

# Enigmatic Totems: Exploring the Intersection of Art and Belief

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## Abstract

This innovative study ventures into the less-trodden domain of mysticism studies, unveiling the complex interplay between totemic mysticism and distinctive spiritual phenomena. Moving away from the conventional confines of Abrahamic religious interpretations, it boldly questions established views that have either marginalized or misinterpreted these spiritual experiences. Through a comprehensive approach that blends insights from religious studies, anthropology, and psychoanalysis, the research embarks on a thorough examination of scholarly literature, indigenous narratives, and historical documentation. The conclusions drawn challenge the outdated notion of totemic mysticism as merely a 'primitive' belief system, showcasing it instead as a vital framework for understanding cognitive and emotional experiences. The study reveals the profound connection between totemic symbols and extraordinary spiritual occurrences, highlighting their capacity for spiritual transformation. By shedding new light on the significance of totemic symbols in cognitive and emotional realms, this research prompts a reconsideration of the role of unique spiritual experiences in mysticism. Its groundbreaking insights contribute significantly to the discourse, echoing the principles of postcolonial, postorientalist, and posthumanist thought.

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## 1. Introduction

Totems, traditionally entrenched in worship and taboo, are often perceived as either relics of feudal superstition or symbols of psychological aberration, a perspective critically examined by Claude Lévi-Strauss in "Totemism." My academic interest in contemporary art and theory is drawn to the enigmatic and mystical imagery of totems. Understanding the widespread practice of totem worship presents a significant intellectual challenge. Central questions include the intrinsic meaning of "totem" and its personal impact. Do these symbols represent a range from the divine to the mundane? The choice of methodology is crucial, encompassing everything from textual analysis to empirical research, and may include archaeological, anthropological, or mythological perspectives. A thorough investigation of specific totemic representations, such as the goddess Ilinna or creation deities in Indian mythology, could provide valuable insights. This exploration might focus on a specific region or adopt a wider, global perspective. Despite some critical views, the international academic recognition of my PhD research, as endorsed by select journal editors and reviewers, strengthens my determination to decode the mystery of global totem art.

The discourse on the ancestral lineage and evolution of totemism fosters a rich array of scholarly theories, influenced by diverse spiritual insights and principles. This study aims to adopt an Eastern perspective, diverging from the static analysis typical of Western metaphysics, to explore the dynamic mysticism represented by religious totems and their role in contemporary speculative thought.

The journey extends beyond traditional educational boundaries, redefining concepts linked to symbolism in religiously embodied entities or artifacts, often referred to as "religious artistry." This collaborative effort seeks to enhance understanding and appreciation of global faith-based representations, enriched by the influence of modern psychology and contemporary aesthetic values.

Despite existing scientific approaches that focus on pragmatic, rational inquiry, often overlooking the philosophical and divine aspects, this exploration delves into the visual representations of divinity found in skillfully crafted and symbolically vibrant 'totem forms.' These artistic expressions, found across human cultures and spanning various epochs, resonate deeply, stimulating sensory and soulful exploration, and addressing existential questions that connect primitive and post-modern human sensibilities.

The research presented in this paper aims to delve into the philosophical and mystical aspects of totem art, transcending mere archaeological analysis. The study will utilize early textual and archaeological evidence to explore the mystical interplay between humans and the divine within totemic art. This area, with its noticeable research gaps, offers a promising avenue for contributing to a broader scholarly discourse.

The academic world is currently reexamining traditional interpretations of mysticism, typically set within Abrahamic frameworks of ascension and transcendence. This shift, noted by Bhogal (2012), has opened up a relatively unexplored area: totemic mysticism and its connection to unique experiences. This field, blending indigenous beliefs from various global regions, challenges typical Western-centric views on mysticism. Tomaselli et al. (2023) advocate for a more inclusive, interhemispherical approach in cultural studies, emphasizing the integration of diverse cultural narratives,

particularly from regions like China, Africa, Asia, and Australasia. This viewpoint facilitates a deeper understanding of mystical phenomena within a wider cultural spectrum, transcending traditional Eurocentric interpretations<sup>1</sup>.

This manuscript endeavors to uncover the complex symbiosis between totemic mysticism and individual experiences, aiming not only to shed light on this less-explored aspect but also to expand the interpretative framework for understanding mystical experiences across cultures. In doing so, it contributes to and extends the ongoing postcolonial and interdisciplinary dialogues that challenge conventional perspectives on mystical states (Bhagal 2012). Within this scholarly environment, our discourse seeks to reveal the complex coexistence between totemic enchantments and unique human experiences. We aim to illuminate these enigmatic facets, striving for a comprehensive analytical perspective to interpret these mystical encounters across various cultures.

Our endeavor is not just an academic exercise; it's a living exploration, rich in shared emotions, demonstrating that science gains depth by embracing unconventional wisdoms.

We integrate empirical research with ancient religious narratives, creating a symbiotic harmony with layered complexity. This approach challenges traditional views of religious structures, resonating beyond academia (Bhagal, 2012). It invites contemplation, engages with counterfactual realities, and sparks anthropological curiosity, prompting a reevaluation of fundamental beliefs.



