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# UNIT 5 THE STUDY OF RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS

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## 5.0 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit, you will be able to

- define a symbol and discuss its affinities and dissimilarities with signal, icon and index
- understand and appreciate the various approaches to the understanding of religious symbols
- interpret the symbols of your own religion through an approach of your choice.

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## 5.1 INTRODUCTION

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In the previous four units of this block, we discussed the sociological understanding of religion, evolutionist and functionalist theories of religion, and the study of religious beliefs. In this unit, you will come to know the way of understanding religion through its symbols.

We begin the unit with a discussion of the nature and meaning of term 'symbol'. Then we focus on the communicative role of symbols in religion. Further, a discussion of the structuralist approaches and its variants is given in order to explain to you the current state of studies of religious symbols. Undertaking a historical journey from Tylor, Malinowski, Firth to Levi-Strauss, Leach, Douglas, Tuner and Geertz, we have attempted to show how communication is the central aspect of religion as understood via the symbols. You are also advised to view the video programme on **Religious Symbols** at your study centre. It will help you to understand better the meaning and role of symbols in our social life.

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## 5.2 THE NATURE AND MEANING OF SYMBOLS

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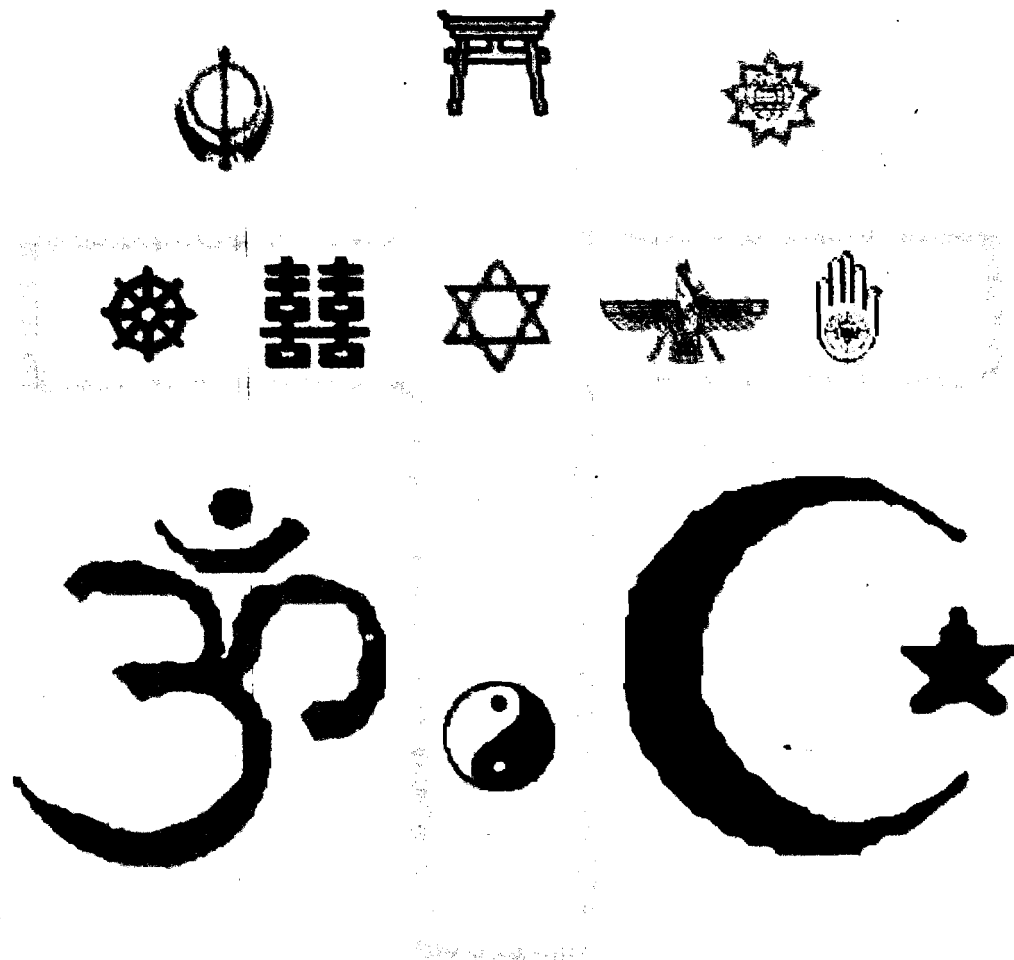
What is meant by the term 'symbol'? Radcliffe-Brown's definition is that everything that has a meaning is a symbol. Here the meaning refers to what is expressed by a symbol, or, what the symbol stands for. This is very wide definition. You are quite likely to come across many things which stand for something else. Regarding all such things as symbols is not very useful to a sociologist who wants to understand religion via symbols.

