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Intersecting Realms of Totemism and Spiritual Uniqueness: A Cross-Cultural Exploration of Mystical Experiences

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Abstract

This groundbreaking study addresses a niche area within mysticism research, exploring the confluence of totemic spiritual practices and distinct mystical experiences. Moving beyond conventional Abrahamic viewpoints, it interrogates mainstream frameworks that either marginalize or pathologize these spiritual occurrences. Utilizing a cross-disciplinary approach that integrates religious studies, anthropology, and psychoanalytic theory, the study synthesizes a rich array of sources including scholarly literature, firsthand indigenous accounts, and historical documents. The research reveals that totemic belief systems go beyond their oft-labeled 'primitive' status, serving as essential cognitive and emotional tools. Additionally, the study clarifies the mutualistic relationship between totemic symbols and individual mystical experiences, advocating for their spiritual and transformative significance. By augmenting existing models with insights into the cognitive and emotional utility of totemic symbols, this work also prompts a reexamination of underexplored spiritual experiences within the field of mysticism. It aligns with critiques emerging from postcolonial, postorientalist, and posthumanist perspectives.

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1. Introduction

In contemporary academic discourses, traditional understandings of mysticism's universality—largely framed within Abrahamic paradigms of ascension and transcendence—have been rigorously interrogated (Bhagal 2012). Within this shifting intellectual milieu, a relatively uncharted territory in mystical studies emerges: totemic mysticism and its interplay with unique experiences. Representing an amalgamation of indigenous belief systems spanning multiple geographical terrains, totemic mysticism offers a distinct lens for reevaluating mystical phenomena. It situates totems as pivotal nexuses that exert a profound influence on both mystical and experiential realms.

Against this contextual backdrop, the present manuscript endeavors to excavate the intricate symbiosis between totemic mysticism and unique experiences. Our investigation aims not merely to illuminate this lesser-explored dimension but also to broaden the interpretive horizons for understanding mystical experiences in a cross-cultural framework. By doing so, it resonates with and extends the ongoing postcolonial and interdisciplinary dialogues that challenge the conventional wisdom surrounding mystical states (Bhagal 2012).



Figure 1. "The Sorcerer" in the Les Trois Frères cave. © Drawings: Aixin Zhang.

1.1. Summarize

At the intersection of scholarly inquiry, totemic mysticism, interlaced with unique experiences, materializes as a captivating subject of academic focus. This review aspires to illuminate the complex and multifaceted tapestry of academic dialogue enveloping these compelling phenomena. Venturing through this intellectual landscape reveals not only the milestones hitherto reached but also the uncharted terrains inviting further exploration.

Navigating the extensive corpus of literature, one discerns a realm imbued with conceptual dichotomies and intellectual puzzles. An array of scholars offer variegated perspectives on the epistemological import of totemic symbols, reflecting upon their cultural genesis and their transformative potential in reshaping our comprehension of mysticism (Winkelman 2004, p.212; Balonon-Rosen 2013).¹

For instance, academics like Winkelman (2004, 212) and Balonon-Rosen (2013) ardently advocate for the cultural specificities intrinsic to totemic mysticism. Nonetheless, this viewpoint ignites a contentious debate. At the heart of this discourse lies the provocative question of whether totemic mystical experiences are universally resonant or are instead sculpted by localized cultural narratives—a question cogently explored in Freud's(2001) *Totem and Taboo*.

Venturing further into this scholarly domain, it becomes apparent that totemic practices, spanning from ritual enactments to storytelling, transcend mere traditionality. As articulated by Pomedli (2014), these practices function as profound expressions of mystical experiences, serving as conduits connecting individuals with the cosmic fabric while simultaneously strengthening social cohesion². Yet, as underscored by scholars such as Sanchez (2001), Deloria (1998), and Said (1979), circumspection is essential to avert the pitfalls of misinterpretation and to ensure an insightful and respectful engagement with these traditions³.

In contemporary dialogues, the significance of totems in the context of modern spirituality has gained increasing prominence. While many highlight the inclusivity and diversity that totems introduce into spiritual praxis, it remains critical to differentiate between indigenous religiosity and canonical Western mysticism. As cautioned by Smith (1986), the peril of oversimplification could lead to epistemological distortions⁴. Moreover, as emphasized by Harrison-Buck (2021) and Klein (2002), approaching indigenous mystical traditions necessitates a heightened degree of scholarly sensitivity to evade superficial interpretations⁵.

In summary, this synthesis endeavors to offer a panoramic vista of the intellectually rich landscape of totemic mysticism, inviting readers to engage, scrutinize, and immerse themselves in the profound intricacies of this compelling domain.

1.2. Question

In summation, the burgeoning body of scholarly literature elucidating the intricate interconnections between totems, mysticism, and unique experiences serves as an invaluable repository of insights. These insights illuminate the manifold

historical, cultural, and experiential dimensions that undergird this distinct form of spiritual expression. By immersing itself in the myriad perspectives and debates encapsulated within this intellectual terrain, the current manuscript aspires to augment the collective understanding of the complex intricacies and formidable challenges endemic to the study of totemic mysticism. Moreover, it aims to extend the interpretive lens through which mystical phenomena are explored within diverse religious theoretical frameworks.