### 1.1. Methodology

Understanding the subtleties between totemic tendencies and their theoretical implications is essential for meaningful discussions on these topics. Religious psychologist William James differentiates phenomena into "judgments of existence" and "spiritual judgments"—the former concerning the nature and history of things, and the latter their profound significance. This distinction is crucial for accurately interpreting the disposition of totems and their theoretical relevance. This paper introduces a novel research approach, honoring the methodical study of totems. While many scholars utilize empirical methods, focusing on aspects like totem culture or their evolution, these studies often lack guidance for our spiritual lives or insights. Shifting to "spiritual judgments," we explore characteristics that endow revelations with value, discerning between mere existence and spiritual significance. Our goal is to embrace a spiritual viewpoint, uncovering deeper meanings and fostering a global spiritual revival in the field of religious totems. Current research, often confined within "scientific empirical thinking," tends to overlook the "divine aspects" of totems, leading to a partial understanding,

particularly in discussions of their historical evolution and human connection.

Claude Lévi-Strauss's interpretation of the totem system as reflecting artists' spiritual symptoms and mystical experiences suggests a reduction of human society to a naturalistic level, likening humans to animals and replacing human ancestors with natural forces. His recommendation to segregate these customs to preserve "normal cultural patterns" aims to realign with societal norms.

My stance differs from Lévi-Strauss's classification of artists with mental disorders resulting from hysteria, and I seek to clarify this position. Artists with totemic beliefs often exhibit unique, solitary symptoms, where religious symbols are not mere expressions but revelations of faith, leading to abnormal psychological or neurological states. Such states add a mystical dimension to art, as evidenced by Edvard Munch's impactful works, transcending rational understanding. Lévi-Strauss's critique of "primitive" thinking and his methodological biases need examination, particularly his association of totem beliefs with "hysterical" symptoms. This oversimplification can overlook the complexity of totemic religions and art forms. The "trance-like mystical state" in art, as shown in Munch's work, represents a deeply insightful psychological condition, not necessarily "irrational" or "abnormal," but found across cultures and religions. My perspective critically evaluates Lévi-Strauss's interpretation of totemism, which may oversimplify or impose bias on complex cultural phenomena, thus deepening our comprehension of totemic religions and their art forms. It's crucial to acknowledge the profound mysticism inherent in totemic beliefs. For instance, categorizing totemism merely as hysteria could trivialize these complex belief systems. Viewing ancestral totem worship solely through rationality or their links to natural objects may obscure their role as vessels of revelation.

Scientific methodologies, typically progressing from classification to origin revelation, may inadequately address the spiritual essence of religious rituals in ancient belief systems like Totemism. An overly rational approach might diminish their spiritual value, branding them as "primitive" or "barbaric." A rigid scholarly categorization that ignores alternative perspectives risks missing the meaningful elements within these practices.

Human history is rich with experiences of connection through personal symbolic objects, central in mysticism and philosophy across cultures. Research into individuals deeply engaged in meditation and ritualistic practices related to Totemism reveals the spirituality and potentialities inherent in these traditions. The logical dissection of these practices, often favored in current scholarship, tends to overlook the sacredly rooted intuition that is an underexplored aspect of these contemplative traditions, offering much to enrich academia.

This paper endeavors to synthesize concepts from religious studies, mystical philosophies, and philosophical theories, presenting content that spans millennia and echoes the thoughts of thinkers across ages. It aims to transcend temporal constraints, weaving a harmonious ecological web of symbolic constructs with spiritual significance. By interlinking cosmic forces and the evolving realm of human consciousness, it reflects transformational patterns across epochs, unraveling layers of meaning and their profound influence on our quest to discover nature's secrets. This eclectic amalgamation of doctrines forms a rich tapestry, showcasing the multidimensionality of individual significances. Ultimately, the paper's intention is to enhance the reader's understanding of totemic beliefs from a multidisciplinary viewpoint and stimulate

thought about the intricate nature of human existence.

## 1.2. Summarize

In the realm of academic research, totemic mysticism, intertwined with unique personal experiences, emerges as a fascinating topic. This review aims to shed light on the intricate academic discourse surrounding these phenomena. It navigates the milestones achieved in understanding totemic symbols and their implications, as well as the unexplored areas ripe for further inquiry.

The literature reveals a domain rich in conceptual dualities and intellectual challenges. Scholars like Winkelman and Balonon-Rosen offer diverse views on the epistemological significance of totemic symbols, delving into their cultural roots and transformative power in redefining our grasp of mysticism (Winkelman 2004, 212; Balonon-Rosen 2013)<sup>2</sup>. These academics emphasize the cultural specifics inherent in totemic mysticism, sparking debates on whether totemic mystical experiences are universally resonant or shaped by local cultural narratives, a theme also explored in Freud's "Totem and Taboo" (Freud 2001). As one delves deeper into the realm of scholarly inquiry, it becomes evident that totemic practices extend beyond mere customs and traditions. These rituals and narratives serve as profound expressions of mystical encounters, forging connections between individuals and the cosmic fabric while simultaneously fostering social cohesion (Pomedli, 2014)<sup>3</sup>. However, caution must be exercised in order to avoid misinterpretation and ensure a respectful engagement with these longstanding traditions—a sentiment echoed by scholars such as Sanchez (2001), Deloria (1998), and Said (1979)<sup>4</sup>.

