

# Unknowns of Cultural Symbols: Research on Cultural Symbols and Social Belongings

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## Abstract

Cultural symbols make it easier for people to express themselves non-verbally and to feel that they belong to a society. In addition, cultural symbols can mean different things from person to person, even if they are lived in the same society. On the other hand, these symbols may vary in meaning as a result of the context in which people use the symbols, and to transfer a culture from generation to generation. Cultural symbols constitute the smallest level and oldest core of culture, which serves to internalize unity, belonging and reconciliation (Nazlı, 2018). It is known that Anatolian stories/narratives, which have been told from ancient times to the present, contain information bearing the truth about the past by describing supernatural events, beings, and changes. So much so that it is considered as one of the factors that affect the formation of culture and form the identity of the nation (Bulduk, 2016). Although we do not know where they actually come from and what meanings they have, the symbols that exist in our culture play a big role in making us feel like we belong to our own culture.

**Keywords:** *Culture, symbols, belonging*

## 1 Introduction

In this study, I examine the importance of symbols in the culture carried from the past to the present, how and in what way symbols shape our daily life, and the differences in perception in making sense of symbols even if they are experienced in the same culture due to the way of living and growing up.

Turks, as one of the oldest and most rooted nations of the world, have encountered quite different cultures, civilizations, societies, and major religions of the world in a very wide geography. As a result, they have a very colorful and extremely rich cultural heritage. (Nazlı, A. T. (2018)).

Symbols have assumed to have more functional and impressive role in human life than words in terms of both the richness of meaning they contain and the fact that they have elements transferred from the perceptions of human history. (Nazlı, A. T. (2018)).

## 2 The Importance of Symbols in Turkish Culture

Culture is defined as anything produced in all in human life. The symbols are like the genetic codes of societies. These codes are transferred to the next generation by the community. Over time are shaped, as necessary. These symbols play a big role in the process of individual's socialization. These symbols earn a nation being the spirit to individual by giving a sense of belonging. (Koca, Mayıs-2012)

Symbols, send a common culture and to be like the circle of those close to the same with the meanings they have acquired. So, today's advanced societies to expand the cultural circle, others closer to themselves, to like and eventually same uses cultural symbols. It is important that examination of the Turkish culture and symbols are transferred the future generations on behalf of the Turkish culture. (Koca, Mayıs-2012)

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## 3 Literature Review

White, dealt with culture as the sum of symbols and defined culture as "an organization of material items, behaviors, thoughts and feelings, based on symbols." (as cited in Güvenç, 2003:100).

John Berger also associated the value he attributed to the sense of sight with seeing before speaking. "The image, according to Berger, is the phenomenon that is recreated or reproduced. The image is the appearance or

order of appearances that is separated and hidden from the place where it first appeared and time. There is a way of seeing in every image” (Berger, 2010: 7-10).

According to Gibson (2013: 7), as psychoanalysts Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung have stated, the human mind is equipped to think and communicate with symbols, and the language of symbols and especially archetypes transcend time and space. The symbolism that culture has developed over time is an example of visual storytelling.

## 4 Theoretical Background

### 4.1 *The Theory of Semiotics (Charles Sanders Peirce)*

Icon: The pictorial sign (icon) is “a sign that refers to its object because of the qualities it has” (Peirce, 1984: 291).

Index: Peirce defines the symptom (index) as follows: “A symptom is a sign that loses the qualities that make it a sign when its object disappears” (Peirce, 1984: 304).

Symbol: Peirce introduced two different definitions of symbols in 1903. The first definition is as follows: “A symbol is a sign whose representative quality fully depends on its interpreter” (Peirce, 1984: 274).

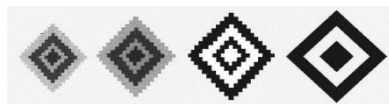
The second definition is as follows: “The symbol, in general (...) It is a sign that refers to the object that expresses the commonality of thoughts.” (Özmağas, 2009)

In this study, I examine all the symbols and materials according to the trilogy of Charles Sanders Peirce's theory for semiotics. The main part that I focus on from this trilogy is “symbol.”

## 5 Analyses of Turkish Rug's symbols

**5.1 *Methods*** Turkish rugs/kilim's symbol were given in order to analyze them in terms of how people express themselves throughout these symbols. Each symbol was examined according to the theoretic background, which was the trilogy icon, index, symbol provided by Charles Sanders Peirce. The aim of this analysis is to state even the symbols that are on the rugs/kilims define specific meanings of the people who lived in that culture. Above from the language level, these symbols affect people in terms of how they interpret life.

