



## Symbolic Pathways to Sustainability: An Approach to Natural Resource Stewardship

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### Abstract

*This article examines how symbolism, which represented a paradigm shift away from utilitarian and functionalist frameworks, emerged and affected sociology and anthropology in the 1960s and 1970s. Symbolism, pioneered by researchers like Clifford Geertz, Mary Douglas, and Victor Turner, stresses an interpretative approach to understanding culture. According to this paradigm, culture is viewed as a dynamic 'web of significance,' in which language, rituals, and daily activities all function as symbols that are essential for creating meaning in particular social circumstances. The article also explores how, especially when viewed through the prism of indigenous knowledge systems, this symbolic approach broadens our comprehension of the connection between culture, society, and the management of natural resources. Drawing on secondary sources, it examines how traditional ecological knowledge, embedded in symbolic practices, complements and enhances modern conservation efforts. Case studies, such as rituals associated with forests and water in Nepal, highlight how cultural symbols bridge the material and immaterial dimensions of culture. These symbols foster sustainable resource use, demonstrating the critical role they play in shaping human-environment interactions. The findings stress the importance of integrating sociocultural symbols and local worldviews into conservation strategies, as they are essential in promoting ecological sustainability.*

**Keywords:** *Sociocultural symbols, natural resource management, Indigenous knowledge, conservation strategies, sustainable co-existence*

### Introduction

In the 1960s, a significant shift began to unfold within the field of anthropology across the United States and Europe. Anthropologists started to push back against the prevailing utilitarian and functionalist frameworks that had long dominated the study of human behaviour in society. The functionalist approach, which

emphasized how social institutions and behaviours served practical purposes to maintain societal stability, was increasingly seen as limited in its ability to capture the richness of the human experience. Instead of focusing solely on the "why" of behaviour its purpose or utility—these scholars began asking "what" behaviour meant to the individuals and communities enacting it within their specific cultural contexts. This intellectual rebellion gave rise to a new paradigm known as "symbolic anthropology," which gained prominence during the 1960s and 1970s.

Unlike earlier anthropological schools of thought such as cultural materialism, structuralism, or functionalism symbolic anthropology did not adhere to a rigid, unified theoretical framework. Rather, it emerged as a loose coalition of ideas and approaches, championed by a diverse group of scholars who sought to decode the intricate symbolic structures underpinning human cultures. These anthropologists emphasized the interpretation of symbols whether they appeared in rituals, language, or everyday interactions as a means to uncover the deeper foundations of cultural meaning. This focus on symbols and their contextual significance marked a departure from more deterministic models, offering a dynamic and interpretive lens through which to view human societies. Key figures in symbolic anthropology, such as Clifford Geertz (1973), Mary Douglas (1966), and Victor Turner (1967), treated culture as a fluid, ever-evolving entity rather than a static or fixed system. They argued that culture should be examined through the lens of real-world actions and interactions, where symbols serve as vehicles for meaning-making in specific social settings. Whether manifested in the subtleties of gossip, the grandeur of religious rituals, or the routines of daily life, symbols were seen as central to understanding how individuals and groups construct and navigate their worlds. These anthropologists rejected the notion that symbols could be studied in isolation or as abstract entities; instead, they insisted that their meanings emerge only within the lived contexts of human behaviour and social relationships. At its core, symbolic anthropology posits that meaning is not inherent or universal but is actively constructed and negotiated within the social fabric of a given culture.

Culture, in the view of symbolic anthropologists, can be understood as a complex system of conceptions expressed and communicated through symbols. Some theorists broaden this definition further, suggesting that culture encompasses a wide array of dimensions—ideological, technological, behavioural, and sociological woven together into what Geertz (1973) famously described as a "web of significance." Humans, he argued, are both the creators and inhabitants of these webs, spinning them through their actions and interpreting them through their lived experiences. The anthropologist's task, then, becomes one of careful interpretation: to disentangle these webs, trace the threads of meaning, and illuminate how symbols shape the ways

people perceive and interact with their world. Symbols, in this sense, are not merely decorative or incidental; they are the building blocks of human communication and cultural identity, carrying meanings that can shift dramatically across different cultural landscapes.

### **Objective**

This article aims to evaluate the connection between symbols and sustainability by linking cultural and societal elements with natural resource management.

### **Methods and materials**

To examine the relationship between indigenous knowledge systems and current conservation initiatives, this article uses secondary research techniques. It seeks to shed light on how traditional ecological knowledge, which has been passed down through the generations, can enhance and supplement contemporary conservation efforts by examining previous research, reports, and academic publications. The article looks at how indigenous cultures' deep understanding of biodiversity, regional ecosystems, and sustainable resource management enhances or supports current environmental conservation strategies. From this perspective, it emphasizes how traditional methods and scientific methods can work together to protect the planet's natural resources for coming generations.

