

EDITORIAL

Artifact Role in Shaping Identity and Empowering Spiritual Practice

Artifacts play an essential role in the contours of a cultural tradition, constituting the constant landmarks of a perennial. Within a given cultural horizon, those artifacts that express the ethos of that horizon in an exemplary way are the most important. In most cases, the artifacts embody symbolic codes and forms belonging to the original, coagulating times of that cultural horizon. Not many artifacts are essential to a cultural pattern, even if they are found on various material supports and configurations. In each culture, particular material supports are favored, and this is an important indication of the landmarks in which a cultural tradition has developed. The reasons why certain artifacts are constantly reproduced, even with certain variations, is a research topic of exceptional importance in understanding the ethos of a culture, a people, or a community. Such an artifact sums up and expresses much more in a symbolic concentration that resonates with the particularities of the material support on which it is found. It is practical wisdom built up over generations, expressed through the genius of the person who decides how to print it on one material support or another.

The realization of a culture's essential artifacts is decided in times and places where the genius of a craftsman shapes the essential code and the preferred material support through which the identity mark of a culture is expressed. The very special significance of artifacts of this kind relates not only to the contours of a collective identity but also to a way of relating to reality, which is part of an everyday spiritual practice. In this sense, spiritual practice is not only about relating to the many aspects of the concreteness of life but also about the actual existence and presence of that beyond materiality, being supernatural forces and powers that influence and make their presence felt concrete. The artifact's symbolism exemplifies this

awareness of the co-presence of the natural and the super-natural. Hence, the complexity of the symbolism of the at sums up several modes of expression and refers to multiple ways of understanding and use. The artifact has *power* because it is where the natural meets the supernatural, so its presence or use means channeling and manifesting a *nexus* between realities and worlds. This is why these artifacts have always been regarded as having the potential to mediate and initiate links and connections. Special attention has been paid to the correct and efficient realization of how specific symbolic codes are imprinted in a particular material support. Deviation from the symbolic code is tantamount to the artifact's inefficiency as a nexus. The aesthetic aspect is secondary. What matters is something else. The imposition of symbolic codes counted as effective in the act of unification and intermediation is related to how a particular community has represented reality, heavenly or earthly, and this has also determined the frameworks in which that community has to live. Otherwise, it is impossible to understand the cohesive force of a community or culture over generations and historical epochs.

Studies in this *Issue* illustrate the above exemplary evidence of the distinct and diverse ways a culture has shaped its symbolic and power frameworks in material support. Jānis Ozoliņš, in his paper *Interpreting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art and Artefacts*, sees that artifacts must be understood not simply as objects that can be described in terms of their physical characteristics and the use made of them but also as objects that have cultural, historical and religious significance. We should see Australian artifacts not just starkly as having utilitarian purposes but immersed in an Aboriginal world in which they will have different meanings, if not uses, for different Aboriginal communities. It is also important to stress that every Aboriginal community has prohibitions on outsiders, knowing certain things that are sacred to that community and that only designated community members can know. Unless individuals are members of that community, they will not be privy to their secret matters. This is to preserve the value of certain ceremonies and rituals and specific designs, totems, and objects. On the other hand, in the African context, Ernest Beyaraza (in *Artifacts in Cultural Identity and Spiritual Practice. Disjointedness of Traditional and Modern Artifacts, Symbols and Signs with Living Examples from*

Africa) stresses that man and nature are not merely observable physical phenomena. Humanity combines physical, mental, intellectual, and spiritual nature. This tripartite phenomenon is reflected in cultures. Nature, too, is not inanimate clay from which cultural objects are modeled, a typical mistake of naturalism and scientism. Man and nature are different entities but complement each other. There is a supra-natural reality beyond them. Thus, artifacts are made about personal needs, natural dictates, and spiritual roles. Artifacts also reflect human relations. Human contacts initiate a cross-fertilization of ideas, concepts, perspectives, aspirations, practices, artifacts, and other aspects of life. Such perspective is very well illustrated in Ikechukwu Monday Osebor's paper on "*Ofo*" in *Cultural Identity and Spiritual Practice in Owa Culture*. *Ofo* is a cultural artifact deeply rooted in the traditions of the Owa people, part of the Ika-Igbo nation in Delta State, Nigeria. It represents personal accomplishment, power, and individual success, often associated with the male's personal deity or "Chi." *Ofo* is typically a wooden staff carved from a specific type of tree believed to have spiritual significance, serving both spiritual and social functions. The wood is usually polished and may be adorned with symbols or decorations. It often features intricate carvings, including anthropomorphic figures, animals, or geometric patterns. These carvings are not merely decorative but hold symbolic meanings related to the owner's lineage, status, or spiritual beliefs. Another excellent contribution to *Issue*'s topic is André Bueno's *The Book as a Cultural Artifact in Brazilian Spiritism*, which examines the religious doctrine of Christian spiritualism that emerged in the 19th century in France but achieved significant expansion in Brazil, becoming one of the primary religious expressions in the country. Brazilian Spiritism places great emphasis on study as a form of knowledge and development of the doctrine, making the Spiritist book central to constructing a Spiritist cultural pedagogy. Bueno sees the Spiritist book mainly as an artifact that has diverse functions in the continuous transformation of the Brazilian Spiritist movement.

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