As we cast our gaze toward the future, it becomes evident that ongoing scholarly inquiries must continue to delve into the nuanced subtleties that characterize the domain of totemic mysticism. Such future undertakings hold the promise of not only bridging the existing epistemological gaps in the literature but also of fostering interdisciplinary dialogues. Collaborative engagement among scholars in religious studies, representatives of totemic cultural traditions, and aestheticians will be instrumental in realizing a more comprehensive and inclusive scholarly exploration of the multifaceted landscape of human spirituality.

1.3. Objectives

The architecture of this manuscript unfolds in a meticulous sequence, commencing with an elucidation of the intricate interconnections between totemic experiences and religious mysticism. This examination delves deeply into the historical and cultural tapestry that underpins totemic phenomena, tracing their ontological evolution across a plethora of indigenous belief systems while emphasizing the nexus between totemic experiences and the philosophies and mystical traditions of the West.

Subsequently, the manuscript engages in a rigorous inquiry into the essence of unique experiences that are intimately interwoven with totemic mysticism. This inquiry seeks to unveil how these unique experiences serve as both a reflection and a determinant of mystical practices, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of mystical phenomena.

In its third segment, the paper revisits the concept of the mystical body, offering a reassessment of its ontological and epistemological significance within the specific framework of totemic mysticism and unique experiences.

The fourth section engages in a critical dissection of the congruencies between animal visions manifested in totemic experiences and those that occur in religious mystical experiences. This analysis scrutinizes the intricate relationship between totemic phenomena and mystical consciousness, identifying shared ideological tenets.

The quintessential and concluding section of this manuscript proposes an experiential framework of transcendence. It posits that animal visions, when encountered within the realm of totemic and religious mystical experiences, embody transcendental phenomena capable of catalyzing an ascension to higher states of consciousness. To substantiate this theoretical proposition, the manuscript invokes the author's artwork, "Totem Art," as an illustrative exemplar. This artwork highlights the close affinity between animal visions, totemic experiences, and religious mysticism, thereby facilitating a profound understanding of the manifold themes examined within this paper.

In synthesizing these explorations, the manuscript poses a formidable challenge to traditional hermeneutics of mysticism,

thereby enriching the existing discourse. By placing totemic mysticism at the core of this scholarly investigation, the manuscript aspires not merely to shed light on the unique attributes of this indigenous belief system but also to contest the prevailing Eastern mystical paradigm's purported superiority in interpreting totemic experiences. This critique thereby ameliorates entrenched Western colonial viewpoints and discriminatory perspectives toward these indigenous beliefs.

In the ultimate analysis, this scholarly examination of totemic mysticism—anchored in unique experiences and their interrelations with religious mysticism—aims to incite intellectual fervor and instigate further research in the mysticism domain. It thus beckons scholars to reassess their preexisting assumptions and to engage meaningfully with alternative scholarly perspectives.

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

Central to the thematic scope of this manuscript are the constructs "totem" and "totemic experience." Totemism, a ubiquitous form of religious praxis intricately woven into the social fabric of communities vis-à-vis specific animals or plants, permeates a multitude of global cultures, particularly among indigenous populations. This cultural ubiquity has engendered a plethora of scholarly interpretations, each fraught with its own complexities and contentious points.

What Constitutes a Totem?

While the Oxford English Dictionary proffers a rudimentary definition of a totem as "a natural object or animal regarded by a specific society as possessing spiritual significance," the ontological roots of the term emanate from the Ojibwe language, signifying "relative," "patron," or "clan sign" (Pomedli 2014). Nonetheless, the semiotic potency of totems transcends this definitional boundary. They serve as symbolic epitomes of a community's lineage, identity, and intrinsic connection to nature. For instance, Australian Aboriginal communities deploy totems as emblems of kinship, territorial affiliations, or ancestral lineages (Dousset 2011), while Native American tribes ascribe to their totems divine affiliations or guardian roles (Frazer 1910). In African societies, totems function as sociocultural markers, delineating social rank or ethical convictions (Frazer 1910).

Beyond their emblematic essence, totems bear sentience, entangled in labyrinthine spiritual or mythological relations with their respective communities. These entities, envisioned as ancestral spirits or cosmic guides, engage in interlocution with humans through diverse mediums such as dreams or ritualistic practices.

In light of these considerations, this manuscript posits a 'totem' as a palpable or animate entity that encapsulates a profound spiritual or mythological relationship between a collective and a specific entity, predominantly of animal nature.

What Constitutes a 'Totemic Experience'?

The construct of "totemic experience" signifies meaningful engagements with one's totem, manifesting through dreams, visions, or ritualistic practices. These encounters span a spectrum of spontaneity and profundity, oscillating between the

personal and the communal.

The operational definition this research adopts for "totemic experience" is a significant engagement with one's totem, thereby encapsulating a range of meaningful interactions (Bhogal 2012).

Why Do They Hold Significance in Understanding Mystical Experiences?

Totemic experiences, akin to unique experiences, engender profound connections with a transcendent sacred entity. These experiences possess the capacity to induce altered states of consciousness, mirroring mystical states and serving as catalysts for an array of spiritual explorations (Farmer 2006; Stutley 2003).

