



Archetypes in Stone Sculptures of Nepal

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Citation: Sharma, K. (2023). Archetypes in Stone Sculptures of Nepal. *Journal of Fine Arts Campus*, 5(2). 27-33. <https://doi.org/10.3126/jfac.v5i2.67288>

Abstract

In many stone sculptures of Nepal, some icons, images, and symbols are recurrent. The sculptures have symbols that suggest ideas and concepts beyond the presented images. The icons and symbols lead toward the roots of our culture, tradition, and myths. The archetypes suggest the wider ideals of meditation, wisdom, and enlightenment. The symbols and archetypes in the sculptures include the figures of gods and goddesses, lotus, Shivalinga, Trishul, and so on. These magical symbols suggest spiritual values. They create viewers aware of the unity of the self and the external world. The mythical contents seem to be mystical. In addition to the aesthetic pleasure, the visuals make us aware of our tradition, culture, myth and ancient civilization. The sense of the artworks enhances human values. The tangible compositions suggest intangible spiritual dimensions of the community. The artworks integrate primordial images and icons from cultures, myths, and rituals. The archetypes are revealed in a spontaneous manner. Nepali artists share these primordial images from their collective unconscious, the common heritage of mankind, and the storehouse of archetypes. The research paper derives the thesis statement from the interpretation of stone sculptures, and there are the possibilities of multiple interpretations works. Thus, this study is qualitative.

Keywords: sculpture, archetype, myth, culture, tradition, collective unconscious

Introduction

Stone sculptures are the earliest art forms in Nepal, and the evidence of the works exists. Sculpture is three dimensional artwork having material mass that arouses tactile sensation. As we see a sculpture, we like to touch it and feel it. Our hand moves to touch the texture. Images, icons, symbols, shapes, and figures are carved on the stone (Sharma, 2020). Stone is long-lasting medium, for it does not rot and disintegrate easily. Thus, the images carved on the stone are almost immortal. In Nepali sculptures, some images and symbols have been used again and again in a spontaneous manner. The age-old images and icons reappear in the creative process. They suggest the pattern of practices of our ancestors. These recurring forms and images function as an aesthetic mode of communication. The contents take the viewers back to their culture, myths, and communal memory.

Traditional sculptures are generally based on mythical characters and narratives. The characters, symbols and images are taken from Hindu and Buddhist religious texts like Shivapurana, Visnupurana, Devimahatmya, Prajnaparmita, and epics like the Mahabharata and the Ramayana (Sharma, 2009). The recurrent characters are Shiva, Parvati, Visnu, Laxmi, Saraswati, Mahakali, Durga Chamunda, Ganesh, Kumar, Hanuman, Ram, Laxman, Trivikram, Barhaha, Narsimha, Fish, Tortoise, Buddha, Bodhisattavas, saints, Brisa, rat peacock, cow, tiger, lion, naga, Garuda and so on. Similarly, recurrent images and



symbols are trisula, bell, conch-shell, lotus, swastika, Shivalinga and so on. This article tries to find the archetypes in Nepali stone sculptures and their meanings.

Research Methodology

The area of this research is Nepali stone sculpture, and the area has been analyzed from the Jungian perspective about archetype and collective unconscious. The theory has been used as a tool to interpret and critique the artworks. This research is qualitative because the researcher observes the artworks and finds archetypes and their significance. The interpretations of artworks can be multiple. The subjectivity and response of the researcher and critique can affect the meaning to some extent. Secondary sources like books and journal articles have been used to create the background and clarify the theory and tool.

Arts, archetypes, and myths

Arts are creative and innovative expressions that provide aesthetic pleasure. Artworks are connected to tradition, rituals, and myths. The artists are exposed to the religions and cultures of their communities since their childhood (Sharma, 2023). From the surroundings and the early generation, the images and symbols enter their mind. The recurrent exposure to the cultural images contributes for the long-lasting impression in his unconscious mind of the creators. The same images in the collective unconscious are spontaneously revealed in visual form on the process of creation (Sharma, 2021). Archetypes in arts take viewers to the depth and cultural roots. Archetypes are the primordial symbols and images, and they are stored in the collective unconscious of society. These symbols and archetypes are the common heritage of mankind from where they grow.