### 5.1.1 *The eye/evil eye motifs*



In the rugs, the evil eye motif touches the rugs with the thought that it will protect the place and its owner from the evil eye. In addition, the eye pattern is another pattern used in carpets and rugs to protect them from evil eyes with this point of view. (Erbek, 2021)

### 5.1.2 *The Elibelinde (hand on waist) motif*



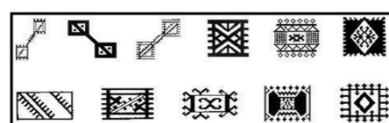
It is the symbol of femininity. It symbolizes not only maternity and fertility, but also luck, fortune, happiness, and joy. Early humans worshiped mother goddesses. The elibelinde motif used in today's weavings, which is a continuation of the cult of the mother goddess, is the proof of the fact that the belief about the mother goddess has survived to the present day as a cultural heritage. (Erbek, 2021)

### 5.1.3 *Bird Motifs*



Bird has many meanings in Anatolian symbolism. The bird is sometimes love, sometimes the soul of the deceased. The bird is identified with the woman. It is sacred. It is longing. News expectation. It represents strength and might. For example, the eagle has been the symbol of many civilizations established in Anatolia. It is considered a sacred animal that represents the sky, foretells the future, and takes souls to the afterlife. (Erbek, 2021).

### 5.1.4 *Earring/ Chest and Hair Tie Motifs*



It is said that young girls used to weave their wishes into carpets and kilims. The earring motif, which expresses that the person who weaves the carpet wants to get married, is an important symbol that enables young girls to convey their wishes to their family elders. The chest also means the dowry chest of young girls. In addition, the hair tie motif clearly expresses the desire to marry. (Erbek, 2021)

## 5.2 According to the analyses examined, my results show that:

The symbols of kilim in Turkish culture have helped people to convey their feelings and thoughts by symbolizing them beyond the language, and the letters used from the past to the present. Cultural symbols still have a serious importance in the daily life of individuals, whether they are aware of it or not, in the context of individuals' feeling of belonging to that society, since they are individuals who have lived in the same culture and have a common cultural heritage.

## 6 Analyses of Animal Symbolism in Turkish

**6.1 Participants** The survey was conducted on two different groups of people: university students and people who have graduated from university (between the ages of 20-45). The departments of the university students varied, but all of the graduate people have received the same level of education (BA). The participants of the survey were either Turkish people, or those who have been familiar with Turkish culture for over at least 10 years. **6.1.1**

**Methods** The experiment for the university students was conducted online. The students were from different universities; however, they were all undergraduate students. For the graduates, it was conducted offline. I gathered the data for the graduates from my colleagues at American Culture Language Course. In each survey, there were 5 questions. Each group consisted of 21 participants, 42 in total. The participants were not informed about the aims of this study.

**6.1.2 Materials** Participants were divided into 2 groups and 2 separate surveys were given. In the first survey, only symbols were shown to the participants, and they were asked to write down the meanings in their perceptions (for the graduates). In the second survey, symbols were shown in line with the online survey, the symbolic meanings in the literature were given and it was asked which symbolic meaning was more correct in their perception (for the university student).

**6.1.3 Aim** The aim of these experiments is to examine the cultural symbols in terms of how they carry culture from generations to generations. I also aimed to provide answers for the following question: how and in what way the symbolic meaning of materials can change in the individuals' perception?

**6.1.4 An Example of the Experimental Items** For the Graduates: They were given a picture of a wolf and they were asked to write down their interpretations. For the Undergraduates: They were given a form on Google Forms, and they were given two options for the following question:

- (1) What does wolf mean to you?

## 6.2 Offline Survey



**6.2.1 Wolf** The symbolic meanings of the wolf differ according to the lifestyles of the people, the society they live in, and the way they raise themselves. For example, according to the data that was obtained from the survey, some people say that the symbolic meaning of the wolf animal in their perceptions are "**power, nobility, rationality, intelligence, leadership**", while others suggest that it contains symbolic meanings such as "**loneliness, darkness, night and wildness**". Therefore, if we look at the meaning of the wolf in the animal symbolism given in the survey, we can say that there is a unity with the meanings transferred to the literature.



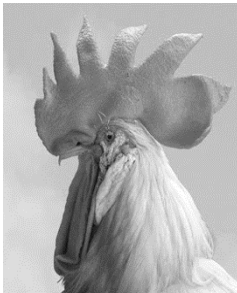
**6.2.2 Snake** According to the meaning used in the literature, the snake is a symbol of abundance, fertility, health, and happiness. However, since the environmental factor, experiences, and the events we have experienced are involved in the dimension of the transfer of the culture to the generations, there are great differences compared to the symbolic meaning that was first used. (Ölmez, 2010). According to the data I obtained in the survey, everyone who participated in the survey gave the meanings of "**insidiousness, hatred, evil, disloyalty**" for the snake symbolism. Here is the conclusion we can draw from the analysis of snake. Cultural symbols are intermediaries in transferring culture from generation to generation, but the way we interpret them changes depending on the context of environmental factor, upbringing, or the events we experience. In addition, if we look at the unity of meanings given about snake symbolism, we will conclude that individuals living in the same culture can think in the same way, and this strengthens the sense of social belonging.