In an excursion into Western philosophical thought, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's articulations on animal individuality, as outlined in *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline*⁶, and Martin Heidegger's concept of "worldliness" in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*⁷, offer indirect yet invaluable insights into this discourse. Though not traditionally categorized as "mystical" scholars, their philosophical ruminations provide a fertile ground for juxtaposing totemic experiences⁸, thereby unearthing the embedded mystical dimensions within totemism.

In summation, the conceptual understanding of totemic experiences proffers a novel hermeneutical lens for interpreting mystical phenomena across diverse cultural contexts. It underscores the pivotal role of totems in fostering cross-cultural spiritual dialogues, thereby enriching the existing scholarly discourse.



Figure 2. "Fu Hao's Exquisite Owl Vessel", an esteemed artifact unearthed in 1976 from Fu Hao's tomb in Anyang Xiaotun, adorns the prestigious "Dwelling in China: Engaging in Dialogue with Xia, Shang, and Zhou" exhibition at the Shanghai Museum. Bronze, from the Shang

Dynasty (13th century to 1046 BCE), dimensions: 45.9 cm x 16.4 cm. In the collection of the Henan Museum. © Photographer: Aixin Zhang.

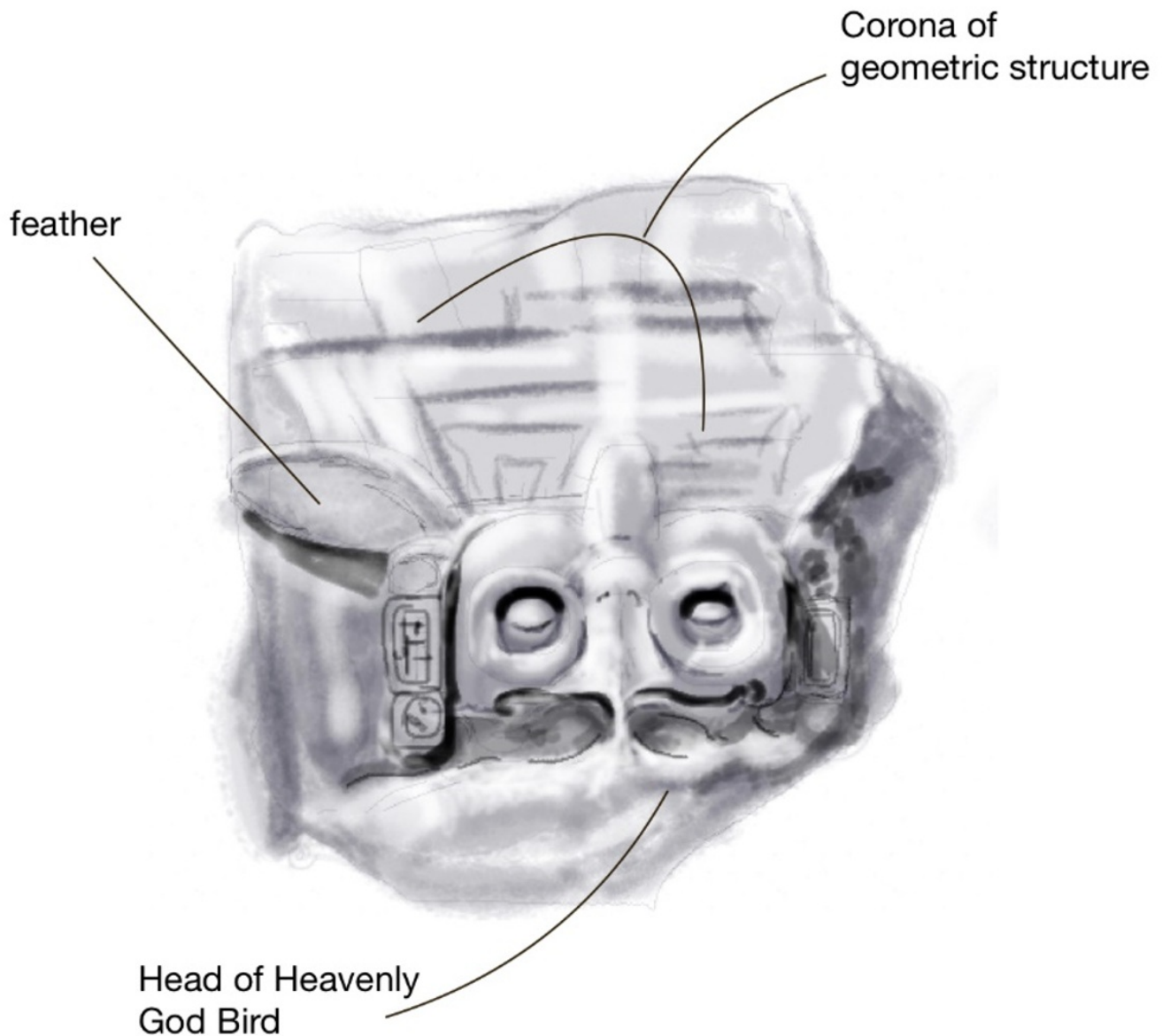


Figure 3. "Avian Deity Head," a fragment of a bas-relief depicting the head of a nocturnal bird of prey, crowned with a tiered headdress of geometric design. Circular stone carving. Maya period, 600-900 AD. Dimensions: 48 x 46 x 6 cm. © Photographer: Aixin Zhang.