Frye (1992) states that archetypes are the recurring images that work as a way of communication in community. Jung (1992) argues that the collective unconscious is the reservoir of symbols and archetypes. Such contents appear again and again in arts, literature and rituals in a spontaneous manner. Archetypes in creative composition provide a form to the human experiences. They provide a sense of the typical experiences of our ancestors. Likewise, Campbell (1971) says that archetypal images inspire rituals, culture myth and creative visions throughout human history and civilization. The artworks reveal cultural roots through archetypes. They aim to communicate social norms to the members of the community. The archetypal symbols and images from antiquity are continuously passed down from one generation to other generation through rituals, mythical narratives, cultures arts (Sharma, 2009). The primordial symbols stay in the memory of the community. Myths integrate the ancestral wisdom, knowledge and valuable human experience in the form of analogy and allegory. An artist possesses his/her ancestral history. He is shaped by the collective experiences. The primordial images and symbols connect art to culture and community. Artists unconsciously use symbols and archetypes, suggesting a broader cultural context (Sharma, 2023). Furthermore, archetypes in visual and verbal arts are the integral parts of human civilization. (Sharma, 2021).

Archetypes and cultural symbols suggest deeper significances indirectly (Sharma, 2022). The mysticism and silence are indicated in verbal and visual art. The ambivalent signs bring various cultural associations. The finite symbolic form brings infinite possibilities to creations. The significance may imply ideal or intangible realities (Berefelt, 1969). Images, figures, and characters in artworks can emerge as archetypes in art. They make a work of art concise and evoke the intuitions of the viewers, bringing forth the cultural memory. They suggest the underlined mystery and origin of ancient culture (Langer, 1979). The intangible reality can be perceived through the archetypes. In the context of Nepali art,



symbols like lotus flower, Vajra, Shivalinga, Kundalini, elephant, and wheel are archetypes. Artists frequently use these symbols in a spontaneous manner.

Some images and symbols in Nepali art take the viewers to Hindu and Buddhist mythical roots (Sharma, 2021). The narratives come to the individual artists from the collective memory of the community, the common heritage of mankind. The artworks suggest a pattern of cultural experiences of the ancestors. Archetypes inspire magical rituals and inner visions based on the history of human culture. Primordial symbols communicate subtle codes of culture in the community. They are continuously inherited from one generation to another generation through myths, arts, architecture and cultures. The collective memory of the community is the source of creation. The ancestral experiences of human beings contribute to connect the past to the present (Sharma, 2021).

An individual artist is unconsciously guided by the collective experiences. The analysis of creative compositions presents a close link in the experiences of diverse individuals. The fear of the unknown and the protection from danger are the common elements of many cultures. Mythical characters and narratives guide the community toward a meaningful existence. Creative artists unconsciously use mythical images, symbols, and archetypes in their artworks that suggest wider spiritual and cultural dimensions.

Discussion of stone sculptures

Many stone sculptures of Nepal have archetypal images, symbols, and characters. They suggest spiritual aspects. We find the underlined logic in the compositions. The recurrent icons and images are the figures of gods, goddesses, lotus, Shivalinga, Vajra, wheel, conch-shell, and meditating characters. The works lead toward the awareness of the cultural roots and the self. Mythical contents make the sculptures mystical.

Shivalinga is an archetypal symbol. In the artwork, the disk (yoni) has been penetrated by the Linga (phallus). In unity, the sadhaka or viewer is supposed to realize the non-duality. In the meditative state, he finds the universe within himself and himself in every parts of the world. Shivalinga is the symbol of absolute bliss (paramananda). It has been extended beyond land and sky into the infinite space, encompassing every particle of the universe beyond the beginning and the end (Sharma, 2022). The artwork depicts the concept of cosmic harmony. The union of Shiva and Shakti includes the whole universe. Shiva is the symbol of Purusa, and Shakti is the symbol of Prakriti. The union of these two aspects creates cosmic harmony (Brown, 1990). When Purusa (a yoga practitioner) unites oneself with Prakriti through concentration and meditation, he is believed to achieve the status of Shiva (Hurtado, 1990). The difficulties of the self are swept away. He finds himself within Shiva (Sharma, 2020). All the parts of the world become the parts of the Shivalinga. The erotic images develop into broader spiritual concepts (Aran, 1978). The Linga is roughly cylindrical in shape, standing upright and rounded at the top. It stands on a flat rimmed disc like yoni, the female symbol (Sharma, 2022). There is an indentation on one side of the disk. The purpose of this is to drain off the water poured over the Shivainga.