Contemporary discourses have brought forth an increased awareness of the significance of totems within modern spirituality. Many proponents emphasize how these symbols promote inclusivity and diversity in spiritual praxis. Nevertheless, it is crucial to distinguish indigenous religiosity from canonical Western mysticism—a point underscored by Smith's cautionary words on epistemological distortions arising from oversimplification (1986)<sup>5</sup>. As highlighted by Harrison-Buck (2021) and Klein (2002), engaging with indigenous mystical traditions demands heightened sensitivity amongst scholars so as not to succumb to superficial interpretations<sup>6</sup>.

## 1.3. Question

In the evolving landscape of academic discourse, there is a growing emphasis on exploring the complex relationship between totemic iconography, esoteric wisdom, and visceral experiences. This burgeoning field of study offers valuable insights into the historical and cultural intricacies, as well as the experiential subtleties, that shape spiritual understanding. This paper seeks to deepen our collective knowledge of the enigmatic aspects of totemic spirituality, advocating for a broadened interpretative approach to examining mystical phenomena within various religious traditions.

Looking forward, academia is poised to continue unraveling the elusive meanings within sacred symbols, contributing to a rich dialogue across disciplines. This endeavor aims to bridge epistemological gaps and foster inclusive discussions, reflecting the diverse and complex spiritual landscape of humanity.

## 1.4. Objectives

This manuscript methodically unfolds, beginning with an exploration of the connections between totemic experiences and religious mysticism. It examines the historical and cultural contexts of totemism, tracing its evolution across indigenous belief systems and its relationship with Western philosophies and mysticism.

Next, the manuscript rigorously investigates the unique experiences intertwined with totemic mysticism, aiming to reveal their role in shaping mystical practices and enhancing our understanding of mystical phenomena.

The third section reevaluates the concept of the mystical body, considering its significance in totemic mysticism and unique experiences.

Finally, the fourth section critically examines the parallels between animal visions in totemic and religious mystical experiences, analyzing the relationship between totemic phenomena and mystical consciousness, and identifying common ideological principles.

In the final section, the manuscript introduces an experiential framework for transcendence. It suggests that animal visions in totemic and mystical experiences represent transcendental phenomena, fostering elevated consciousness. To illustrate, the author's artwork "Totem Art" is used, exemplifying the link between animal visions, totemism, and mysticism. This artwork aids in understanding the various themes discussed in the paper, encapsulating the connection between these elements and their impact on consciousness.

This manuscript challenges traditional interpretations of mysticism, enriching the discourse by centering totemic mysticism. It aims to illuminate the distinct qualities of indigenous belief systems and question the perceived dominance of Eastern mystical paradigms in interpreting totemic experiences. This critique addresses Western colonial biases and fosters a reevaluation of indigenous beliefs. Ultimately, the study seeks to inspire further research in mysticism, encouraging scholars to reconsider their assumptions and explore diverse perspectives.

## 2. Definition of Totem and the Importance of Understanding the Concept of Totem Experience

At the essence of our exploration is a deep reflection on "totem" and "totemic experience," concepts that transcend academic constructs to touch on existential significance. Totemism, revered within various ethnological contexts, is not just a characteristic but embodies the spirit of communities. It represents a deep connection with certain animals or plants, attributing them with transcendental importance. This reverence for totems is a pervasive element across diverse cultural landscapes, signifying much more than mere symbolism.

What exactly is this spiritual emblem known as "Totem"? We start with basic definitions, like the one from *the Oxford English Dictionary*, which describes a totem as "a natural object or animal seen as spiritually significant in certain societies." Moving beyond this, we explore its etymological roots in Ojibwe language, where it conveys ideas of "kinship",

"patronage", or symbols of clan affiliations (Pomedli 2014). However, these initial interpretations only skim the surface. Totems, rich in semiotic value, are akin to living hieroglyphs that narrate unseen realms, transcending simple linguistic definitions.

Beyond their symbolic significance, totems are perceived as sentient beings entwined in intricate spiritual or mythological connections with their communities. They are often seen as ancestral spirits or cosmic guides, communicating with humans through dreams or rituals.

This manuscript defines a "totem" as a tangible or animate presence embodying a deep spiritual or mythological bond between a group and a particular entity, usually an animal.

### What Constitutes a "Totemic Experience"?

The term "totemic experience" refers to meaningful interactions with one's totem, which may occur through dreams, visions, or rituals. These experiences vary in spontaneity and depth, bridging personal and communal realms. This research adopts a definition of "totemic experience" as a significant engagement with one's totem, encompassing a range of interactions (Bhagal 2012).