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

3.1. Summarize

Navigating through the intricate labyrinth of totemic mysticism necessitates an acute awareness of its physical and emotional dimensions. A robust comprehension of indigenous belief systems that hinge on totemic mysticism remains elusive without a nuanced exploration into the dialectical interactions between corporeal and spiritual domains. This manuscript, therefore, places a magnifying lens on the instrumental roles enacted by bodily 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.

3.1.3. 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.

3.1.4. 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.

Conclusion

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, p.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, p.428;p.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, p.282)⁹. 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 Yan Zhi Long, 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.



Figure 4. *Fragrant Scenery*. 500cm x 200cm. Oil on canvas. 2021. Artist: Zhilong Yan

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 thought¹⁰. 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, p.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.



Figure 5. *The Enigmatic World-7#*. Oil on canvas. 200cmx160cm. 2023. Artist: Zhilong Yan



Figure 6. *The Enigmatic World-10#*. Oil on canvas. 240cmX60cm. 2023. Artist: Zhilong Yan

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. The Sublime Confluence of Animal Imagery in Totemic and Mystical Experiences

4.1. Prolegomena

In the expansive tableau of totemic and mystical experiences, a striking parallelism emerges in the visual representations of animal entities. This intriguing confluence mandates an in-depth hermeneutic exploration into the dialectical interplay between totemic experiences and mystical consciousness. Totemic mysticism, a pervasive ontological framework reverberating across global indigenous cultures, furnishes a novel epistemological lens that accentuates the quintessential role of totemic entities within the realms of mysticism and experiential cognition. Within this intricate tapestry, animal iconography often functions as an allegorical signifier for the archetypal human—the saint, if you will. Herein, the corporeal vessel of the totemic mystic subject is metaphorically transmuted into a sacred equine steed, galloping in an unrelenting quest for the Divine. This allegorical transmutation poignantly unveils the profound symbiosis between human and animal existences, thereby amplifying an ethos of reverence and understanding vis-à-vis the animal kingdom.

However, the intellectual landscape is increasingly becoming a battleground where the universality of mystical experiences, particularly in the context of Abraham's hermeneutics of notions such as ascension and transcendence, is subjected to rigorous scrutiny. The nexus between totemic mysticism and extraordinary—dare we say, unique—experiences remains a fertile yet lamentably undercultivated terrain within the mystical studies discourse. This treatise aspires to augment the existing body of knowledge by elucidating the intricate relationships between totemic mystic subjects and animal entities, while concurrently delineating the shared conceptual frameworks that underpin these two ideologies.

As we navigate through the transformative odyssey of the totemic mystic subject, it becomes increasingly apparent that the primary inhibitors to authentic totemic experiences are not animal instincts but rather human cognition and dualistic consciousness. For the totemic mystic subject, alignment with cosmic ordinances should manifest as an innate existential imperative. Such ontological realignment is not precipitated by a calculated pursuit of spirituality but rather emerges from a profound resonance with all sentient beings, inclusive of women, children, and animals.

The ensuing segments of this study will specifically dissect the perceptual frameworks through which the totemic mystic subject engages with and assimilates the animal Other. This perspective is firmly anchored in the axiological postulate that animal behavior constitutes a divine orchestration endowed with intrinsic value. This philosophical stance serves as a formidable challenge to the hegemonic constructs of modern rational subjectivity and advocates for an embodied

epistemology rooted in the corporeality of the "sublime animal." The subsequent sections shall endeavor to delineate a reconceptualization of humanity, not as an aberration from animal essence but rather as a reversion to our quintessential human nature, thereby embracing the full kaleidoscopic spectrum of human existence.

4.2. The Semiotics of Animal Iconography in the Ontology of Totemic Traditions

The totemic belief systems unfurl an intricate tapestry that elucidates the intricate alchemy between the spiritual and the material realms. Within this metaphysical schema, totems—predominantly manifesting as animal entities—have historically constituted the linchpins of myriad cultural matrices, fulfilling manifold roles as emblematic identifiers, spiritual conduits, and guardian archetypes.

Tracing the historical antecedents of this phenomenon, one may journey from the primordial cave paintings adorning the subterranean chambers of Lascaux, France, to the majestic totemic monoliths that punctuate the landscapes of Native American tribal territories (Женест 2017)¹¹. These animalistic representations have undergone a transformative evolution, transmuting from mere artistic renderings to potent semiotic vessels that encapsulate collective experiences, belief paradigms, and aspirational yearnings.

