

Symbol

- Human beings create symbols by which we associate mental constructions with events, ideas, or forms found in the external world. Most broadly, a symbol is (Dillistone, The Power of Symbols, pp. 13-14):

<i>Symbol:</i>	<i>Transformational Process:</i>	<i>Referent:</i>
1. A word or object or thing or action or pattern or person or concrete particular	2. Representing or suggesting or signifying or veiling or communicating or eliciting or expressing or recalling of pointing to or standing in place of or typifying or denoting or relating to or corresponding to or illuminating or referring to or participating in or re-enacting or associated with	3. Something greater or transcendent or ultimate: a meaning, a reality, an ideal, a value, an achievement, a belief, a community, a concept, an institution, a state of affairs.

(1) is more visible, audible, tangible, proximate, concrete than (3). The function of a symbol is to bridge the gap between the world of (3) and (1).

More narrowly, a symbol is the linkage of an idea, feeling or value to a sense experienceable form by certain people in certain contexts. (Hiebert, "Folk Religions", p. 150)

Example: A Symbol from Ghana

	<p>The Akan believe that the search for knowledge is a life-long process. The symbol <i>nea onnim sua a, ohu</i> (he who does not know can become knowledgeable from learning) incorporates this view of learning. Akan regard the elderly as wise and believe that experience comes with age.</p> <p style="text-align: right; font-size: small;"><i>Source: http://www.marshall.edu/akanart/akanknow.html</i></p>
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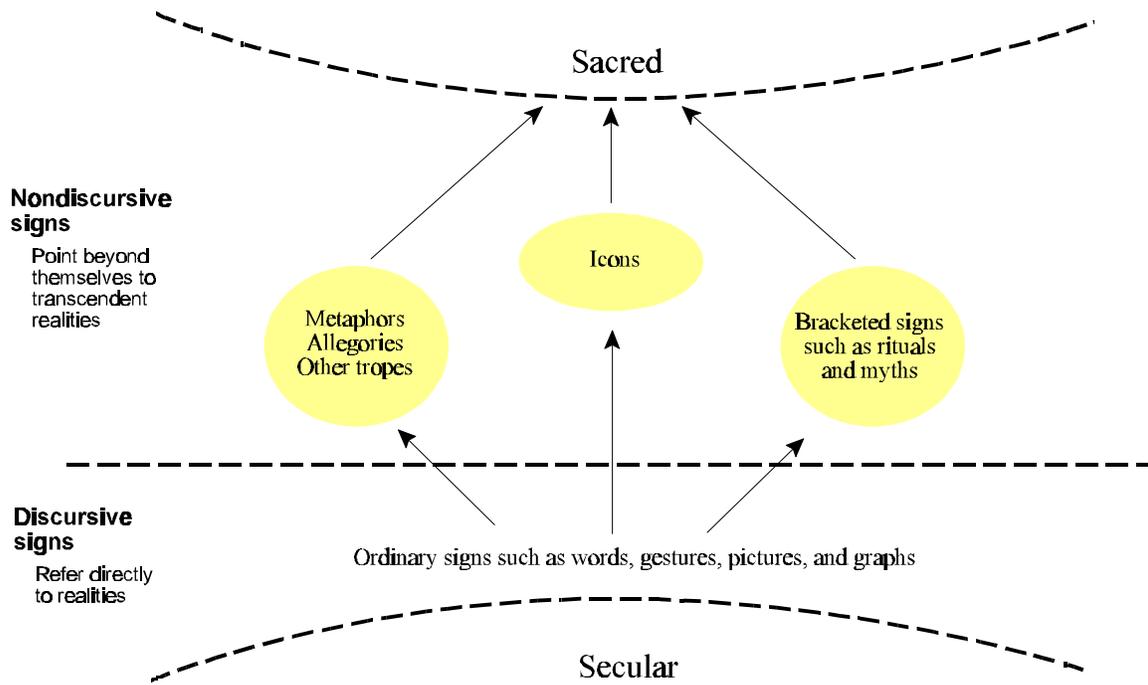
- We live in a physical/spiritual world in which all societies create symbols. As human beings we are uniquely able to create models of our world by means of symbols. In society, symbols "are *intimately related to social cohesion and to social transformation.*" (Dillistone, 15; emphasis his). The study of semiotics "sees a culture as a vast communication network, whereby both verbal and non-verbal messages are circulated along elaborate, interconnected pathways, which, together, create the systems of meaning. . . ."