Totemic experiences hold significance in understanding mystical experiences as they often lead to profound connections with a transcendent sacred entity. These experiences can induce altered states of consciousness similar to mystical states, acting as a gateway to various spiritual journeys. This correlation between totemic and mystical experiences, as discussed by Farmer (2006) and Stutley (2003), underscores their importance in the broader context of spiritual exploration and understanding.

Exploring Western philosophy, the works of Hegel in *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline*<sup>7</sup> and Heidegger's concept of "worldliness" in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*<sup>8</sup> provide indirect but valuable insights into totemic mysticism. Though not primarily known for mystical scholarship, their philosophical musings offer a rich backdrop for contrasting totemic experiences<sup>9</sup>. Their ideas help in uncovering mystical dimensions within totemism, providing an intellectual framework for understanding these experiences beyond traditional mystical or religious contexts.

In conclusion, the study of totemic experiences offers a unique interpretive lens for understanding mystical phenomena within various cultural contexts. This approach emphasizes the significance of totems in facilitating spiritual dialogues across cultures, thereby contributing valuable perspectives to the academic conversation on mysticism.

Venturing into the realms of Western philosophy, we find Hegel's thoughts on the individuality of animals and Heidegger's exploration of "worldliness" offering unique perspectives. These ideas, though initially seeming distant from traditional mystical interpretations, provide deep insights. Underneath their scholarly exterior, these philosophies reveal concepts that resonate with indigenous spiritual views, offering a bridge between Western philosophical discourse and primal spiritual understandings. This connection enriches our comprehension of both domains, highlighting the universality of certain existential themes across different cultural and philosophical landscapes.



### 3. Embodying the Sacred: A Study on Physical, Emotional, and Totemic Mysticism

#### 3.1. Summarize

Delving into the complex maze of totemic mysticism requires a deep understanding of its physical and emotional dimensions. A thorough grasp of indigenous belief systems centered around totemic mysticism is unattainable without a detailed examination of the dialectical interactions between the corporeal and spiritual realms. Consequently, this manuscript casts a detailed focus on the pivotal roles played by physical existence and emotional landscapes in indigenous mystical practices.

##### 3.1.1. The Holistic Nature of Totemic Mysticism

To fathom the totality of totemic mysticism requires an acknowledgment of its inherently embodied nature. As Bhogal (2012) posits, mysticism transcends the narrow confines of mere intellectual or transcendental escapades and finds its roots deeply embedded within the corporeal and affective aspects of human existence. Traditional mysticism, often framed within an Abrahamic-centric paradigm, neglects this embodied dimension, opting instead for an emphasis on intellectual ascendancy and divine communion.

##### 3.1.2. Emotions as the Bridge

Emotions serve a bifurcated function within the ambit of totemic mysticism: they forge a nexus between cerebral faculties and bodily existence, whilst concurrently offering a conduit for spiritual articulations. In the context of totemic mysticism, emotions metamorphose abstract totemic symbology into palpable experiences, thereby cementing the affective and spiritual bonds between individuals and their totemic counterparts.

##### 3.3.3. Embodied Mysticism in Totemic Cultures

Totems transcend symbolic representation; they manifest as corporeal extensions of individual selves. Ritualistic practices, dances, and oral traditions across diverse cultural landscapes augment this corporeal-spiritual bond, underscoring the ontological unity between the individual and the totemic entity. This unity crystallizes into what is aptly termed "embodied mysticism," a state wherein the body becomes an active participant in the theater of spiritual phenomena.

##### 3.3.4. Reinterpreting Mysticism

The conceptualization of "embodied mysticism" introduces an avant-garde lens through which mysticism can be reevaluated. It subverts traditional Abrahamic-centric discourses on mysticism, proffering an alternative epistemological framework that accentuates the body and emotional experiences. By doing so, we cultivate a richer, more textured understanding of mysticism, acknowledging its universal applicability and its instrumental role in facilitating human transcendence.

Our intellectual sojourn into the domains of bodily existence, emotional subjectivity, and totemic mysticism remains an evolving narrative. Through forthcoming research endeavors, we aspire to further deepen our epistemological reservoirs and cast new light upon the perennial quest for mystical understanding that defines human existence.

### 3.2. The Body in Totemic Mysticism

The complex tapestry of totemic belief systems unfurls a distinctive epistemological lens through which to perceive the terrains of embodied mysticism. Within this interpretive schema, corporeality transcends its material limitations, metamorphosing into a multifaceted vessel—a sanctum for mystical practices, a canvas for inventive expressions, and an odyssey for spiritual sojourns. Such a conceptual framing obliterates the Western-centric paradigms that reductively interpret the body as a mere physical entity, offering instead a foray into the intricately woven cosmologies and worldviews indigenous to various human societies.

In these grand ontological narratives, corporeal and spiritual realms intersect and coalesce through intricate choreographies—ritualistic dances, meditative practices, and sacrificial ceremonies emerge as tangible manifestations of spiritual quests and connections.