**6.2.3 Eagle** In Turkish culture eagle has very important symbolic meanings. Therefore, it has been used as a symbol of power, height, and nobility in many places from architecture to art. (Koca, Mayıs-2012) In the survey I made, the symbolic meanings given for the Eagle symbolism are as follows: "**masculinity, freedom, power and observation.**" From here, if we look at the meanings of eagle symbolism in Turkish culture and the answers given by the participants due to the survey, we can see some consistency. Thus, it is concluded that the symbolic meaning of the eagle animal, which has been used from the past to the present, remains in Turkish culture as a carrier element of the culture without changing.



**6.2.4 Fox** The symbolic meaning of the fox in Turkish culture has always been cunning. The expressions "like a fox" are always used for people who are good at lying and are successful in deception. However, it is also known that the fox represents rationality and intelligence (Çatalbaş, 2011). In the survey I made, the answers given were quite different. While some people said that the fox symbolically characterizes direct **cunning**, others stated that it symbolizes **rationality, intelligence, nobility, and harmony.**



**6.2.5 Rooster** The meaning of the rooster in Turkish culture is associated with the behavior of the animal's own character. In literature, it symbolizes **a new day, enlightenment, and the sun** with the sound it makes to wake people up in the morning (Demircan, 2015). The answers given in the survey were in support of the literature. The people who participated in the survey said the following about the symbolism of the rooster animal. "**new beginnings, home, belonging, warmth**" and "**selfishness, evil, narcissism, dictatorship.**"

Cultural symbols, such as the results we have drawn from the analysis of snake symbolism, are intermediaries in transferring culture from generation to generation, but the way we interpret them changes depending on the context of environmental factors, upbringing, or events we experience.

## 6.3 Online Survey

### 6.3.1 The Symbolic Meaning of Wolf in Turkish Culture



What meaning does the wolf have in your perception, what do you think it symbolizes?

The answers that were given were, "It represents warfare and the spirit of war, freedom, speed, nature, and is also a symbol of mind and power" by 67,7 % and "It is a wild animal; it symbolizes fear and loneliness." by 32,3% participants.

### 6.3.2 The Symbolic Meaning of Snake in Turkish Culture



What meaning does the snake have in your perception, what do you think it symbolizes?

- a) The snake is a symbol of abundance, fertility, health, and happiness. 6,5 %
- b) The snake is a symbol of insidiousness, betrayal and lying. 93,5%

### 6.3.3 The Symbolic Meaning of Eagle in Turkish Culture



What kind of meaning does the eagle have in your perception, what do you think it symbolizes?

- a) Eagle symbolizes descent, power, inaccessibility, protection and nobility. 87,1%
- b) Eagle is a symbol of goodness, light and height. 12,9%

### 6.3.4 The Symbolic Meaning of Fox in Turkish Culture



What meaning does the fox have in your perception, what do you think it symbolizes?

- a) The fox symbolizes lies, deception, cunning and deceit. 61,3%
- b) The fox symbolizes intelligence and perseverance. 38,7%

### 6.3.5 The Symbolic Meaning of Rooster in Turkish Culture



What meaning does the rooster have in your perception, what do you think it symbolizes?

- a) The rooster symbolizes light, sun, enlightenment. 83,9%
- b) It symbolizes bad luck and evil. 16,1%

## 7 Results

The results I reached according to the second survey on Turkish culture symbols are as follows:

The symbolic meanings of animals in Turkish culture differ due to the way people grow up and the environment they live in. Due to these symbolic meanings that vary from person to person, variability can be seen in the language we use or in the expressions we want to say while communicating. For example, if we take the fox symbolism in the questionnaire, the context in which a person uses the fox may vary according to the underlying symbolic meaning in their perception. In a context where Ahmet says to Mehmet:

- (1) Sen de **tilki** gibi bir çocuksun.  
(You are a child like a **fox**.)

When Ahmet says, «like a fox» he might mean «cunning». However, to Mehmet, the interpretation of «fox» could be different. He might think that he is a very bright/sharp person. So, we can say that cultural symbols are the things that contain all the elements that make up the building block of a society in a trans-language dimension and play an important role in the transfer of culture from generation to generation.

## 8 Conclusion

When we look at the results of the surveys, all the data we have seen showed us if individuals who belong to a culture, we see that the elements, symbols, or the language used through the symbols of that culture are common. On the other hand, according to the data obtained in the context of the various meanings they contain, cultural symbols also greatly affect the language we use in our daily life. Thus, we are the people who form the pieces of a culture we live in like a puzzle. In this respect, regardless of our thoughts, the meanings that lie in our perception prove how effective symbolism is when transferring culture from generation to generation.

## 9 Open Question & Future Research Idea

This study cannot address the breakpoint at which the interpretation of the symbols has changed. For example, the point and the reason the interpretation of snake has changed from fertility, abundance to hatred, evil is unknown. While this remains as an open question, it is also a future research idea for the present study.

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