In order to define the term specifically, we need to examine its nature. It is common

to find in text books a discussion about differences between a signal and a symbol. We have also to show how a signal is different from a symbol. But so also is the case with an icon, index and allegory. In fact, all these terms serve to form an image or representation of something in the mind. Often, one comes across the words sign and symbol being used interchangeably. At times, sign is used when another person may find it more appropriate to use the word symbol or vice versa (for an interesting debate on this point refer to Daniels (1987:15-47).

Such scholars as Ernest Cassirer (1944) hold that symbolic representation is an essential function of human consciousness and it is fundamental to our understanding to human culture, including history, art, science, myth and religion. For Cassirer all these spheres are aspects of a 'symbolic universe'. He distinguished between sign and symbol. For him, a sign refers to the physical world of being and there is always a natural link between the sign and the thing that it signifies. He holds that a symbol is an 'artificial' indicator and refer to the human world of meaning. For Cassirer, human knowledge is essentially symbolic. He argues that symbol and the signified are merged in religion and myth and the two are differentiated in science.

We find that earlier writers generally discussed the similarities and differences between sign and symbol. Later, such scholars as Raymond Firth (1973) wrote about four different signs, namely, index, signal, icon and symbol. Let us follow Firth, who held that an **index** is a sign which is related to what is signified in the same way as a parts is related to the whole or particular is related to general. For example, incidence of smoke is an index of a fire. The dynamic aspect of an index is referred as a **signal**, for example, switching on of a red traffic light is a signal of danger and therefore a signal to stop movement of vehicles. A sensory-likeness



is represented by an **icon**. For example, the statue of a leader is iconic. A **symbol** is that kind of sign which has many associations of a complex nature. There does not exist a clear-cut likeness between a symbol and the thing which is signified. There is usually a kind of arbitrariness, based on convention, for example, the owl is the symbol of wisdom.

Edmund Leach (1976) regards both symbol and sign as subsets of index (see Morris 1987:219). He uses the terms sign to refer to symbols, which displays the part to whole relationship with what is signified.

Secondly, Leach also distinguishes between a sign and the thing signified is expressed by substituting the name of an attribute for that of the thing meant. For example, a crown may stand for king. In the case of symbol, the relationship between a symbol and the thing symbolised is metaphorical. This means there is an application of name to an object to which it is not literally applicable. According to Morris (1987:222) this distinction between a sign and a symbol is 'an elaboration of Frazer's distinction between homeopathic and contagious magic' (see Unit 2, subsection 2.3.4). A significant contribution of Leach's ideas is that symbols can not be interpreted in isolation and there are no universal symbols, though there may be some fairly common symbolic themes. **He argues that symbols usually carry multiplicity of meanings, that is, they are polysemic.** Further, they became meaningful only when seen in opposition to other symbols as parts of a cultural context. He considers it necessary to understand symbolism in a particular ethnographic context.

It is clear that the concept of symbol has been approached in various ways by the sociologists. However basically a symbol communicates indirectly.

At this stage of our discussion, you may not want to enter into the controversies about similarities and differences among different types of sign. It may suffice to say that a sign is a wider term which may share certain features with signal, symbol, icon, index and allegory (see Barthes 1967:35-38). But the context of the study of religion, it is customary to use the term symbol rather than sign. This is so because of the polysemic (multiplicity of meaning) nature of religious symbols.

Further we find that there is a reason or an underlying rationale for a particular symbol to be used in a particular case. In case of signals certain messages are carried through conventionally accepted means. For example, a green light is a signal for a driver to go ahead and a red light is a signal to stop. These signals are part of accepted conventions among all road-users. Similarly, in all languages, certain combinations of certain sounds stand for certain meanings because speakers of those languages have by convention accepted to recognise those sounds with particular meaning.

In the case of symbol, there is apparently no connection between the object which signifies and what is signified by it. But the bases for a symbol's appropriation to what is symbolised lie in some actual or imagined similarity between the symbol and what is symbolised. In some cases, the basis may lie in some past event.

You will also find that the rationale underlying a symbolic representation may not always be obviously so and may not be so easy to discover. Signals are easy to decipher because they generally stand for a concrete reality and refer to some observable action. Traffic lights are the best examples of signals. Symbols are, on the other hand, usually an expression of such abstract notions as power, authority, solidarity of the group. For example, the yam house. The debate thus is between symbols, which deal with the abstract notion, and signals which are 'concrete' and different from the role of the polysemic nature of symbols.

Symbols provide people with a means of expressing ideas of significance. This is why sociologists find symbols as something very important to study. We already know that Durkheim was interested in the study of 'totem' because he thought that it symbolised the idea of group solidarity among the Australian aborigines (see Unit 3 of this block).

In brief, we can say that the main characteristic of a symbol is that it expresses something significant. This indicates that one cannot remain neutral about something that is symbolised. Take the case of your national flag. It stands for your country. If someone insults your national flag, you feel offended. You can hardly be neutral to what happens to it. In other words, what is symbolised is also respected.