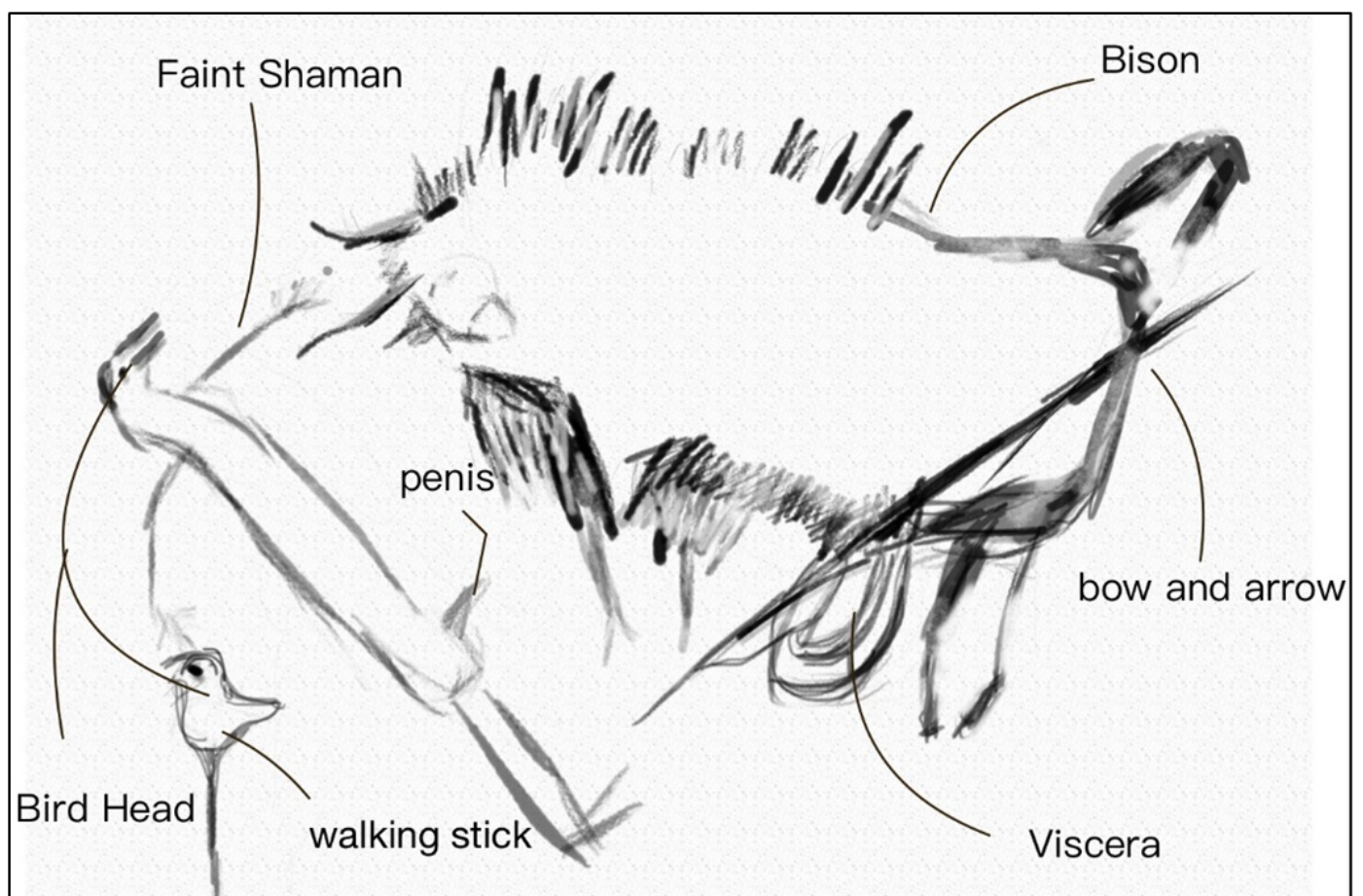


Figure 7. "The Hunting Accident," a notable depiction from the Lascaux Caves, portrays a shaman in a trance of ecstasy, symbolized by an erect phallus. Adjacent to him are a bird-headed staff, a ritual implement, and a bison with spilling innards. Lascaux, Dordogne, 15,000-20,000 BCE. © Drawings: Aixin Zhang.

For instance, the eagle, exalted for its perspicacity and aerodynamic prowess, emerges as a symbol imbued with connotations of freedom, potency, and spiritual illumination. Among indigenous communities such as the Haida, the raven assumes an archetypal status, epitomizing the dialectics of transformation, mischief, and cosmogony. Meanwhile, the bear—often emblematic of fortitude, valor, and governance—occupies a *sui generis* position, particularly within the cosmological narratives of North American tribes. To elucidate further, one might invoke a poetic stanza or an excerpt from an indigenous mythos pertinent to the thematic undercurrents at hand. In the discursive terrains of anthropology, folklore, and religious studies, these zoological totems function as prismatic lenses through which the spiritual mores and collective metaphysical orientations of their respective tribes or social conglomerates are refracted and projected (Bhagal 2012).

Animal totems, when interrogated through the esoteric prism of mysticism, transcend the oft-reductive ontological categories proffered by Western metaphysics. The lexicon of the Western philosophic tradition, often marred by dualistic conceptions—such as the bifurcation of mind-body or spirit-matter—poses a myopic framework when negotiating the contours of mystical experiences. Animal totems emerge as phenomenological signposts, gesturing towards a metaphysical realm that eludes such dualistic confines. These totems operate as epistemological conduits, bridging the empirical with the ineffable, and thereby impelling a recalibration of divinity as not merely a circumscribed entity but as a pervasive cosmic consciousness. This engagement eschews linearity, akin to a boundless oceanic expanse, wherein new epistemic vistas may materialize serendipitously—a phenomenon echoed both within the annals of Tibetan Buddhism and the theosophical tenets of Christian mysticism. As propounded in Judeo-Christian scriptures, divinity is not an insular nucleus but an intricate web of relationality that percolates through the cosmic fabric, thereby obliging humanity to transcend its anthropocentric solipsism and embrace a more encompassing, relational ontology.