In more precise terms, the totemic belief systems, omnipresent across a plethora of indigenous cultures worldwide, bestow upon specific fauna, flora, or other natural elements the exalted status of "totem." Allegiance to these totems imbues them with both symbolic profundity and spiritual potency. Yet, the corporeal dimension assumes an even more transformative role, resonating with the emphasis indigenous cultures intrinsically place upon the body's instrumental role in facilitating spiritual engagements within totemic practices.

This epistemological stance finds resonance in the scholarly contributions of Western philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty, who delved into the role of corporeality in shaping perceptual and conscious experiences. Thus, within the ambit of totemic belief systems, the body morphs into both an "instrument to navigate the spiritual domain" and a "sanctuary for mystical practices." The erstwhile binary between body and spirit dissipates, giving way to a dynamic equilibrium characterized by mutual influences.

Nestled within the complexities of totemic mysticism lies a vibrant web of relationships that interconnects corporeality, cognition, individuality, and the totemic entity. This intricate nexus engenders a holistic cosmology, wherein every facet of existence coexists in a state of mutual symbiosis and influence. Such an ontological postulate unsettles the prevailing anthropocentric and rationalist inclinations ingrained in many Western philosophies, accentuating instead the indispensability of relationality within totemic paradigms.

For instance, an immersive exploration into the unique tapestry of totemic rituals unveils the Kachina dance, an emblematic spiritual discourse within the Hopi tribe. This ritualistic performance, delineated by its idiosyncratic rhythmic patterns, transcends the conventional boundaries of theatricality to evolve into a pulsating communicative channel. This channel intimately interlinks individual participants with their totemic entities. Within this performative narrative, the dancer's corporeal transformations serve not merely as ritualistic enactments but also as conduits for spiritual dialogues,

underscoring the body's integral role in mediating spiritual engagements within totemic frameworks (James 2000).

In the ritualistic choreography of the Kachina dance, participants metamorphose into the roles of various Kachina spirits, thereby assuming the mantle of celestial messengers. Through their meticulously orchestrated movements, they articulate a nuanced tapestry of relationships that weave together the human, natural, and divine realms. Herein, corporeality emerges as the semiotic medium through which this complex interplay is expressed.

The salience of the coming-of-age ceremony, as a quintessential threshold in an adolescent's odyssey toward maturity, commands particular attention. Upon the advent of puberty or the attainment of the twelfth year of life, the Kachina dance crystallizes into an indispensable component of this liminal phase, serving as an archetypal rite of passage. Far from merely signifying a transition into adulthood, the ritual inaugurates a profound, mystical discourse, epitomized by the symbolic metamorphosis of a child's tears into rain—a poignant emblem of empathetic resonance (James 2000, 909).

Against this fecund backdrop, the corporeal transformations that unfurl within the confines of the Kachina dance ascend to a level of profound semiotic import. They transmute beyond mere ritualistic enactments to become lexicons of embodied experience in their own unique idiom. These corporeal narratives foster an osmotic interface between the physical and ethereal dimensions, thereby accentuating the body's pivotal role as an ontological conduit for spiritual engagements within totemic traditions.

As our analytical gaze penetrates further into the labyrinthine realm of totemic experiences, the human body ascends from its status as a mere corporeal vessel to assume the role of a celestial navigator. It functions as the epicenter where the palpable and the ineffable collide, molding a confluence between the phenomenal and the numinous. In this capacity, the body serves as the symbiotic liaison that interlinks individuals with their respective totemic emblems—be they animalistic, vegetative, or elemental in nature—thus forging a dynamic communicative bridge.

The theoretical contributions of Bhogal (2012) infuse this discourse with a refreshing intellectual vigor, unequivocally elevating the body's centrality within the domain of mysticism. This conceptual framing finds its palpable affirmation in totemic practices, where the intricate interweaving of corporeal and spiritual realms illuminates their symbiotic interdependence. Within this context, the philosophical musings of thinkers like Merleau-Ponty find profound resonance. Their seminal work on the body's instrumental role in shaping perceptual and conscious landscapes lends a robust theoretical scaffold to our understanding of the intricate dialectics between the corporeal and the ethereal.

### 3.3. Emotion in Totemic Mysticism

In the intricate tapestry of totemic mysticism, emotion manifests as a pivotal compass guiding the seeker toward a sacralized confluence of the secular and the divine. Far from being relegated to the realms of the inferior or perilous, both corporeality and emotional potency serve as an intermediary conduit bridging terrestrial existence with transcendent realities. This emotionally charged dynamism finds vivid expression in the Liangzhu civilization—a culture flourishing during China's Neolithic epoch, approximately between 5300-4300 BCE.

The Liangzhu's veneration of the natural world permeates not merely their quotidian existence but also crystallizes in their artistic oeuvre. Jade artifacts—comprising jade swine, annular jade discs, reflective jade mirrors, and jade circlets—act as enigmatic symbols, functioning as an unspoken historiography that articulates their profound reverence for natural deities and their aspiration for celestial guardianship.