As mentioned before, language, art, history and myths are modes of human experience expressed through symbol. Earnest Cassirer holds that a human being is a symbol making animal (animal symbollicum). In this sense a cultural system is basically the nexus between the various ways of symbolising. This makes it important for a sociologist to identify symbolic elements in human activities. We are here concerned with symbol as means communicating something significant. The communicative role of symbol is very important for studying religion. Communication is the central aspect of religion is understood via the symbol. Both ritual and belief are two sides of the communication process. In Unit 4 we explained in a simplistic manner the differences between ritual and belief. Here we would like to emphasise the fact that ritual and belief as reflected in symbolic activities express both instrumental and expressive aspects. Let us clarify what we mean by the two terms. Before going on to these terms, complete Check Your Progress 1.

**Check Your Progress 1**

i) What is the main characteristic of symbol? Use five lines for your answer.

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ii) What sort of ideas are best communicated through symbols? Use one line for your answer

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ii) What is common between a sign and a symbol? Use one line for your answer.

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By instrumental we mean that action which produces some desired goal and it is directed to an end. By expressive activity we mean saying or expressing an idea. The instrumental action can be directly observed and can be explained in terms of what it is oriented towards. The expressive aspect of behaviour can be, on the other hand, studied by finding out what is being said or communicated. Both aspects of an activity are generally intermeshed and difficult to separate. But sociologists usually distinguish them for purposes of analysing human behaviour in general and rituals and beliefs in particular. In the following section, we will examine how they study the role of symbol in religion, and by doing so they try to understand religion via symbol.

## 5.3 SYMBOLS IN RELIGION

Both functionalists and structuralist, in their own ways, have tried to interpret the communicative role of symbols in religion. We have already noted in units 2 and 3 the criticisms of explanations by the evolutionists like Tylor and of functionalists like Malinowski and Firth. The evolutionists implied a division between symbolic structures of myths and rituals and concrete structures (kinship, politics and economics etc.). Even Durkheim resorted to this artificial division between religion (a symbolic structure) and society (a concrete structure).

The functionalists, on the other hand, asked the question: what rituals as observed via symbolism do for the society? Rituals are those formal actions which are expressed through symbol. The functionalists studied the process of transactions or regular patterns of interaction and explained them in terms of what a particular transaction or interaction did for a group of people. For example, according to Firth (1973:77), political symbols can be used as instruments of public control. Firth (1973) argues that that a person or a party can control the mobilisational efficacy of symbols by manipulating the meanings assigned to them. The manipulability of symbols arises mainly because system of symbols are not always consistent and coherent. It is the arbitration of association with meaning which makes symbols manipulable. Precisely due to this symbols become instruments of power struggle.

For the functionalist however the important fact is how a symbol or a 'set' of symbols relate to the totality of the symbolising complex of ideas.

Further, in unit 4 we focussed on the meaning aspect of religious beliefs. The shift from function of meaning of religion took into account communicative aspect of human actions. You would agree that every action is a communicative action. This position has now led us to a consideration of religion as a set of symbols which throws light on the communicative dimension of an action as well as the capacity of human beings to create culture through symbols. We find that the structuralists suggest interesting possibilities in the interpretation of religion. They all fasten on to the communicative aspect of such structuralists as Levi-Strauss and, to a lesser extent, Leach emphasise the mentalist (intellectualist) aspect and strive towards a natural science model in the interpretation of religious symbols. Finding it hard to sustain, Evans-Pritchard and others developed an approach which is more interpretive and 'humanities'-oriented. Examples of this approach are the symbolic analyses of Mary Douglas, Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz.

It is a well established notion that religion views human behaviour in terms of cosmic order and reflects that cosmic order in human actions. Geertz (1966) argued that in empirical terms not many tried to inquire as to how this is actually achieved. In sociology we have very good theoretical framework to analyse socialisation process of child, succession to political power, economic processes of production, distribution and consumption, etc. but for a long time little progress was made in the field of religion. It was the study of religion as a system of symbols that provided a break through. Let us first discuss the approaches of Levi-Strauss and Leach. This discussion will be followed by a more detailed examination of the symbolic analyses of Douglas, Turner and Geertz.

### Check Your Progress 2

- i) Who perceived a division between such symbolic structures as myths and ritual and such concrete structures as kinship, politic and economics etc.? Use one line for your answer.

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ii) State in four lines what the functionalists tried to ask while studying the communicative role of symbols.

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iii) Who tried to strive for a natural science model understanding religious symbols? Use one line for your answer.