Mystics within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition embark upon an intellectual and spiritual odyssey that transcends dualistic encumbrances, delving into the fundamental interconnectedness and ephemeral nature of all phenomena—a worldview perhaps best epitomized through the symbiotic relationship between rainbows and raindrops. Phenomena, bereft of any intrinsic permanence, manifest as interdependent variables within an ever-shifting kaleidoscopic reality¹². This paradigmatic framework finds resonance within the context of animal totems, where the corporeal converges with an ineffable transcendence. As articulated by the esteemed Buddhist monk and scholar Matthieu Ricard, the sphere of thoughts emanates from and subsequently dissolves into the primordial matrix of pure awareness, akin to oceanic waves that arise and subside without ever detaching from their aquatic substrate. This epistemological stance serves as a therapeutic antidote to the malaise engendered by ingrained, mechanistic thought patterns, steering the mental compass towards a non-dualistic harbor of equanimity¹³.

In a thematic expansion within our earlier publication in *Religion*, entitled "Bird Totems in Tibetan Buddhism," we dissect the nuanced interplay between Buddhist textual corpus, artistic depictions, and totemic symbolism. Contrary to reductionist viewpoints, animal totems are not relegated to the peripheries of spiritual discourse but are revered commensurately with divine archetypes. These totems function not merely as mimetic representations of biological diversity but as metasymbols of interspecies ontological continuity.

For a more nuanced discussion, one might consult the seminal works of Buddhist luminaries such as Ricard(2010) or delve into canonical texts like the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*¹⁴ or *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*¹⁵. These intellectual reservoirs enrich our understanding of the existential substratum as conceived within Tibetan mysticism and provide profound insights into the symbolic lexicon that shapes our cosmic interactions.

4.3. The Confluence of Animal Symbolism in Mysticism and Artistic Discourse

The symbiotic interplay between mysticism and artistic representation has been a subject of profound intellectual inquiry. Throughout the annals of human history, art has transcended its aesthetic dimensions to function as an ontological conduit for the articulation of mystical phenomenology. Where verbal exegesis falters in its endeavor to encapsulate the transcendent, the artist turns to the visual, auditory, and the abstract as alternative lexicons for conveying the ineffable. In doing so, art becomes more than a mere medium; it evolves into a metaphysical space where complex emotions, abstract ideations, and numinous experiences find nuanced expression (Oganov 2017).

For instance, the mesmerizing geometric designs that adorn Islamic art, the ineffable serenity that emanates from depictions of the Buddha in Buddhist iconography, or the ethereal divinity portrayed in Christian frescoes and tapestries all serve as phenomenological windows—illuminating both the universality and the cultural specificity of mystical experiences.

Within this intricate framework, art that features animal totems or symbolic fauna serves as a resonant carrier of mystical epistemology. Animals, replete with multilayered symbolic import, emerge as potent metaphors encapsulating a diverse range of spiritual verities. For example, in the artistic traditions of ancient Egypt, the falcon—often associated with the deity Horus—serves as an emblem for divine kingship and cosmic expansiveness. In various artistic renditions that draw upon mystical themes, animals such as butterflies and eagles, emblematic of transformative processes and lofty spiritual ascents, respectively, are frequently utilized to symbolize dimensions of spiritual metamorphosis or the soul's cosmic pilgrimage. Moreover, artistic representations that depict humans in harmonious coexistence with animals serve to illustrate the mystic's holistic cognizance of cosmic unity. Such artworks, often found among Mayan animal totems, incorporate celestial iconography alongside animal figures, thereby invoking a sense of divinity that is simultaneously immanent and transcendent. The animal, tethered to earthly existence yet reaching towards the divine, encapsulates this ontological duality.

In sum, animals within the domain of mystical art transcend their role as mere subjects; they metamorphose into semiotic vessels imbued with profound spiritual meanings, serving as mediators that bridge the ontological gap between the sacred and the profane.

4.4. A Reevaluation of Heidegger's Anthropocentric Stance on Animals

In a nuanced esoteric framework, the manifestation of animal imagery transcends mere acts of corporeal violence or sensual yearnings as portrayed in epic literatures, and circumvents the reductionist interpretations prevalent in Western

dualistic philosophies. To elucidate, consider the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, a Western thinker whose discourse is imbued with a conservative ethos, frequently manifesting a negationist posture vis-à-vis the existential salience of animal life. This viewpoint, however, is laden with intricate controversies, necessitating a comprehensive section dedicated solely to the critical interpretation and deconstruction of Heidegger's ontological postulates concerning animals.

4.4.1. Unveiling the Theoretical Foundations of Heidegger's Animal Ontology

Martin Heidegger, a seminal philosopher of the 20th century, has bequeathed an intellectual legacy replete with penetrating analyses of existence, temporality, and the ontological fabric of Being itself. His conceptual apparatus, which engages with a multitude of existential dimensions, also encompasses a perspective on animals—a perspective that has elicited both scholarly attention and critical scrutiny.