Uma and Mahesvara sculpture present the union in the form of Uma and Mahesvara, Shakti and Shiva, Prakriti and Purasa. There is no duality between the individual soul and the cosmic soul. The entire universe is the manifestation of the cosmic being or the Brahman. The divine spirit is creating oneness in all the things. According to Khadka (1995), it is the self that is supreme. The individual self and the universal self have been assimilated. Realizing the universality of the self is one of the major spiritual concept of Hinduism. There is no duality of subject/object (Sharma, 2009). An individual self identifies with Brahma. There is one life, one world, one existence (Vivekananda,

1915). A person becomes an all-embracing consciousness at once Being and Bliss (Khadka, 1995). Stone sculptures have magical and mystical features due to the existence of archetypal images, icons, and symbols. The symbolic sculptures suggest something else beyond the presented images (Sharma, 2021).

In the sculptures, divine figures like gods and goddesses stand or sit on the lotus flower. Lotus is also the archetypal symbol. The lotus symbolizes enlightenment. Thus, the divine figures are believed to be enlightened. Garuda (bird), the vehicle of Lord Vishnu, is also an archetypal image. The mouse is the vehicle of Lord Ganesh. Some deities have multiple hands.

The image of 'Ganesh' (Fig.1) has four hands. It is a magical aspect. This suggests that the divine figure has supernatural power. The body is a hybrid, having the elephant's head and the human body. This contrary combination signifies the existence of both aspects within a divine figure. The garland of the snake signifies that negative and positive aspects are integral parts of an entity. Contrary elements coexist in the same space. The artwork signifies ethical values. Despite the magical appearance on the surface, the artwork underlined logic (Shakya, 2000).

The sculpture Garudashan Vishnu depicts Lord Vishnu on a Garuda (bird). The figures of Garuda, the vehicle of Vishnu, and Vishnu, are archetypal images, for they are recurrent in Hindu civilization. According to the Hindu myths related to Lord Vishnu, it is believed that Lord Vishnu nourishes all the living beings of the universe. The magical elements suggest the god's supernatural power.

The sculpture Uma-Mahesvara (Fig.2) presents the union of Uma and Mahesvara. The image of the goddess is close to the god. The characters are also the manifestations of Shiva and Shakti. Shiva has used snake as a garland. This union is believed to encompass the whole universe. The duality between the self and the other dissolves. The person, who realizes this concept, is believed to achieve the status of Shiva. All the parts of the cosmos



Fig.1 Ganesh, Banepa



Fig.2 Uma-Mahesvara, 12th century, The British Museum



Fig.3 Sunita Rana. Lotus, 2022

are the integral parts of Uma-Mahesvara (Sharma, 2009). All the things are the manifestations of the same entity, Brahman. Uma-Mahesvar sculpture symbolizes the union of the Purusa and Prakriti (Ray, 1994). The archetypal patterns connect to the cultural roots of the artist.

Vajra, the archetypal image in the sculpture, tries to resolve the dualities of the inner self and the external world. Vajra, a yantra (instrument), is held by different Buddhist deities in Buddhist sculptures. It is an instrument of the deity. Vajra is the symbol of the union of Prakriti and Purusa (Sharma, 2009). Vajra, the symbol of purusa or phallus, penetrates the lotus flower, the symbol of Prakriti. The visual suggests that nirvana is possible only through the union of Prakriti and Purusa. The sculpture aestheticizes the tabooed concept, like the union of yoni and linga (phallus). The concept of the union of the Prakriti and Purusa is associated with the union of the individual self with Brahma (Sharma, 2020).