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## 5.4 INTERPRETING RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS

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Levi-Strauss (see Box 5.01) takes language to be a model for understanding social behaviour. Structuralists like Levi-Strauss try to relate consciousness to the unconscious, individual to the cultural, and objective analysis of experience to subjective experience of individuals. Levi-Strauss argues that mythic structures (symbolic structures) parallel social structure, not because myth mirrors society. But because, both myth and social structure share a common underlying structure of human mind. Put it differently, myths are more than the meaning they offer to an interpreter, and the functions they fulfil for the society which shapes them. Levi-Strauss argues that there are relatively stable mental structures (structures in mind) which give rise to permutations and combinations in the form of culture. These mental structures are universal human nature. These structures are union and opposition between ideas, better put as 'binary opposition'. Like a grammar beneath languages lies the logic or code beneath culture (any symbolic form, myth, for that matter).

### Box 5.01

Claude Levi-Strauss has been the most influential thinker among anthropologists in France. He has a large following among scholars in Europe and the United States of America. His primary contribution is related to the study of human mind. He has attempted to identify the underlying patterns, regularities and types of human activities. His major works concern three areas, namely kinship theory, the analysis of mythology, and the nature of primitive classifications. In his analysis of myths he depends on structural linguistics (the study of human speech and cybernetics the science of communication and control theory). Levi-Strauss studies myth as a system of signs. For him, a myth accounts for the basic conceptual categories of the human mind. These categories are made of contradictory series of such binary opposition as raw and cooked, nature and culture, left and right etc. Thus, a myth is a version of a theme which is represented in specific combination of categories.

This logic or code needs to be deciphered for an understanding of that culture. It is important to note that the complexity of symbols makes them difficult and even intractable in certain cases. As such while attempting to work on interpreting the symbol or the set of symbols there is always room for an alternative explanation. While understanding structuralism we need to remember that.

- b) the mental structures are divorced from the actions and intentions of the particular individuals. From the above two aspects it emerges clearly that structuralism is least interested in the 'values' or 'ethos' which a symbol represents and it is unmindful of the use to which symbols are put (especially in the context of the power struggle).

We can say that this kind of structuralist interpretation of symbols denotes mental structures of structures in the mind. This is why sometimes Levi-Straussian structuralism is labelled as 'thought-structuralism'. These mental structures flow out of our minds to create culture in their various combinations. If culture is set of symbolic forms and if we analyse them or decipher or decode them, we get to know the underlying mental structure. Levi-Strauss views it as a binary opposition between nature and culture. Thus, he would say, if raw food is nature, cooked food denotes culture.

Leach (1976) uses the structuralist method to decipher the various symbolic forms. To him, culture is only a manifest physical form and it originates in our mind. Within our mind, it begins as an "inchoate metaphysical idea". Inside our mind categories emerge as a set of opposing categories.

The structuralist model can be used for the analysis of a common thing as a dress, or costume. You know we dress for certain occasions in a special way. To attend wedding banquets or receptions we wear a grand attire. Why? We inherently believe that our dress 'speaks' (communicates) a lot about us to the other. One's dress reveals one's rank and social status. Note the color of anybody's dress. Will anybody wear a black attire while going for a wedding banquet? No. You would have seen that black is always opposed to white. Black may indicate impurity whereas white indicates purity. Black indicates mourning whereas red colour in an appropriate context indicates joy.

Structuralism can be used to study almost any sociological or anthropological area of interest or specialization. Levi-Strauss, Leach and others have demonstrated great skill and versatility in using the structuralist theory method and data. For example, Leach has done a structural analysis of traffic signals and their meaning.

Likewise, Leach (1976) applies structural model to 'bodily mutation'. For example, take shaving of the widow's head in certain cultures. This 'loss of hair' (albeit forced by society) indicates a change in the status of a woman. Possession of hair is opposed to lack of hair, and accordingly this idea is applied by the society to indicate change in social status.

I hope you remember, the Durkheimian classification of 'sacred versus profane'. This is a cognitive categorisation created by the society, argued Durkheim. For Levi-Strauss natural and universal to all cultures. If that is so then sacred and profane will be categories ever persistent irrespective of the advancements in science and technology. If you carefully reflect 'time' is a human invention; so is sacred time (for rituals and other religious activities) and sacred space. Sacred time and sacred space are concepts devised by human mind to classify the continuous time and space around us. Years, months, days, public private, drawing room, bed room—are human classifications which flow out from the binary opposition of human mind.

Take another example, 'sacrifice' is an act of communication with the other-world. At its heart lies our belief that we shall die one day, and yet we want to live. Hence the classification 'this world' versus 'other world', 'this-worldly' versus 'other-worldly being', 'this-worldly time' versus 'other-worldly time'. At the meeting point of these two worlds, i.e. this world and the other-world, lies the liminal zone in which beings of both the worlds can take part. A church or a temple or a mosque

is the meeting point of this-worldly and other-worldly. A sacrifice held at this spot in the form of killings a goat has a symbolic meaning. It indicates that the sacrifice is willing to undergo a transformation in order to reach the other-world. Leach (1976:71) writes, "Religion is concerned with establishing a mediating bridge between 'this world', and 'the other' through which the omnipotent power of deity may be channelled to bring aid to impotent men". We will now turn to a variant of the structuralist approach, followed by Mary Douglas.