The interaction of signs, groups of signs that mutually define each other, and these kinds of rules (see below) are a creative collaboration that produces a culture. They span more than the verbal dimensions of culture and more even than the visible dimensions of culture. The task of semiotics is to describe and explain

the signs, their interaction, the rules that govern them, and the complex that we call culture which emerges from all this" (Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, p. 50)

3. Most symbols are part of larger interconnected symbol systems. For example, when a teacher writes in red ink on a student's paper, the teacher is communicating not only through the comments, but through the color. In Western culture, the color red is associated with diverse things such as mistakes, stopping (signal lights, stop signs, do not enter signs) and life/death (blood).
 - a. Symbols enable us to categorize and analyze our world. They are intimately tied to our framework of making categories that enable us to make sense of the vast amounts of sensory data that we are constantly receiving. They help us to know what to pay attention to, what to ignore, what must be attended, what can be put off, etc.
 - b. The boundaries associated with symbols may be well defined or fuzzy. Further the sets themselves may be centered or bounded. We used these sets to keep boundaries sharp or to avoid overly sharp distinctions.
4. What is the relationship between form and meaning in symbols?
 - a. Previously it was thought that form = meaning which resulted in literalism in translation and interpretation.
 - b. More recently, form and meaning were divorced through dynamic equivalence. While dynamic equivalence works well in linguistic translation, it is also reductionistic.
 - c. More currently, semiotics recognizes that the relationship between form and meaning is complex and varied, and not reducible to a single definition.
5. Changing the meaning of symbols:
 - a. The meanings of symbols are locked into the larger culture from which the symbols came. Once a symbol is recognized throughout a culture, changing its meaning is extremely difficult, especially for a small counter-culture. For example, a small Christian community in a Muslim setting would not be able to redefine traditional symbols, for it is the larger culture that continues to give them meaning.
 - b. Cults often do change the meaning of vocabulary, but the changed meaning is confined to the cult in question.
6. Symbols in religious contexts: Sacred symbols

- a. In religious contexts, symbols are used as pointers to transcendental experiences or truths. Typically we indicate that we are using sacred symbols by setting them off in some way from the ordinary (Hiebert calls this "bracketing" them).
 - b. We set these symbols off in many different ways (gestures, posture, clothing, space, words ["Our Father In Christ`s Name, Amen"]).
 - c. Because they connect this world with the transcendent, such symbols will be multidimensional (emotional, affective, volitional) and multivocal (multi-sensory).
 - d. Properties of religious symbols (Zahniser, *Symbol and Ceremony*):
 - i. Condensation: many objects, actions, feelings, and concepts can concentrate in a single symbol (p. 79)
 - ii. Unification: a symbol relates and unifies a set of things often very different (p. 80)
 - iii. Polarity: they bring together an ideological pole with a sensory pole
7. Discursive and non-discursive symbols (Hiebert, Shaw, and Tienou, 248):



A Missiological Approach to Myth and Symbol

1. Items to note:
 - a. It will be extremely rare for a culture (even a collective one) to present univocal agreement on the details of the significance of even the most widely used myths, rituals, or symbols.
 - b. Myths, rituals, and symbols are deeply embedded in the culture--appropriate understanding of them will serve as a window to the outsider.
 - c. Do not think that a symbol must be discarded simply because it is too closely tied to spiritistic concepts. Redemption may be possible, but believers who have come out of the religious context in question will be the best sources of information on the emotional/psychological packaging of a particular symbol, myth, or ritual

2. Towards critical contextualization

Focus: Your job is to focus on being a facilitator of biblically informed indigenous decisions. You do not have to be the "savior"--just a willing instrument in the hands of the Divine Enabler.

- a. When a question arises about a belief or practice in the Christian community it provides an appropriate opportunity to deal with the particular topic at hand. Discussion may eventually range beyond the topic, but let the indigenous church decide how far and in what direction it goes.
- b. Have the people openly discuss the symbol, myth, or ritual and range of meanings associated with it (or them). Take the time to explore the possible range of meanings of the issue(s) in question, and always assume that there is more to be discovered! Further, do not expect that everyone will have the same idea. If a small group in our church were to discuss the ritual of communion and what it means, the ideas would be as varied as the members of the group.
- c. This is the opportunity to explore the Scriptures together as a community to see what God's word has to say about the issue. While you will possibly serve as a resource, allow the members of the community to bring the passages/principles they think of to the discussion.
- d. Facilitate their ability to decide how they want to deal with the issue at hand. If they want to "Christianize" a practice, help them think through the issues involved (both positive and negative). If they want to replace a practice, let them come up with possible options (they don't have to borrow Western forms for this!).