

## Occurrence, function and meaning of symbols in agriculture

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**Abstract:** Symbols can be seen as bridges between our conscious mind and the unconscious. They are interface phenomena, which cannot be fully integrated in one involved part, as our consciousness, alone. Thus, interpreting symbols needs inner experience as well as thorough differentiation of the ambiguous potentials they are expression of. Agricultural systems are full of symbols. Also modern scientifically and industrially drawn systems, but there we are normally not keyed to understand their function and meaning. Examples from past and present and interpretation hypotheses will be given. It is an aim to support appropriate relations to unconscious (natural-spiritual) systems in agriculture.

**Keywords:** Symbols, rural sociology, rural psychology, rural history, unconscious factors, depth psychology

The purpose of this paper is to give a short introduction to symbols as bridges to the unconscious in agriculture; to the participants of the workshop “Farming’s relation to unconscious systems” of the 9<sup>th</sup> European Symposium of International Farming Systems Association (IFSA) in Vienna, 2010.

### 1. Introduction: cultural contexts of symbols in agriculture

The inclusion of factors from the psychic and spiritual realm acting in us and nature, while not being part of our ego-consciousness, has been formative for many agricultural systems of the past and present. In these ‘traditional’ agri-cultures symbols are naturally part of cultivating nature, whereas in the more ‘modern’—both industrial and the agro-ecological way—they appear and act mostly unattended; as here is less awareness for the effects of unconscious factors in agricultural theory and practice.

### 2. Unconscious factors in human life

The term ‘unconscious’ is used here, to name what is not part of our conscious mental world, but appears, when touching or entering it, mentally. For scientists, the unconscious is a difficult counterpart, because by its nature, we can scarcely grasp it. We can only trace it by its effects, take up images, emotions, and ideas gotten, and find with comparative methods some typical structures of them. But relations to the unconscious are important: As self-reflection and psychology show, we humans perceive, think, judge and act not only out of conscious rational processes and the observation of physically ‘objective’ appearances, but also out of unconscious patterns and motivations with their own phenomenology and intentionality.

### 3. Occurrence of symbols in agriculture

In all historical agrarian cultures, we see many observances of factors which are, in traditional language, e.g.: experiences and images of God and Devil, demons and dwarfs, vegetational spirits and Mother Earth. Referring symbols were, e.g.: processions, crosses and palm branches on the field, gifts for those living below ground, or special nightly rituals. They were part of everyday life as well as of the decisive moments of the year. Albeit consideration and appeal of unconscious factors are characteristics of agricultures where culture is moulded by religion, interplays with the unconscious also occur somewhere in rather secular cultural contexts. For example, unnoticed in the shape of encompassing

theories or ideologies, fascinating farm machines, or powerful auxiliary liquids and powders to stimulate plant or animal growth and health.

This shows that there is a human need to have meaningful symbols in one's own life and work. That is, to feel connected with something 'internal', which provides meaningful support and guidance. In present agriculture, this is indicated, e.g.: by first the continuation or re-introduction of traditional symbolic ideas and practices, despite they appear incompatible to the dominating scientific worldview; second, by individual exploratory movements, picking up ideas e.g. from Celtic or American Indian cultures; and third by spontaneous actualisation of symbolic patterns in contemporary minds and farms, being thus really creative events.

In fact, anything may become a symbol to the individual, when it links him to what he/she cannot integrate as such in his/her conscious mental system. And beyond that, symbols always became somewhere a kind of magic tool, with the magical-religious functions "effects by relation" or "effects by power" in the foreground.

#### **4. Basic function of symbols: relating to unconscious systems**

We work here with the concept of symbols that was developed by Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung. He definitely did not understand living symbols as 'signs' or 'codes' for something intelligible. Instead, he worked with the hypothesis that symbols were tentative bridges between a given human consciousness and the realm of the "unconscious" (Jung 1968), described in part 2 above.

Some contents of the unconscious can be integrated into consciousness, i.e., made conscious themselves. Contents from the unconscious, which become fully conscious, make their symbolic expression needless. What can be fairly expressed in defined words or explicable metaphors, doesn't need symbolic images or wording. In contrast, other contents of the unconscious resist being integrated to consciousness — they more likely are able to 'possess' *it*. (These are traditionally referred with terms addressing the realm of the Divine, but also the demonic and all kinds of spiritual forces—after 'Enlightenment' addressed more in idealistic, political or psychopathological terms.)

To that layer of the unconscious, also called the collective unconscious, living symbols are very significant interface phenomena of human consciousness. Being a kind of bridge, symbols can tie individual links with the non-graspable, and generally between seemingly irreconcilable opposites. This is why symbolic pictures and expressions are so important in arts and religions. And in agricultural practice and science, too, the effects of living symbols on consciousness can complement the necessary attempts at scientific-analytical understanding and the tacit knowledge. The function of bringing opposites together was constitutive for the original term definition of 'symbol', which comes from Greek *symbollein*, meaning literally 'projecting together'.

Of course, there are also specific functional interpretations of symbols, e.g. concerning the social function of them or the personal benefits from accepting some commonsense symbols, but these purposes are less important in the context of this paper here.

#### **5. Meanings of symbols**

Roughly we may say: functions of symbols rather denote their formal sense and the purposes of their *use*, whereas their meanings rather indicate their inner links and where they hint at for the person in whom the symbol is effective. Therefore, talking about a meaning of a symbol means in the first instance talking about *my* subjective apperception: what it activates in me, or which insights I get by it. (That's not the same as the functional theories I may have about the 'working' or purpose of a given symbol.) In order to somewhat objectify meanings of symbols, it is necessary to make comparative structural analyses of their iconographies, contexts and individually and culturally expressed meanings. Having got hypotheses about 'archetypal patterns' of symbolic images and meanings this way, one may

use them together with the specific contexts of given symbols as conceptual framework for the scientific interpretation of symbols in agriculture. We like to see meaning with the elements of our life.

In agriculture, traditional symbols had in their function of 'bringing together', particularly the typical meanings of: bringing together heaven and earth, convey more 'vital forces' to the plants, give the destructive factors a bearable place, adapt to the 'quality of times' in the course of the year, and counteract the exploitation of nature by behavioural rules.

## 6. What may be the significance of farmer's relations to unconscious factors?

Talking about symbols in agriculture may give the impression of leading far away from agricultural practice—while the unconscious is quite powerful in co-shaping what is done in the cowsheds, on grasslands and fields. Empirical psychology proves the unconscious being present and effective in our activities, also, when one is not so aware of that process. On the other hand side, much of the inner world sometimes seems to have been split off from conscious daily life—what may, in times of crisis, be regretted as a kind of alienation or lack of orientation. Thus, the unconscious is significant for agricultural practice, as well as our relation to it can be significant for our values und quality of life.

The question of significance is often linked with that of effect. Definitely, there is no causal determinism from certain contacts with or appeals to the unconscious to the state of certain observables on the field. That people's attitudes and preferences are changed in a dialogue with the unconscious, is a matter of evidence; also, that from dream symbols or similar perceptions may come valuable insights also for very practical things. But if it gets you somewhere or anywhere, strongly depends upon how you match with the perils of symbol interpretation, and of your ethical consideration of the interpretations. Ultimately, these questions of significance and effect go beyond the nursing of single symbols, they need the care for our full humanity and our embedding in what cares about us.

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