### Activity 1

Carefully read section 5.4 and following the concept of mental structures, given by Levi-Strauss, list some binary oppositions which you think are universal.

## 5.5 UNDERSTANDING SYMBOLS

Different from the Levi-Straussian notion structures, a variant of structuralism, followed by Mary Douglas (see Box 5.02), holds that symbols are not formed out of the structures of mind. In this approach we find a definite slide towards Durkheimian understanding in which social structures have key role in symbolic processes. There is also reflection of Robertson Smith's argument that symbols of divinity were originally drawn from natural symbols. **The 'universalism', advocated by Levi-Strauss for the structures of mind is sidetracked in this approach.** The argument is that meaning is not exhausted in the patterned categories of signs. Mary Douglas (1966, 1970) argues that the origins of symbolisation are related to social structure in general and to processes of human body in particular. Consequently, in her writing Mary Douglas describes the body as a medium through which social structure finds expression. Let us discuss in detail Mary Douglas's approach to the study of symbols.

### Box 5.02

Mary Douglas was educated at Oxford where she obtained her D. Phil in 1951. She did fieldwork in the Belgian Congo from 1949-50 and again during 1953.

Mary Douglas has been described by Adam Kuper (1973:206) as one of the leaders of the new British 'structuralism'. She is concerned with the anomalies which imply loss of purity and therefore a source of danger. Influenced by her teacher, at Oxford, Franz Steiner's lectures on taboo and Levi-Strauss's structural method, Douglas (1966) has analysed the dietary rules by reference to system of classification. In her study, *Natural Symbols* (1970), she holds that society as an entity is expressed by ritual symbolism. Here, she focuses on finding structural correlations between symbolic patterns and social experiences.

Mary Douglas (1966) studied the pollution beliefs of Jews recorded in the Bible and also used the ethnographic notes from various societies of the world. Primitive people's understanding of pollution can be understood by exploring our own mentality, according to Douglas. She quotes Lord Chesterfield's definition of dirt, 'dirt is a matter out of place'. What is implied here is an order and contravention of that order. Take a simple example: Will any of us leave our footwear in a bookshelf? No, this is because footwear and books belongs to entirely different realms. We know of an order where footwear belong to footwear stand and a book belongs to a bookshelf. Now, if that order is disturbed, you will draw rebuke from your elders.

It would be most interesting to see what results desire from a study of purity and pollution in the Indian context. To some extent the anthropologist influenced by Levi-Strauss (e.g. Dumont) have already made in roads into this area.



Similarly, we can analyse pollution belief. In many societies, menstrual blood is polluting. Hence, menstruating women remain secluded. In case this rule of seclusion is contravened, grave danger is foreseen for the community and the person/community concerned has to undergo purification processes. Pollution beliefs are cultural and they imply an order and its preservation. Pollution beliefs are mostly related to the bodily processes and emissions: blood, menstruation, exertions and exhalations. Now, what is the significance of these pollution beliefs.?

- a) They imply an order and its preservation.
- b) Pollution beliefs and related sanctions check the deviations from the order.
- c) They help the individuals to clarify social definitions and re-order their experiences.
- d) Pollution beliefs reinforce the understanding of cosmos and the world of nature, as is held by the society.

These pollution beliefs are not universal. Menstrual blood is polluting in one society but in may not be in another. It is in this selection process that social structure intervenes. Douglas (1975:67) clarifies the role of social structure by distinguishing several levels of meaning in rituals which control the bodily conditions. Firstly, rituals have a personal meaning for one who undergoes it and those who witness the ritual. Secondly, there is a social meaning, where every society 'says' something public about its nature, social grouping etc. To quote Douglas (1975:67) "a public ritual is a graphic expression of social forms. In societies where marriage is weak, child-bearing mother will be secluded and father too will have to be secluded.

Otherwise danger might occur. Here, this child-bearing process of body is prescribed or selected as polluting, because, proof of paternity is needed and the marriage is weak. Bodily processes are attributed meanings with a view to defend and preserve the established social order. Says Douglas (1970:xiii), "Body is a symbolic medium which is used to express particular pattern of social relations".

Douglas (1970) explores the cosmology of various societies and their relations with the corresponding bodily symbols. Human body is used to express the experiences of social relations. We present our body in different postures and angles, depending upon the situation whether it is formal or informal. **According to Douglas, experienced social relations are structured in two ways: group and the grid.** Group is a bounded social unit whereas grid indicates a person-to-person relationship on an ego-centered basis.

In societies where group is strong, human body is guarded against attack from outside. The inside/outside definitions are clear cut. Social experience emphasises external boundaries of the body, ignoring the internal structure of the body. In such a society, the social philosophy is that the internal structure can remain undifferentiated. Such societies believe that injustice within the society can be removed by eliminating the internal traitors who ally with the outside enemies. Witch-fearing cosmology is an example. Here, the body symbolism values the boundaries, discourages mixtures and treats sex with caution. The social experience here tends towards austerity, interest in purification, and disregard for bodily function like ingestion. The society celebrates purity of spirit and holds that flesh could be corrupted.