However, this is but a mere surface-level revelation into the esoteric cosmology embedded within Liangzhu culture. At the Lingjiatan archaeological site situated in Anhui's Huangshan, an enigmatic totem has been unearthed, meticulously engraved upon a jade artifact and featuring an assemblage of a swine, an eagle, and the solar orb. The eagle, distinguished by its pronounced, hook-like beak, serves as an emblem of a predatory avian species, rather than a banal bird. This artifact stands as another lyrical homage to the vital life force, extolling the celestial dome, the terrestrial plane, and the inherent wildness suffusing all existence.

Delving into the affective universe of the Liangzhu reveals a vibrant and nuanced emotional landscape, one intricately intertwined with their natural surroundings. Their emotions—ranging from love and awe to hope—are deeply ingrained within their cognitive frameworks, engendering a rich spiritual life that augments tribal cohesion and self-identity. This enigmatic triad elucidates the pivotal role that emotion plays in the Liangzhu's quest for, and articulation of, mystical experiences.

William James, in his seminal work *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, delineated a spectrum of emotions integral to religious and mystical engagements, including but not limited to fear, guilt, and awe (James 2000,428;451-452). James posited the crux of religious experience to reside in these "original emotional indicators," effectively challenging sterile, rationalist paradigms that divorce emotion from religious praxis.

Stace's 1960 counter-argument interrogates the subjectivity and non-quantifiable nature of emotional experience, highlighting the inherent challenges in its academic contextualization (Stace 1960: 282)<sup>10</sup>. Nevertheless, in the realm of totemic mysticism, the subjectivity of emotional experiences is not viewed as a limitation but rather as a unique vantage point that enriches our understanding of the mystical journey. Therefore, the subjectivity inherent in these unique experiences is not merely accepted but deemed indispensable, thereby challenging conventional understandings that construe mysticism as merely a transcendental endeavor.

### 3.4. Body, Emotion, and Mysticism in Totemic Experience: A Discourse of Transcendence

Can we tender a conclusion at this juncture? The answer resists simplification. Our preceding deliberations have operated within the constraints of three-dimensional space-time, yet the true profundity of this discourse mandates an exploration that transcends into fourth, fifth, or even higher dimensions. When we immerse ourselves in the oeuvre of Zhi Long Yan, do we not find ourselves propelled into ruminations on the great philosophers of yore, envisioning them as intrepid cartographers of the human psyche? Such figures—William James among them—emerge as our sagacious guides, shepherding us through the labyrinthine corridors of human complexity. James, for instance, introduces us to the notion of the "mystics," whom he characterizes as beings "fully awake." It's as though he beckons us, exclaiming, "Behold, these

are the individuals who have unearthed the subterranean pathways into the human abyss".

Consider the valiant Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche and Gilles Louis René Deleuze, our philosophical comrades in this daring expedition. They implore us to dismantle ossified dualities such as the "I/mind" and to retreat into a primordial, animalistic state. Such a retreat enables us to encounter reality through the visceral immediacy of corporeal existence and the natural world—a clarion call to abandon the stifling anthropocentrism that has long dominated Western thought.

In Nietzsche's seminal work, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he delineates the archetype of the Overhuman—an entity that eschews nihilistic apathy in favor of a transcendental existence. This Overhuman disassembles anthropocentric paradigms and materializes as a sui generis being. The concept of the Overhuman serves as an indispensable fulcrum in this discussion, illuminating the possibility of a life beyond the limitations of conventional human perspectives (Nietzsche, 2005, XVII-XIX).

Ergo, Nietzsche's philosophical edifice posits that the apogee of human existence ought to be conceptualized in consonance with nature's grand tapestry—a theme vividly articulated in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Within this existential quest, Nietzsche contends that the tension between "beast and Overhuman" forms an essential dialectic. This tension crystallizes in the corporeal vessel—the locus of human animality and natural function (Nietzsche, 2005, XVII-XIX). The Overhuman attains this exalted state through a preservation or reclamation of the natural, thereby disrupting conventional cognitive frameworks. Such disruption furnishes us with innovative prisms through which to comprehend the mystics in the realm of totemic mysticism.

In the final analysis, the conceptual paradigms articulated by Nietzsche's notion of the "Overhuman" and the "mystics" within the ambit of totemic mysticism appear to resonate in symphonic harmony. Both conceptual frameworks champion the dismantling of traditional constraints in the relentless quest for an authentic, primal self. This ideological convergence seems to enunciate a collective exhortation: "Liberate yourselves from the shackles of societal mores to unearth the quintessential self that is authentically your own."

Revisiting the philosophical oeuvre of Nietzsche, his ideological thrust propels us toward a reversion to our most primal, instinctual natures. This exhortation can be paraphrased thus: "Live with the unbridled vitality of a beast, yet aspire to transcendence in the manner of an Overhuman." For Nietzsche, the pathway to a more natural state of being is not merely a "return to nature," but rather a protracted existential struggle. This naturalization, in Nietzsche's framework, involves the audacity to embrace the amorality inherent in nature itself, thereby subverting the entrenched anthropocentrism and rationalism that has long dominated Western thought<sup>11</sup>. As Nietzsche articulates in his seminal work, "The will to power is a precondition for 'life,' but so far as life is merely the will to power, it stands beyond good and evil" (Nietzsche 1968, 73).

