

## **EDITORIAL**

### **Symbolic Codes as Cultural Identity Frames**

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The contours of cultural identity can take various forms, but mainly through the persistence of symbolic codes, of patterns constantly present in the various manifestations of cultural identity. When expressing key aspects of an identity mark, cultural codes appear in different contexts and on different material supports but can always be recognized as such. To express the essence of cultural identity, a symbolic code must fulfill several prerequisites, such as the possibility of reproducing it easily and in a recognizable way, its simplicity, its ability to express something essential synthetically, its imposition in different historical periods, its impact on the collective consciousness. A symbolic code is expressed on material support, and it is obvious that a certain cultural tradition prefers certain material supports in the establishment of symbolic codes, which says a lot about the particularities of that cultural horizon. A symbolic code synthesizes and condenses in a synthetic way and with maximum simplicity an entire evolution of how reality has been represented, be it the universe, man, or community. Thus, a symbolic code can be described as a kind of "hard disk", a way of condensing complex "information" coming from an enormous accumulation of symbolization and representation. This "hard disk" is a "passive" one, not being

on an electronic medium and inaccessible on a screen, but has a material support as resistant as possible, such as stone, iron, and wood, which can withstand centuries or millennia, capable of providing multiple and complex information depending on the mode or modes in which it is accessed. The exceptional value of a central symbolic code of a cultural tradition is the capability of providing benchmarks for human understanding and behavior in different historical contexts, in diverse circumstances or needs. It is like a guide that always points to a path of theoretical understanding or a way of behavior, a path with its coordinates, different from the pathways outlined in other cultural traditions. A symbolic code, when providing guidelines for understanding or behavior, delivers no less identity contours, personal or communitarian. Of course, there are not many symbolic codes that can 'shape' the identity frameworks of a cultural tradition, rather there are a few. And therein lies their exceptionality, as they can respond constantly to different needs, quests, and challenges.

Symbolic codes play an essential role in the encounter with *cultural otherness*, mediating encounters between people of diverse cultures. The interplay of the cultural encounter is initiated and takes its contours into the mutual opening which means tattering, advancement, connection, empathy, and everything that is being moved by each of those who experience the encounter. It initiates and develops something unique in this scenario of the intercultural encounter, and outlines a meeting environment, that becomes a *place*. Something that is created, which would not have been if that meeting did not happen. What is happening in each of the actors of the meeting is the constitution of a symbolic space: that is not neutral, nor has autonomy, and cannot be sustained by only one of those who initiate it. It is an *in-between*. This symbolic space of meeting with the other is the place that is made and is transformed by the dynamics of

cultural outreach, the exposition of your cultural face in the encounter with the cultural face of the other.

There are instances identifiable as sites, edifices, and artifacts, but gaining a special condition as they contribute to the contours that the dynamics of the cultural encounter. It is the condition of the symbolic edifice, site, artifact, the exceptional and privileged product of a cultural and spiritual horizon as carrying a crystallization of fundamental landmarks. The experience of the alien artifact, place, or edifice, produced within a particular cultural horizon, are privileged instances that mediate and provoke at the same time: to sense the difference. To sense what is a culturally different code, insofar as it expresses something through a code of signs fixed in the object, site, or building, creates the consciousness of difference, of what escapes you, even though it is in front of you. Those instances play a complex role of guidance in meeting with the cultural other.

Through the various ways they appear, monuments, sites, or artifacts provide the medium and guide for the *cultural encounter with the other*. They play a critical role in intercultural encounters as they provide the symbols that shape the space of the encounter and give coordinates and frames. A place of mediation and meeting, where the actors of intercultural experience became open to each other. Such interaction is *active*, a continuous hermeneutical activity meant to always enlarge the horizon of meeting, *the place*. A place that produces signs and markings of an emotional, cognitive, and experiential horizon, offering no less space for game, for creative advance in the unfolding of the meeting with the other. The experience of deciphering the complex traces that the fundamental tradition of culture implies a creative dimension in which the recognition of those traces is carried forward to the intuition of what is not only the spirit of those codifications but also what that spirit produces during the articulations and developments of the

intercultural encounter, concretely in that unique and unrepeatable time of the encounter.

The fact that the other, whose face/surface is revealed to you, leads you to your own, is the kind of universalization through which each one finds him/her better by ways of interacting. It is, at the same time, the experience of the other's cultural face, the evidence of the difference, of his/her identity mark. Just because the cultural other is and remains different from you, within the cultural frame that gives his or her identity, he/she can offer you the extraordinary chance of an experience of the self that no other instance would allow in such a way. It is a genuine and unique discovery by which you can reach your very self as never before. It is an exceptional occasion of authenticity; it is the situation in which you make an authentic self-discovery and the discovery of the other. And this opening constitutes and is constituted by a place, a novel dimension of reality, which offers the possibility of an experience beyond the self of what it delivers yourself to you. Perhaps this is the most important dimension of the cultural difference and of meeting with the other by and with this difference.

Symbolic codes as cultural identity frames represent a main research focus of the Institute for the Study of Values and Spirituality. In November 2023, the Institute organized an international conference on *Symbolic Codes and Identity Frames in Armenian Spirituality*, a very successful meeting with in-depth presentations and debates, a great contribution to better understanding the complexity of the symbolic code's role in the Armenian tradition. This Issue of the Methexis Journal includes conference's contributions.

Mariam Vardanyan, in *Artistic Features of Armenian Liturgical Objects Abstract*, discusses artistic features of the ritual objects of the Armenian Church, interpreting them according to the types of objects, focusing on the ritual objects used during various rituals in the Armenian church, with

their types and artistic features developed over time.

Avedis Hadjian, in *Notes on the Origins and Symbolology of the Conical Dome in Armenian Church Architecture*, sees that soon after Armenia became the first state to adopt Christianity, its architects developed a new sacral architecture to accommodate the liturgical requirements of the new faith, with a liturgy that made larger indoor spaces necessary, unlike the pagan temples, which essentially functioned as repositories of the sculptures of gods, the most characteristically outstanding feature became the *Conical Dome*.

From a different perspective, Umut Asanova and Asel Abdurakhmanova propose an investigation on *What Ultimate Truth is Hidden Beyond the Symbolic Code of Cultures*, invoking the examples of some legends and myths included in famous Chynghyz Aitmatov's novels.

Ikechukwu Monday Osebor, in *Inclusive Symbolic Frames and Codes Shaping Cultural Identity and Cultural Values*, points out that the moral implications associated with symbolic codes about cultural identity frames may include potential misinterpretation, stereotyping, and marginalization. The symbolic moral codes emphasize the importance of recognizing the dynamic nature of cultural identities and the need for inclusive representations in symbolic codes to foster understanding and respect across diverse cultural groups.

The issue includes Paniel Reyes Cárdenas paper on *The Experience of Deification in the Spiritualities of the Night: from Early Eastern Christianity to Saint John of the Cross*, showing the continuous trend of values and experiences proposed by what we can call 'Spiritualities of the night': the knowledge of God is concealed to the mind unless the human person undergoes a process of purification and union with God in love, this culminates in ecstasy as experience of ultimate union. The darkness involved in the senses and

understanding is, nonetheless, valued as an itinerary of growth.