Douglas (1970:ix) argues that in contrast, where grid is strong, a bounded human body cannot be used for expression of social concerns, since the individuals does not feel bound and committed to a social group. Individuals is not constrained by group, but by rules, which facilitate reciprocal transactions. There is no attempt to

secularise mind and matter, and neither they are revered nor despised. People remain secular in outlook.

Bodily concerns differ according to social experience. Applying her model to the student revolts, Douglas says that since the social relations are over structured by grid, the students begin to seek unstructured personal experiences, in the form of rampage and destruction of catalogues and classifications.

This is clearly an example of how wide an application or even series of applications can be a part of study research and analysis. Yet it must be cautioned here that the structuralist method requires deep study to be used adequately as a method to study any aspect of society.

**Check Your Progress 3**

- i) What is the place of body symbolism in Mary Douglas approach to the study of symbols? Use five lines for your answers.

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- ii) Explain in five lines Mary Douglas concepts of group and grid.

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- iii) Match the following

A	B
a) Binary opposition	1) Firth
b) Symbols have purposes	2) Cassirer
c) Body is medium of expression	3) Durkheim
d) 'Man is an animal symbolicum'	4) Levi-Strauss
e) 'Society is mirrored in symbol'	5) Douglas

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**5.6 CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF SYMBOLS**

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Victor Turner (see Box 5.03) is influenced by a version of structural functionalism which assimilated many ideas from conflict theories. Turner's understanding of symbol emerged from his study of rituals in Zambia. Symbols are operators in the social processes, because they help the actors move from one status to another and also to resolve social contradictions. Symbols bind actors to the categories and norms of their society. Turner argued that the meaning of symbols can be understood only in their "action-field" context.

**Box 5.03**

The tradition of cultural analysis, which resulted in translations of important essays of Durkheim, Mauss, Hubert and Hertz etc. by the Oxford anthropologists, was carried on by such scholars as Victor W. Turner. He was born in 1920, in Scotland and educated at University College, London. He obtained a Ph.D. degree at Manchester. A professor of anthropology, Turner has made significant contributions to the study of religion. Turner's approach to analysis of the function of ritual and symbols has elements from Freud, Radcliffe-Brown and Gluckman. According to Mary Douglas (1970:303), Turner has taken into account the psychic content of symbols and his ethnography of Ndembu life shows clearly how 'the cultural categories sustain given social structure'.

For Turner (1967:26), "symbol is always a best possible expression of relatively unknown fact, a fact which is nonetheless recognised or postulated as existing". He lists three properties of symbols.

- a) **Condensation:** many things and actions are represented in a single form;
- b) **Unification:** a dominant symbol within a ritual unites together many diverse ideas and phenomena;
- c) **Polarisation of meaning** at one pole of ritual, moral and social orders of the society, values and norms are represented by the dominant symbol, at the other pole, meaning related to the outward from the symbol are represented. Turner (1967:28) holds that the former is the **ideological pole** and the latter is the **sensory pole**. Turner (1967:50) identifies different levels in the meaning of ritual symbol.
  - a) **Exegetical meaning:** This meaning is obtained by questioning the laymen and ritual specialists involved in the ritual situation.
  - b) **Operational meaning:** This meaning is obtained by what they do with the particular symbol and how they use it.
  - c) **Positional meaning:** The meaning that a particular symbol acquires by its relationship with other symbols in a totality.

Turner relates the performance of rituals to social process, and also holds that the span and complexity of rituals may correspond to the size and internal complexity of the society. Rituals are divided into two classes, namely the rituals which check deviations and regulate and rituals which "anticipate division and conflict". The latter class of rituals include life cycle (initiation/circumcision rites) rituals and periodic rituals.

Going by Turner, rituals help the individuals to adapt to changing roles and statuses. Ritual symbols motivate people to act, maintain the social structure in spite of contradictions, adjust to the internal social changes and environment. Within the context of action, symbols are dynamic entities which relate human beings with ends, purposes and means, explicitly formulated or observed from behaviour.

Now that I have broadly elaborated the basic arguments of Victor Turner, let me present an illustration of his field work. Victor Turner did his fieldwork among the Ndembu people of Zambia, who live west of the Lunga river in Africa. The Ndembu people lead a simple life, but their ritual symbolism is elaborate and complex. The Ndembu are matrilineal (succession to property and office goes to the daughters from mother). After marriage, wives may have to go to their husband's village, since the husband lives with his **matrikin**. Among the Ndembu, boy's circumcision

ceremony is called Mukanda and girl's puberty rituals are called Nkang'a. Boys are collectively initiated before puberty. Girls are individually initiated with the onset of puberty.