### **Comprehending the nature and function of symbols**

Symbols are multifaceted and versatile, serving as gestures, objects, or words that form the foundation of human communication. According to Schaefer & Lamm (1999), symbols are the signs whether tangible or abstract that humans use to represent objects, ideas, or emotions, whether real or imagined. Unlike fixed or universal signs, symbols are inherently arbitrary, their meanings derived from cultural conventions rather than any intrinsic connection to what they represent. For instance, a simple gesture like a handshake might symbolize trust or agreement in one culture, while in another, it could carry little significance or even an entirely different connotation. This arbitrariness underscores the adaptability of symbols and their dependence on the cultural contexts in which they are embedded.

Clifford Geertz (1973) offered a more expansive definition, describing a symbol as any object, event, quality, or relationship that acts as a vehicle for conveying a particular concept or meaning. For Geertz, the power of symbols lies in their ability to embody and transmit complex ideas, often in ways that transcend literal interpretation. This emphasis on embodiment highlights the dynamic interplay between symbols and the human actions that give them life. Meaning does not reside

solely within the symbol itself but is activated through its use and interpretation within a specific social setting. This perspective aligns with the broader goals of symbolic anthropology: to move beyond surface-level observations and delve into the deeper layers of significance that symbols convey.

Symbolism, as both a mode of communication and a form of psychological expression, invites anthropologists to pursue what Geertz termed "thick description"—a detailed, contextual analysis that uncovers the multiple layers of meaning embedded within a single symbol or act. A cultural system, in this view, is a constellation of symbols, each representing something beyond itself, yet lacking any inherent or fixed relationship to what it signifies. For example, a flag might symbolize national pride in one context, oppression in another, or even nostalgia in a third, depending on the historical and social circumstances surrounding its use. The fluidity of symbols allows them to serve as powerful tools for communication, ritual expression, cultural interpretation, and even psychological exploration, adapting to the needs and perspectives of the people who employ them.

The interpretation of symbols is far from universal; it varies not only across cultures but also within them, influenced by factors such as class, gender, age, and individual experience. Ethnographers studying symbols must therefore anchor their analyses in the everyday lives of the people they observe, examining how symbols are woven into the fabric of social practices and interactions. This grounded approach distinguishes symbolic anthropology from more abstract or theoretical paradigms, emphasizing the importance of context in unlocking the meanings that symbols hold.

### **Unveiling symbolism in social and cultural practices**

Sociocultural analysis within symbolic anthropology is inherently interpretive, aiming to unravel the processes through which cultures are created, sustained, and transformed. Symbols often function as indirect representations of deeper meanings, a quality that makes them particularly prominent in domains such as religion, rituals, and psychoanalysis. Unlike rigid signs with fixed definitions, symbols are flexible and open to multiple interpretations, allowing them to resonate differently across individuals and communities. This flexibility is what enables symbols to bridge the material and immaterial aspects of culture, connecting tangible objects like a sacred relic or a communal artifact to intangible ideas, such as faith, identity, or collective memory (Shepard & Robert, 2018).

Consider, for instance, the role of symbols in natural resource management, an area where symbolic anthropology reveals the intricate interplay between culture and the environment. In community forestry practices, people's perceptions of forests often extend beyond their utilitarian value as sources of timber or fuel. Forests can

carry profound spiritual, mythological, and social significance, shaping political, economic, and ecological decisions (Larsen, 2017). Upadhyay (2007) highlights how, in many cultures, forests are imbued with symbolic meanings that influence how communities interact with and protect them. The relationship between people and forests—encompassing their uses, values, and collective efforts to conserve them—is often steeped in rituals and beliefs that reflect a deeper connection to the natural world.

### **Symbols in natural resources management**

The study of symbolism in natural resource management offers a micro-level perspective on how cultures and societies construct meaning around their environments. This approach focuses on interpreting symbols that may carry multiple, sometimes contradictory, meanings depending on the context. Mary Douglas (1966) emphasized the role of rituals in creating unity and coherence within a community's experience, arguing that understanding these rituals- and the symbols they employ is essential to grasping the cultural logic that governs social behavior. For example, the Kung Bushmen of southern Africa perform symbolic rain dances to invoke rainfall, a ritual that reinforces their dependence on and reverence for the natural world. Similarly, the Dinka tribe of South Sudan conducts an annual ceremony to cure malaria, blending practical concerns with symbolic acts of purification and renewal.