Heidegger's foray into animal ontology is not an isolated intellectual endeavor; rather, it is inextricably woven into his broader philosophical tapestry of "Dasein," which serves as an ontological linchpin elucidating the very essence of human existence. In articulating his conceptual framework, Heidegger introduced the notion of "world-poor" (*weltarm*) as a descriptor for the animal condition. In contrast to human beings, who navigate a "world" (*Welt*) replete with semantic richness and existential possibilities, animals, according to Heidegger, are "poor in world." He posits that their engagement with the external environment is fundamentally circumscribed, limited to immediate sensory stimuli and instinctual responses (Sheehan 2014; Peters 2019).

4.4.2. Deconstructing the Anthropocentric Underpinnings: A Critique of Heidegger's Hierarchization

A central critique that emerges in the discourse surrounding Heidegger's philosophy is its implicit anthropocentrism. Heidegger's ontological architecture, by ascribing a superior existential status to human beings, either inadvertently or deliberately engenders a hierarchical framework. Within this schema, human existence is elevated to a superlative plane, leaving other forms of life to occupy lesser ontological tiers.

Such an anthropocentric formulation is becoming increasingly untenable, especially in light of burgeoning understandings of the interdependent and interconnected nature of all life forms. The hierarchical delineation posited by Heidegger not only stands in need of rigorous philosophical interrogation but also invites critical scrutiny from an ecological standpoint. The inexorable march of environmental degradation and the ethical imperatives of interspecies relationships compel a reassessment of such ontological hierarchies (Blok 2022).

4.4.3. Unpacking the Ethical and Ontological Ramifications of Heidegger's Animal Philosophy

The implications of Heidegger's perspectives on animals extend far beyond the realm of ontological theorization; they penetrate the moral and pragmatic dimensions of human-animal relations. If animals are, as Heidegger posits, "poor in world," what ethical ramifications does this engender? Does this ontological impoverishment necessarily relegate animals to a lower tier of moral or ethical consideration? Indeed, the manner in which humans perceive animals inexorably influences a wide range of practices—from ethical contemplations and legislative enactments to quotidian interactions.

Moreover, whether one subscribes to Heidegger's perspectives or not, his philosophical postulations serve as a catalyst for deeper intellectual inquiries into the essence of animal existence. They provoke poignant questions that challenge the status quo: What ontological weight should we attribute to an entity that possesses or lacks a "world"? How might we approach the Herculean task of comprehending experiences that are fundamentally alien to our own human condition?

By scrutinizing Heidegger's animal philosophy, we are doing more than merely dissecting his intellectual stances. We are, in fact, participating in a grander dialogic enterprise—one that delves into the metaphysical intricacies of existence, interrogates the intrinsic value of diverse life forms, and explores our ethical obligations to other sentient beings. It is a discourse of immense contemporary relevance, especially as humanity navigates the labyrinthine ethical conundrums brought about by ecological cataclysms and the imperative of biodiversity preservation.

5. Conclusion: Envisioning the Totemic Mystic Subject in a Post-Human Epoch

"Live like a beast and transcend like an Overhuman." This aphorism, crystallized during our scholarly voyage through the symbiotic realms of Nietzsche's Overhuman and the totemic mystic subject, serves as a luminary guidepost. It beckons us to recalibrate our ontological compasses, to dismantle the artifices of human cognition and dualistic consciousness. The true alchemy of transformation, it suggests, does not transpire through mere striving but emanates from a profound resonance with the variegated tapestry of life—spanning animals, children, and women.

The totemic symbols of the horse and the dog rise not as emblems of an inferior state of being but as sanctified conduits toward an enriched, panoramic understanding of our cosmic station. They furnish a scathing counter-narrative to anthropocentric doctrines, such as those propounded by Heidegger, which inadvertently obfuscate the intricate profundity of animal existence.

In an era punctuated by ecological crises of apocalyptic proportions, the exigency of ushering in a post-human world—a world where each life form is lauded for its irreplaceable uniqueness—cannot be overstated. The figures of the totemic mystic subject and the Overhuman, who incarnate a sublime unity with all life forms, proffer a visionary template for such a transformative ethos.

Paradoxically, it is through the scrutiny of these ostensibly "lesser" beings that we excavate the most elusive strata of human consciousness and potentiality. The odyssey toward the Overhuman or the totemic mystic subject does not constitute a detour from our animal essence but an affirmation and celebration of the totality of our existential spectrum. It is a passage strewn with epistemic and ontological hurdles and epiphanies, culminating in an expansive comprehension of our celestial domicile.

In sum, our scholarly engagement with the totemic mystic subject and the Overhuman has transcended the confines of mere philosophical inquiry, casting its illuminating glow on the ethical, ecological, and existential stakes of our interactions with the pantheon of life forms in a dynamically evolving cosmos. As we perpetuate our intellectual adventures in these domains, we sustain our commitment to dismantling anthropocentric paradigms, rekindling our primal kinships, and

advocating for a world where the intrinsic value of every life form is unequivocally acknowledged. The trajectory toward this transformative horizon is lucid: it lies in the unconditional embrace of our multi-dimensional existence—encompassing the human, the animal, and the ineffable realms beyond.