Let us take one particular symbol from Ndembu girl's puberty ritual (Nkang'a), and follow Victor Turner's analysis. During the puberty ritual, a novice is wrapped in a blanket and laid at the foot of the Mudyi sapling. If its bark is scratched the Mudyi tree secretes a white latex and forms milky beads. The milk tree (mudy tree) is the dominant symbol in Nkang'a ritual. There are several meanings attributed to this 'milk tree' Ndembu women attribute the following meanings to the milk tree: (a) milk tree is the senior tree of the ritual; (b) it stands for breast and breast milk; (c) tree of 'mother and child' a place where all mothers of the lineage are initiated. If we closely look at the above responses, it emerges that at one level milk tree stands for matriliney, which is the governing principle of Ndembu social life. At another level, milk tree stands for the tribal custom itself—a total system of Ndembu social relations. Respondents tended to emphasise the cohesive, harmonising impact of milk tree. Like a child's suckling of the mother, the Ndembu drink from the breasts of tribal custom. Milk tree is short hand for Ndembu instruction in tribal matters which follow immediately after initiation.

When a contextual analysis is done, the milk tree seems to represent social differentiation and opposition between various categories of society. In a series of action-situations in the puberty ritual, groups mobilise around the milk tree and worship. These groups represent the differentiations in the society. In Kkang'a ritual, women dance around milk tree initiating the young girl. This group of women oppose themselves to men. Hereby, women come together as a social category. In some cases, the young milk tree will be sacralised by the women. The young tree represents the young girl. The opposition here is between the young girl and the adult women. In another context, the mother of child will not be allowed to join the ring of dancers. Here, the opposition is between mother and her child. Because, a mother is likely to lose her daughter through marriage after the ritual. At the end of the first day of ritual, the mother of the child cooks cassava and beans, brings it in a spoon and asks 'who wants it?' The women dancing around the milk tree rush to eat from the spoon. If women of same village eat from the spoon, the child may reside with the mother. Othereise, she will have to go to a distant village and die there. Here, the conflict between living in mother's village and moving to husband's village finds an expression through symbolic activity.

So far two types of interpretation have been listed. Interpretation of milk tree provided by the Ndembu and the behaviour which emerges from the action field context seem to contradict each other. Ndembu say that milk tree represents the bond between mother and child, but in the action-field context, milk tree separates mother from child. Ndembu tell that milk tree stands for unity of Ndembu society, but in action-field context, the milk tree separates women from men, one group of women from other group of women. The two interpretations whom that dominant symbol of a ritual is related to the social process in the society. On the one hand milk tree enables the child to cross over to adulthood, and on the other it helps the society to resolve social contradictions at various levels.

### Activity 2

Follow Victor Turner's idea of contextual analysis of symbols and explain in a note of 500 words, a symbol of your choice in the context of your society.

## 5.7 SYMBOLS AND MEANING : CLIFFORD GEERTZ

interested in the cognitive dimension of culture. He emphasises its affective/emotional dimension. Geertz refutes the view that meanings are in the minds of people. According to him, symbols and meanings are shared by the actors between them. Meanings are public and are shared. Cultural patterns are things of this world, like rocks and streams. They are not ideas and hence metaphysical. For Geertz, meaning is embodied in public symbol and it is through the symbols that human beings communicate with each other their world view, ethos and value-orientations.

#### Box 5.04

Born in 1926 in U.S.A., Clifford Geertz was educated at Antioch College and received his Ph.D. degree from Harvard University. This American professor of anthropology represents the hermeneutical or interpretative approach to the study of religion. He draws on the writing of Dilthey and Weber. Geertz argues that religion should be studied as an aspect of interpretative sociology. His study abandoning the insights of his predecessors (Durkheim, Weber, Freud and Malinowski) he widens their perspectives on religion and interprets religion as a cultural system that provides meaning to human existence. According to Geertz (1957:95), symbolic structures 'both express the world's climate and shape it'. For a number of criticisms of Geertz's approach to religion see Asad's (1983:237-59) review article.

Geertz studies culture from the actor's point of view. He rejects the structuralist position, which ignores the role of individual and favours the universal mental structures. For Geertz, culture is a product of social beings, who try to make sense of this world through their actions. If we want to make sense of culture, we have to situate ourselves in a position from where it was constituted. Geertz holds the view that culture is essentially particularistic and hence there cannot be a universal epistemology. In Geertz, we find an emphasis on the creative aspects of culture. Through culture, a cluster of symbols, we learn and interpret the world in which we live. Culture is not merely an inherited or unconscious learning pattern. It is created constantly in our everyday social interaction.