In the Terai region of Nepal, women participate in a striking ritual where they dance naked at midnight to appease the rain god, symbolizing their collective plea for water in times of drought. In the Kaski district of Nepal, communities perform a symbolic "frog marriage" ritual, pairing two frogs in a ceremonial union to bring rain—a practice rooted in the belief that frogs, as creatures tied to water, can influence the weather. These examples illustrate how symbols and rituals intertwine to address both practical needs and spiritual aspirations, reflecting the adaptability of cultural systems in responding to environmental challenges.

Forests, in particular, hold a special place in the symbolic landscapes of many cultures. Across the globe, forest resources have long been central to religious customs, mythology, and folklore, their significance extending far beyond their material utility. In the Indian subcontinent, including Nepal, the interplay of social, cultural, and religious philosophies shapes how local communities perceive and manage their forests. For instance, religious forests in Nepal designated as sacred spaces demonstrate how cultural beliefs can directly influence resource management practices. Ingles (1994) notes that these forests are often protected by local taboos and rituals, which discourage overexploitation and promote conservation.

Historically, the symbolic value of forests was overlooked in formal assessments of "forest value," which prioritized economic metrics like timber yield or

land productivity. However, recent scholarship has begun to recognize the importance of socio-cultural dimensions in community forestry. In Nepal, forests provide materials such as herbs, wood, and fibers used in religious rituals, reinforcing their sacred status and influencing patterns of resource use. Local institutions, guided by indigenous knowledge and customs, further enhance these efforts. Gurung (1999) explored the *riti-thiti* (customs and social norms) of the Tarami Magar people in western Nepal, demonstrating how these traditional practices remain effective in managing natural resources, even amidst rapid social change.

### **Resource management: the Influence of religion and culture**

Religious beliefs exert a profound influence on forest management, particularly in Nepal and other regions with strong spiritual traditions. These beliefs often give rise to cooperative institutions that regulate resource use and imbue conservation efforts with symbolic meaning (Akkajit et al., 2020). For example, the designation of certain forests as "religious forests" in Nepal reflects a worldview that sees nature as sacred, fostering practices that align with ecological sustainability. Ingles (1994) argues that such forests not only support community forestry initiatives but also serve as powerful symbols of environmental stewardship.

Gyawali (2001) contends that a society's worldview its collective understanding of its place in the cosmos shapes its attitudes and actions toward the environment. In Nepal, this worldview is evident in rituals that honor forests as divine entities, such as the worship of trees or the construction of "chautara" (stone resting platforms) beneath sacred groves. These platforms, often built under large trees like the pipal or banyan, serve both practical and symbolic purposes: they provide shade and rest for travelers while reinforcing the cultural reverence for nature. Such practices suggest that ancestral wisdom, encoded in rituals and symbols, was designed to protect forests from overuse and ensure their survival for future generations.

Empirical evidence supports the effectiveness of these culturally rooted strategies. Upadhyay's (2007) study in western Nepal found that areas with strong conservation practices such as hunting bans, fire prevention, and enrichment planting-experienced significant improvements in natural regeneration and biodiversity. Community forests in these regions saw increases in both plant and animal diversity, thanks in part to the integration of indigenous knowledge and religious values. Sacred water springs, maintained within forested watersheds, further illustrate this synergy: their spiritual significance encourages communities to protect the surrounding vegetation, which in turn sustains the springs' flow. These examples highlight how traditional beliefs and practices can serve as enduring frameworks for natural resource management.

## Conclusion

Symbols are not static; they are shaped by the cultural norms and social contexts in which they arise, and as these norms evolve, so too do the symbols themselves. In the realm of natural resource management, each culture crafts its symbolic repertoire, infusing it with meanings that reflect its unique relationship with the environment. The anthropological endeavour, as articulated by symbolic anthropologists like Geertz (1973), is to unpack these meanings through "thick description," recognizing that behaviours tied to natural resources are layered with significance practical, spiritual, and social.

Symbols play a pivotal role in establishing the social and cultural order that governs how people interact with their surroundings. A community's worldview, informed by its cultural beliefs and historical experiences, profoundly influences its approach to conservation. In places like Nepal, where forest management is deeply intertwined with religious and cultural traditions, understanding these symbolic dimensions is essential for effective resource stewardship. Successful conservation strategies must therefore go beyond technical solutions, incorporating local knowledge, values, and symbols to resonate with the communities they serve. By bridging the material and the metaphysical, symbols offer a window into the human experience of the natural world. They reveal how people construct meaning, assert identity, and negotiate their place within larger ecological systems. Whether through a rain dance, a sacred grove, or a simple resting platform, these symbols remind us that culture and nature are inseparable and that their interplay holds the key to sustainable coexistence.

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