Footnotes

¹ Winkelman (2004, p.212) notes that contemporary religious experiences primarily involve perception, sensation, and contact with supernatural agencies or 'sacred others.' These entities possess volition and moral and social characteristics, much like ourselves. Contemporary experiences of interaction with the sacred include: 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 (messages from the sacred other); and states of being controlled by the sacred other. The sensations associated with these spiritual others involve intense emotional experiences of reverence and awe, as well as the essence of shamanism rooted in animism (note: animal worship). Balonon-Rosen (2013) explores the mysticism, spirits, and animistic practices in Senegal, as well as their relationship with Islam. The author, through fieldwork and interviews, has documented the experiences and viewpoints of some mystics and animists, and how they maintain and develop their beliefs and traditions in contemporary society.

² 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).

³ In this article, the author (Sanchez 2001) finds that over half of the books surveyed contain at least satisfactory descriptions. However, some books harbor serious errors and biases, such as depicting Native Americans as barbaric, ignorant, evil, dangerous, or vanished populations. The author argues that these books not only perpetuate harmful stereotypes but also distort the totemic culture of Native Americans by reducing it to meaningless decoration or symbols, neglecting its profound symbolic and spiritual significance. The author believes these books have a negative impact on education and society as they overlook the diversity and complexity of Native Americans and their interrelationships and contributions to other communities. Deloria (1988) criticizes the discrimination and oppression faced by Native Americans in 'Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto' (University of Oklahoma Press), and the misunderstandings and misrepresentations of Native American culture by scholars, politicians, religious leaders, and the media, leading to a crisis of identity among Native Americans. Said (1979) analyzes the two forms of Western stereotypes and prejudices against Eastern cultures: one latent and the other manifest. The author argues that both forms of Orientalism serve to distort and demean Eastern cultures, all in the service of maintaining a sense of Western superiority and control. Accordingly, it is not hard to understand that harboring such fixed viewpoints could easily lead to interpreting Eastern totemic symbols (such as dragons, phoenixes, and Buddha statues) as evil.

⁴ Primitive religion refers to the religious beliefs and customs of prehistoric humans, one of its characteristics being the

worship of natural or supernatural forces. Mysticism refers to the ideology that involves gaining knowledge about God or ultimate reality through profound personal experiences. Mysticism is found in various religions, including primitive religions, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. The mysticism within primitive religions does not necessarily rely on a clearly defined supreme being, but manifests as a perception of the sacred or spiritual dimensions. Therefore, a simplistic comparison between primitive religions and theistic religions may overlook their inherent connections and differences in the realm of mysticism.

⁵ The relationship between mysticism and ancient Mesoamerican religions is complex, as these ancient religious systems were not monolithic or unified but composed of a diverse array of beliefs and practices. Harrison-Buck (2021) observed that many studies on Mesoamerican religion operate on the assumption that past and present Mesoamerican ritual customs are shamanism-centric. They argue that defining Mesoamerican 'religion' based on traditional pan-Asian shamanic definitions and associated ideological rhetoric is problematic, as it could potentially weaken or blur indigenous cosmologies. The author suggests that a relational ontology approach provides a more effective direction forward, implying that previous methods or ideologies might carry inherent risks of misrepresentation or oversimplification. On the other hand, Klein et al. (2002) advocate for scholars to engage in the study of shamanism and related practices in a more responsible and culturally sensitive manner, rather than blindly appropriating and romanticizing the spiritual traditions of ancient indigenous mysticism.

⁶ 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, p.389).

⁷ 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,p.177-178).

⁸ 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.

⁹ In his study he insightfully suggests that "The mystic experiences profound blessedness and joy, sometimes ecstasy and rapture " (Stace 1960, p.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,p.282)

¹⁰ 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, p.73)

¹¹ This paper offers an in-depth exploration of the evolution of Western European rock art, with a particular emphasis on significant sites in France, such as the Lascaux caves. Its objective is to identify changes in symbolic language, animal representation, and artistic spatial arrangement over the span of 15,000 years (Женест 2017).

¹² "The world is a result of the coming together of an infinite number of causes and conditions that are continually changing. Just as a rainbow is formed at the precise moment the sun shines on a collection of raindrops and disappears as soon as the factors that produce it are no longer present, phenomena exist in an essentially interdependent mode and have no independent and permanent existence. Ultimate reality is therefore described as empty of independently existing animate or inanimate phenomena. Everything is relationship; nothing exists in and of itself"(Ricard 2010, p.76).

¹³ "Thoughts arise out of pure awareness and dissolve back into it just as waves arise in the ocean and fall back into it without ever becoming anything other than the ocean itself. It is essential to realize this if we want to free ourselves from the habitual, automatic patterns of thought that create suffering. Identifying the fundamental nature of mind and knowing how to rest in it in a non-dual and non-conceptual way is one of the essential conditions for inner peace and liberation from suffering" (Ricard 2010, p.93).

¹⁴ Lopez, D. S. (2011). *"The Tibetan Book of the Dead" A Biography* Princeton University Press.

¹⁵ Rinpoche, P. (1998). *The words of my perfect teacher: A complete translation of a classic introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*. Rowman Altamira.

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