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The Scientific Import of Symbols in Human Knowledge

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Abstract

Symbolism, being the use of symbols to represent ideas, it is generally believed that symbolism is restricted to the Arts, especially logic and literature. However, recent developments have shown that symbolism can be an interesting companion and, in fact, a necessary complement, of science. This work X-Rays the phenomenon of symbolization or symbolism, *vis a vis* exposing its potentiality as an emerging veritable complement of modern science and the scientific methodology. It also portrays the reality of signs and symbols, showing their areas of convergence and their areas of divergence. Analytic and hermeneutic methods were used. In the analysis and interpretation of issues, instances were cited from the Catholic Liturgy of Christendom, the African Traditional Religion, Science, Mathematics and normal social life situations.

The Scientific Import of Symbols in Human Knowledge

Symbols are conventional, hence cultural realities imbued with cultural meaning. A symbol is a reality we can apprehend with the aid of our consciousness. As such, the use of symbols is crucial in the acquisition of knowledge. Symbolization is an emerging area of knowledge which has the great potentiality of continuing in the

exposition of knowledge even where and when science ceases to thrive. Current scholars are aware of this great epistemological base and potentiality of symbols and symbolization; hence, the renewed attention in this area of human endeavour. Aylward Shorter (1991) stressed the importance of symbols when he noted,

... if there were no universal criteria of truth, people would be incapable of expressing their ideas and beliefs in languages and systems of symbols, and it would be impossible to have any scientific knowledge about such languages and symbol system.

Umeogu (2003) gives an interesting African metaphysical twist to the concept of symbolism when he zeroed in on “Afa’ as the nucleus of the Igbo-African Ontological metabolism. According to him:

Afa is the science of all things in the Igbo African world of being, motion and time. It is a system of traditional institution and analysis that in its dimensions of symbols and meanings, language and logic, and communications and controls, gives a coherent and necessary system of the combinations of general and relative ideas in terms of which every idea of experience can be interpreted.

The implication of the contention here is that the use of symbols can aid the exploration of virgin areas of knowledge and as such help science to achieve fresh ‘breakthroughs’. A symbol has the ability to participate in what it represents. This position was anticipated by St. Augustine who, in an attempt to distinguish between sign and symbol, holds that a sign is that which represents what is presents, whereas a symbol not only represents what it presents but also participates in what it presents. The implication is that while sign simply represents something, symbol adds to its representation of a thing, a reference to some immaterial truth about what it represents. It is in this way that it is able to proffer meaning, which surpasses that provided by sign. Herein lies the epistemological sting of symbol. Otite (1970) must have reasoned in a similar way when he wrote: “Symbols could be said to be agents which are impregnated with messages and with invitations to conform and to act. When decoded in their social and cultural context, they are found to have both cognitive and emotional meanings”.

Since symbols express meaning, they can signify something. This is actually why one feels inclined to disagree with Ukaegbu (1991) where he writes that symbol cannot signify: “The true and current notion of symbol is that symbol symbolizes, expresses, represents, reveals and indicates, but it does not and cannot signify as in case of sign”.

The ability to signify is not a point of divergence but that of convergence between symbol and sign. Both signify. They both signify, express, represent, indicate and reveal. In these cases, symbol and sign achieve a meeting point. Hence, some signs

are symbols and some symbols are signs. However, all symbols are not signs, neither are all signs symbols. A sign can be an event or an action that shows that something exists, is happening or may happen in the future. For instance, we say that headache may be a sign of stress. In a related sense, sign can be a piece of paper, wood or metal that has writing on it which gives information, instructions, a warning, and so on. For example a road traffic sign. In the two senses of the word 'sign' presented here, it is different from symbol. In other words, these are signs that are not symbols or so to say, signs that are devoid of symbols.

Besides the above cases, whatever constitutes a sign can also constitute a symbol and vice versa. A person can be a sign and a person can also be a symbol. A person can be said to be a proof, and as such a sign, of his or her mother's potency. A person can as well be a symbol of a greater being. For instance, in the catholic liturgy, especially during the blessing of bread and wine, the priest is a symbol of the Lord, Jesus Christ. Similarly, in the traditional African setting, the theory of demonology, by which demons cause diseases to people, such is strongly believed. In view of this, protective charms are usually prepared. Afro-vaccination sometimes involves marks being made on certain parts of the body, such as the upper and lower limbs, the face and the forehead. Mbamara (2005) notes that one can indulge in Afro-prophylactic measures to such an extent that when the one dies, the one becomes a deity and an object of worship. He also holds that some great men in Nigeria are worshipped just like deities:

The Afro-prophylactic measures, however, have helped so many people to obtain adequate protection against evil machination, illness attributable to witches and hostile environment, and when such a person dies, he becomes a deity and an object of worship. Some great men are worshipped in Nigeria and are seen as deities.

This implies that these great men are symbols of deities

There are other areas of convergence between sign and symbol. A movement can be a sign, it can also be a symbol. The nodding of the head, for instance, is a sign of agreement or understanding. Similarly, a movement in Christian liturgy as well as in African traditional liturgy, can be a symbol of something. A sound can be a sign. A sound can also symbolize something. A sound can be a sign. A sound can also symbolize something in liturgy. A mark can also be a symbol. In fact, in mathematics, science, logic and even in traditional African setting, a mark is both a sign and symbol. For instance, in mathematics, a minus sign is also a minus symbol. In science, the chemical sign for copper is also the chemical symbol for copper. In logic, 'A' is the sign as well as the symbol of the standard form categorical universal affirmative proposition. In traditional African setting, especially among the Igbo people of Nigeria, if a man goes to visit his friend's house and finds nobody around, he simply picks up

the *nzu* (traditional white chalk), usually kept around, and makes a distinct mark on the floor of his friend's outer passage or any such place, As soon as his friend comes back, he recognizes who has the distinct mark. That mark is both a sign and a symbol. It is like a signature. By and large, sign and symbol have their convergence in the ability of both to express, signify, represent, indicate and reveal.

Conclusion

Whatever that is a symbol is also a sign but whatever that is a sign is not necessarily a symbol. In other words, all symbols are signs but all signs are not symbols. This implies that sign has a wider 'circumference' than symbol. However, symbol has a much greater epistemological import than sign. Symbol, in representing the abstract also suggests something. In that case, it penetrates the immaterial or abstract which constitutes the spiritual and the theoretical. Hence, apart from representing, just like sign does, symbol exerts a stronger force in its expression. Herein lies that epistemological sting, that is, that scientific import which makes symbolism a potential aid of science. Symbolism, therefore, constitutes an extension of science. In other words, it continues where science stops. By and large, Symbolism is a new area of study that attempts to complement science.

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