According to Geertz (1973:90), "Religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothe these conceptions with such an aura of factuality, that the moods and motivations, seem uniquely realistic". Let us take any religious symbol—feathered serpent, cross or crescent. These symbols are drawn from a myth or ritual. These symbols remind us about a world as it portrays the kind of emotional life it supports. The Cross, you know, is a Christian symbol. It reminds a Christian that Jesus Christ died on the cross. Cross means the sorrow of this life. Cross indicates that a Christian can reach happiness, glory through suffering. A believer is expected to behave in a particular way in the presence of a cross.

A religious symbol helps us to identify fact with value. 'what actually is' and 'what ought to be' are related through symbols. It is through symbols that we create an order, experience it and maintain it. 'what is' and 'what ought to be; reinforce each other in the ongoing process of making sense of this world. 'what is' is converted into a set of priorities for action, in an interaction with 'what ought to be'. In his studies of Javanese culture Geertz found that people were manoeuvring with their religious beliefs, in a bid to interpret the new economic and political situation in the post-revolutionary Java.

In Java of the 1950s, Geertz could see that endurance of tradition as well as the creative manipulation of tradition in the wake of changes. On the one hand, the Javanese peasants remained glued to inherited form of social and economic

organisation. On the other hand, Sukarno could manipulate the many symbols out of the elements of Javanese culture in a bid to forge a new notion of nationalism.

#### Check Your Progress 4

i) Which aspect of symbols is emphasised by Geertz when he argues that symbols are vehicles of meaning? Use one line for your answer.

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ii) What is the place of particularistic nature of culture in Geertz's study of symbols? Use three line for your answer.

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iii) To what use, according to Geertz, did the Javanese put their religious beliefs? Use one line for your answer.

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## 5.8 LET US SUM UP

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We begin this unit by discussing the nature and meaning of symbols. We stressed on the communicative role of symbols. Then we discussed structuralist mode of understanding religion via communicative role of symbols.

After our discussion on how Levi-Strauss and Leach used the structuralist method to decipher the various symbolic forms of culture, we examined, how Mary Douglas developed a parallel approach to the study of symbols. She argues that body is a symbolic medium through which social experience finds expression.

In order to provide examples of actual studies of symbols, we discussed Victor Turner's study of symbols among the Ndembu of Africa. According to him, meanings are situated in contexts. He opines that symbols are related to social processes, in the sense that they take the individual from one status to another, and also resolve social contradictions. Our other example is from Geertz's approach to symbols who studied Javanese culture. Geertz argues that meanings of symbols are not in the actors' heads, but meanings are shared between human beings in a social context. Meaning are essentially public.

Thus, in this unit, we discussed the various ways in which scholars understand religion through symbols. Now you have to read further and develop skills in the approach of your liking, and apply it to a religion of your choice and its symbols. Our video programme on Religious symbols offers you an exposition of the three styles of studying religious symbols. These styles were evolved by sociologists over the last hundred years. Through visuals, we have tried to give you an experiential understanding of religious symbols. Hopefully, the visual communication will express more than the print-material can do and it will give you deeper appreciation of the world of symbolic representation.

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## 5.9 KEY WORDS

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**Binary opposite:** a union of two contrasting ideas in mind.

**Cosmology:** system of ideas about universal order.

**Cybernetics:** the science of communication and control theory. It is concerned specially with the comparative study of automatic control systems.

**Grid:** a person to person ego-centered relationship.

**Group:** a bounded social unit.

**Linguistics:** the study of human speech including the units, nature, structure and modification of language.

**Pollution:** a magical notion that uncleanness results due to violation of taboos.

**Taboo:** that which is prohibited.

**Teleology:** a doctrine which explains phenomena by final causes.

**Totem:** symbol of a clan.

**Witch:** one who uses magic for evil purposes.

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## 5.10 FURTHER READING

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Turner, V. 1975. Symbolic Studies. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 4 : 145-62.

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## 5.11 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- i) The main characteristic of a symbol is that it expresses something significant.
- ii) symbols usually express such abstract notions as power, authority, solidarity of group etc.
- iii) Both sign and symbol stand for something other than what they appear.

### Check Your Progress 2

- i) The evolutionists implied a division between symbolic and concrete structures.
- ii) The functionalists tried to find out what rituals do for society. Rituals are basically practical aspects of religion and refer to regular patterns in interaction. These set patterns of interaction are expressed through symbols.

### Check Your Progress 3

- i) Mary Douglas describes body as a medium through which social structure finds expression. She argues that origins of symbolisation are related to processes of human body.
- ii) According to Douglas describes body as a medium through which social structure finds expression. She argues that origins of symbolisation are related to processes of human body.
- iii) a = 4, b = 1, c = 5, d = 2, e = 3

**Check Your Progress 4**

- i) Here, Geertz is emphasising the emotional or affective dimension of culture.
- ii) According to Geertz, the particularistic nature of culture places stress on its creative aspects. As culture is constantly created in our daily social interaction, only through learning particular cluster of symbols, we can understand the world we live in.
- iii) The Javanese were manipulating their religious beliefs to interpret the new politico-economic situation in post-revolutionary Java.



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