Sunita Rana's stone sculpture "Lotus" (Fig.3) is the archetypal symbol that suggests enlightenment. Lotus grows in muddy clay but has beautiful flower untouched by the clay. The flower remains in the world but it is not stained by the material where it grows. The symbol signifies that we are connected to the material world. However, we should try to gain enlightenment transcending the material reality. The Lotus flower is also the symbol of our consciousness (Ward, 1952). Spiritual people believe that the lotus bud in our body gradually opens on the process of concentration and meditation. In the body of an enlightened person, the bud blossoms into a lotus flower having a thousand petals on the head. This is the state of realization of the oneness of the self and the absolute spirit. This resolves the contradictions of consciousness and matter. The external reality and divinity have been blended in the image of the lotus. The mystical experience adds color to the living experience. The dryness of reality is becomes joyful with the imagination of mystical dimensions. The sculpture Vishnu Vikranta (Fig.4) presents *Vamana avatara* (dwarf), the fifth incarnation of Lord Vishnu. The divine figure on the lotus seat holds a conch shell, wheel, mace, and lotus in his four hand. He destroys the pride of the demon king Bali who boasts of his power of donation. Vishnu take the incarnation of poor Brahmin, and asks Bali for land as much as he can cover in three steps of his feet to sit there and meditate (Sharma, 2009). Bali accepts to provide the space. As shown in the sculpture, Vishnu tricks him stretching his left leg upward to cover the heaven. In two steps, he covers the entire earth and heaven. In the third step, Vishnu puts his foot on the head of Bali pushing him down to the hell. Figures of Vishnu and Bali, and images of lotus, conch shell, and wheel are the archetypal contents.



**Fig.4 Vishnu Vikranta, 17th century
Geo Georges Labit Museum,
Toulouse**

The leaf in the sculpture "Bodhi" (Fig.5) is the archetypal image that connects to the Buddhist and Hindu culture. These are the leaves of *bodhibriksha*. Under this tree, Siddharth Gautam meditated on the mystery of life and the universe, and ultimately achieved nirvana. The sculpture is a symbolic representation of meditation and enlightenment. The sculpture connects the culture of the quest of the self and the invisible world beyond.



**Fig.5 Indira Shrestha. Bodhi, 2022,
Devdaha**

In the sculpture "Kopila" (Fig.6) by Ben Prasad Thapa's, the lotus bud is the archetype. The artist relates a mythical narrative about Buddha's life. The narrative goes like this. Once, an untouchable ordinary man picked up lotus flowers and went to sell it in the bazaar. A buyer

offered a very high price for the lotus flower. The salesman was amazed. He asked why the people were buying lotus in high price. A man responded that he wanted to worship Buddha with the flower. The flower seller said, "I want to offer the flower to the lord instead of selling it." The salesman visited Buddha and offered the flower to Buddha. Buddha happily accepted the flower. By accepting the flower from so called untouchable person, Buddha rejects the caste system among human folks. Buddha delivers the message of humanity and universal brotherhood.

Devendra Panday's Sculpture "Meditation" depicts the contradiction of concentration and temptation in meditation. The scene of tempting sages through seductive nymph is the archetypal pattern.



Fig.6 Ben Prasad Thapa. Kopila, 2022, Devdaha

Although there exist lust and temptation within, Buddha controls and frees himself from them. There is a figure of meditating Buddha on one side of the sculpture. On the other side, there is a figure of nude female figure. Mara, the demon, attempts to tempt Buddha by sending nude dancer in front of a meditating figure. He asks the mother earth to be the witness of the scene. Then, he remains in meditation. The devil does not get success to distract Buddha (Hirakawa, 1990). Buddha's experience can be useful to our own life. When we begin to meditate, the seductive female figures come in our minds. Buddha's divine aura is suggested by the circle of light around him.

Conclusion

Many stone sculptures of Nepal present images, icons, symbols and characters from myths. The signs and traces of Nepali culture, tradition, and rituals are visible in the artworks. The collective unconscious or the memory of the community has influenced their artworks. Cultural and mythical archetypes are recurrent in these creations. The archetypes and symbols provide clues to our cultural roots. We can understand our history, culture, myths, and civilization through the visual arts like the stone sculptures of Nepal. Such artworks not only provide aesthetic pleasure but also suggest the values of our culture and tradition.

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