identified. These included “religious cultural identity,” identity with one's own culture, and the characteristics of visual symbols in religious rituals “empathic symbols,” “symbolic symbols,” “change in religious consciousness,” and “bodily behavior,” under the influence of religious rituals. These factors

are why individuals perceive visual symbols. To verify the validity of the data obtained, a sample of shamanic religious rituals was used to simulate and experience the perception. In total, 27 test items were selected and designed in the following three different questionnaires (Fig. 4, Fig. 5, Fig. 6). Additionally, the data were coded and analyzed using the Likert data collection method for the group experiencing shamanic religious rituals.

Perception of space of the ritual's subject.	
Dimensionality	Measurement indicators
Cultural identity	(1) A sacred place
	(2) A place where the power of faith is felt
	(3) A place of consistency with imagination
	(4) A place where troubles are temporarily forgotten
	(5) A place to feel a sense of belonging
Self-identification	(6) A place to purify the soul
	(7) A place to fulfill a long-held wish
	(8) A pilgrimage done in one's own way
	(9) Feeling transformed

Fig. 4 Perception of space of the ritual's subject

Visual perception of symbols in space	
Dimensionality	Measurement indicators
Abstract symbols	1. Shamanic textual graphics
	2. Religious rock art
	3. Religious architecture
	4. Religious motifs and decorations
Empathy Symbols	5. Religious objects (statues)
	6. Shaman's masks
	7. Shaman's paper cutouts
	8. Religious costumes (animal costumes)
	9. Religious implements (shaman's sacred drums and bells)

Fig. 5 Visual perception of symbols in space

Visual symbols of the perception of space

Dimensionality	Measurement indicators
Change of consciousness	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Produces a trance experience 2. Produces the emotion that all things are spiritual 3. Time (the concept of time becomes blurred) 4. Space (the concept of space becomes blurred) 5. Interpersonal (relationships between people, freer and more equal) 6. Social attributes (age, gender, occupation, social status also become irrelevant)
Physical Behavior	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Can dance to music 8. Can develop worship of religious objects 9. Produces usurped religious behaviors

Fig.6 Visual symbols of the perception of space

For each dimension, 300 questionnaires were distributed. These were returned and screened to obtain a valid sample of 216, 248, and 252. Meanwhile, reliability tests and factor analysis on the data were conducted using the SPSS data analysis platform. The results of data analysis showed that the first questionnaire on the perception of space of the ritual's subject had a coefficient of Cronbach's Alpha of 0.851, which was greater than the test indicator of 0.7, indicating that the data were true and reliable. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test value was 0.727, greater than 0.6. The second questionnaire was on the visual perception of symbols in space. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test value was 0.754, greater than 0.6. The third questionnaire was on the visual symbols of the perception of space. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test value was 0.761, greater than 0.6. The results of the above three sets indicated that the factors in the questionnaire were correlated with the main variables. Therefore, the results of the qualitative analysis have been validated from the perspective of the data.

Conclusion

This study of shamanic visual symbols not only provides a fresh way of thinking about research on perceptual experience of religious rituals, but also validates the way visual symbols are perceived in shamanic religious rituals. Using the theoretical basis of ritual passage, a questionnaire was administered to a sample of people experiencing shamanic religious rituals in three dimensions, six directions, and 27 test items. Data analysis results showed that the experience of religious perception was the result of the subject's spatial perception, spatial concept, and spatial interaction. Visual symbols significantly influence individuals to produce perceptions and are an important medium connecting religious consciousness and religious rituals. In the course of religious rituals, the shaman produces pictorial narrative relationships based on abstract and empathic symbols through the spatial construction of visual symbols. Through the religious symbols, an individual's religious consciousness is guided and access to the threshold space is controlled. The individual is made to produce a dual arrogance of body and spirit, a trance, and a change of perception. A perceptual experience of divinity is thus created for visual symbols.

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