This philosophical stance bears remarkable affinity with the tenets of totemic mysticism. Both ideologies espouse a radical departure from conventional cognitive paradigms, urging us instead to excavate our own clandestine passageways into the depths of authentic existence.

In a series of scholarly endeavors and artistic creations, specifically a collection of oil paintings collectively titled *The*

*Language of Birds and Flowers*, a pervasive thematic current emerges: the avian image is not merely ornamental but functions as a semiotic vessel redolent with the arcane significance of archaic totems. This conceptual thread has been intricately woven into a companion series of oil paintings, *The inexplicable world*, both of which are my own creative contributions that extend the thematic exploration into new scholarly and artistic avenues. Such symbolic representation has sustained its resonance through the annals of history, a discursive trajectory that, while meriting scholarly attention, falls outside the purview of the present exegesis for the sake of conciseness. The immediate scholarly imperative at hand involves a critical juxtaposition of animal symbolism and totemic mysticism within the broader academic dialogues that navigate the intersections of Eastern and Western mystical traditions. A rigorous examination of the sui generis contributions that Eastern mystical thought can introduce into this intercultural discourse is not merely advantageous but quintessential.

## 4. Conclusion

"Embrace the primal, ascend to the Overhuman." This maxim emerges as a beacon throughout our exploration of the intertwined concepts of Nietzsche's Overhuman and totemic mysticism. It invites a profound reevaluation of our existential bearings, urging us to dismantle the constructs of human cognition and the binary nature of consciousness. This guiding principle posits that true transformation arises not from mere effort but from a deep, harmonious engagement with the diverse fabric of existence—encompassing the realms of animals, children, and women.

In this context, the totemic figures of the horse and the dog are revered not as symbols of lesser beings but as sacred pathways to a broader, more profound comprehension of our place in the universe. They offer a powerful critique against human-centered views, such as those advanced by Heidegger, challenging the traditional underestimation of animal life's complexity and depth.

In a time marked by ecological catastrophes of near-biblical scale, the urgency of transitioning to a post-human era—one that celebrates the unique value of every life form—has never been more critical. The archetypes of the totemic mystic and the Overhuman, embodying a profound connection with all life, present a revolutionary vision for this change.

It is by engaging with what are often deemed "inferior" life forms that we uncover the deepest layers of human consciousness and potential. The journey toward becoming an Overhuman or embracing totemic mysticism is not an estrangement from our animal roots but a deep affirmation and celebration of our entire being. This path is fraught with both challenges and revelations, leading to a broader understanding of our place in the cosmos.

Our investigation into the totemic mystic and the Overhuman transcends traditional philosophical discourse, illuminating the moral, ecological, and existential implications of our relationship with the myriad forms of life in our ever-changing universe. As we continue to explore these themes, we are committed to challenging human-centered narratives, renewing our ancient connections, and promoting a world where the inherent worth of all life is recognized. The path forward is clear: it requires a wholehearted embrace of our complex existence, bridging the human, animal, and the mysterious beyond.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> In their work, "Cultural Studies in Interhemispherical Perspective. China, Africa, Asia and Australasia," Tomaselli and Xiao underscore the significance of multiculturalism and challenge Eurocentric interpretations. They observe China's rising influence in knowledge production and cultural capital, attracting international scholars but grappling with internalized Orientalism. The paper discusses Africa and Asia's colonial legacies and neocolonialism, as well as Han Chinese decolonization through reexamining Chinese national studies. It also highlights the importance of understanding Western perceptions of China and vice versa, exploring these themes through discourse analysis and cultural studies, reflecting the authors' critical stance against Western-centric tendencies in cultural studies and advocating a global multicultural perspective.

<sup>2</sup> Winkelman (2004:212) notes that contemporary religious experiences are predominantly characterized by perception, sensation, and interactions with supernatural agencies or "sacred others." These entities are imbued with volition and exhibit moral and social traits akin to human beings. Interactions with the sacred in contemporary contexts manifest in various forms, including: recognition (self-awareness of the sacred other); responsiveness (awareness by the sacred other of oneself); ecstasy (the union of oneself with the sacred other); revelatory experiences (receiving messages from the sacred other); and states of being under the influence of the sacred other. The emotional intensity accompanying these encounters with spiritual entities often evokes profound feelings of reverence and awe, encapsulating the essence of shamanism rooted in animism (note: animal worship). Additionally, Balonon-Rosen (2013) delves into the mysticism, spirits, and animistic practices prevalent in Senegal, alongside their interplay with Islam. Through extensive fieldwork and interviews, the author has meticulously chronicled the experiences and perspectives of certain mystics and animists, highlighting how they preserve and evolve their beliefs and traditions within the modern societal framework.

<sup>3</sup> This study examines the cultural principles of the Ojibwe tribe in North America, where animals serve both as reality and symbol, functioning as kin partners, spiritual forces, healers, and protectors. The paper concludes by providing multiple pieces of evidence to demonstrate the roles that animals, as the subject of totemic mystical practices, play in Ojibwe culture (Pomedli 2014).

<sup>4</sup> In the study by Sanchez (2001), it was found that over half of the books examined provided at least adequate descriptions. However, there exists a notable portion of these books that present significant errors and biases. These include the portrayal of Native Americans as barbaric, ignorant, evil, dangerous, or as vanished communities. Such characterizations not only perpetuate damaging stereotypes but also misrepresent the totemic culture of Native Americans, reducing it to mere ornamental or symbolic elements without acknowledging its deep symbolic and spiritual importance. The author emphasizes that these misrepresentations negatively influence both educational and societal perspectives, disregarding the diversity, complexity, and significant interactions and contributions of Native Americans with other communities. Deloria (1988), in *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (University of Oklahoma Press), addresses the discrimination and marginalization faced by Native Americans. He critiques the widespread



misunderstandings and misrepresentations of Native American culture by academics, politicians, religious figures, and media, contributing to an identity crisis among Native American communities. Similarly, Said (1979) examines Western stereotypes and prejudices against Eastern cultures, identifying two forms: latent and manifest. He argues that both forms of Orientalism serve to distort and demean Eastern cultures, perpetuating a narrative of Western superiority and dominance. This mindset can lead to misinterpretations of Eastern totemic symbols like dragons, phoenixes, and Buddha statues, often labeling them as evil.

<sup>5</sup> Primitive religion, characterized by the worship of natural or supernatural forces, reflects the spiritual beliefs and practices of prehistoric humans. Mysticism, transcending specific religious frameworks, seeks knowledge of God or ultimate reality through profound personal experiences. It's present in various religious traditions, including primitive religions, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. In primitive religions, mysticism often emerges not from a defined supreme being but as a perception of the sacred or spiritual dimensions. Thus, simplistically comparing primitive religions with theistic ones might overlook their unique connections and differences, especially in the context of mysticism.

<sup>6</sup> The relationship between mysticism and ancient Mesoamerican religions is multifaceted, reflecting a diverse spectrum of beliefs and practices. Harrison-Buck (2021) critiques the prevalent notion that Mesoamerican religious rituals are predominantly shamanistic. They highlight the issues in defining Mesoamerican "religion" through traditional pan-Asian shamanic lenses, which may obscure indigenous cosmologies. The author advocates for a relational ontology approach to avoid misrepresentation. Meanwhile, Klein et al. (2002) emphasize the need for scholars to responsibly and sensitively engage with shamanism and related practices, cautioning against the uncritical adoption and idealization of ancient indigenous spiritual traditions.

<sup>7</sup> An example of Hegel's thoughts on animals within the context of mysticism can be found in Section 352 of the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline* where the animal organism is described as an individual that exists in and for itself, elevated above the universal elements, and standing on its own ground and foundation; it possesses itself (Hegel 2010: 389).

<sup>8</sup> In *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, Martin Heidegger elaborates on his concept of "worldliness" and how it serves to differentiate humans from animals. He contrasts the "world-poor" (weltarm) existence of animals with the "world-forming" (weltbildend) capacities of humans (Heidegger 1995: 177-178).

<sup>9</sup> Scholars argue that even if Hegel was influenced by Hermetic traditions, it does not necessarily make him a "mystic" in the way the term is often employed. While Hermeticism includes elements that could be considered mystical or spiritual, it also encompasses a broad array of philosophical, scientific, and artistic thought. In summary, Magee's book (see Glenn Alexander Magee's *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition*) offers an intriguing and thought-provoking interpretation of Hegel's philosophy, but it should be considered alongside other broad interpretations. Equally important is to note that the question of whether Hegel is a "mystic" largely depends on how we define the term. Many scholars would argue that, although Hegel's philosophy is complex and profound, his work remains firmly within the realm of philosophical inquiry.

<sup>10</sup> In his study he insightfully suggests that "The mystic experiences profound blessedness and joy, sometimes ecstasy



and rapture ..... " (Stace 1960: 282 ). He uses this as a starting point to deepen his critique, arguing that emotions, while forming part of the mystical experience, are not its main or only ingredient. He further elaborates, "We observe in the first place that mystical experience is not mere emotion, nor even chiefly emotion. Its basic element is more like a perception....." (Stace 1960: 282)

<sup>11</sup> How man has become more natural in the nineteenth century (the eighteenth century is that of elegance, refinement, and sentiments genereux). - Not "return to nature"-for there has never yet been a natural humanity. The scholasticism of un- and antinatural values is the rule, is the beginning; man reaches nature only after a long struggle-he never "returns"-Nature: i.e., daring to be immoral like nature. (Nietzsche 1968, 73)

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