

Review of: "Mystical Totems: Unveiling Mysticism in the Realms of Art and Faith"

June Boyce-Tillman¹

¹ University of Winchester

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

Mystical Totems: Unveiling Mysticism in the Realms of Art and Faith by

Zhilong Yan and Aixin Zhang

This is an important paper requiring new approaches to art and anthropology. In its present form, parts of it read almost like poetry or expressive prose rather than an academic paper. I think this may be due to the translation from the original Chinese.

The critique of Western anthropological discourse and its relationship to secularization, colonialism, and scientific discourse is not new, and the absence of more recent literature is a weakness. Edith Turner, for example, in 1992, described the attitudes critiqued in this paper as intellectual imperialism, which highlights the gradual move towards decolonialism in anthropology in the twentieth century. The paper depends a great deal on the Bhogal paper, and I would recommend that those who are inspired by this article access this paper as an excellent example of an emic approach to Sikh perspectives on human/animal relationships. The relationship between emic (insider) and etic (outsider) approaches in anthropological discourse is set out clearly in this article from China, exposing how

hierarchies of being and of human cultures were set up by Western academics' approaches to "exotic," othered cultures. This was particularly true of the religious/mystical/spiritual discourses within these cultures, where the mind-set of the observer clearly coloured the analysis and description of practices; the position of Western anthropologists, which the authors rightly set out as rooted in the Abrahamic faiths and the pseudo-objectivity of scientific/sociological discourse, was influential. I would have welcomed some references to the anthropological/ethnomusicological work of Bruno Nettl (*Heartland Excursions*, 1995, University of Illinois Press) and Philip Bohlman (especially *Resounding Transcendence: Transitions in Music, Religion, and Ritual*, edited by Philip Bohlman and Jeffers Engelhardt, 2016, Oxford University Press).

The critique of the disembodiment and dualism of post-Enlightenment Western discourse is effectively highlighted by means of including animal totems as central to the discussion. The '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' is also well discussed in Western contemporary feminist discourse, with such writers as Sally McFague (*The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*, Fortress Press 1993), and the unfamiliarity of the authors with this strand in Christian thought has impoverished the argument. Many different traditions are referred to in the paper, and more detailed exploration might reveal some inaccuracies in these references. I would, however, agree that Western scholarship is enriched by the 'critical juxtaposition of animal symbolism and totemic mysticism' and that 'the intersections of Eastern and Western mystical traditions' are 'not merely advantageous but quintessential.' This does indeed help with counterbalancing the increasing pathologization of the mystical experience in Western culture.

The linkage of these themes in the article with artistic expression: I wonder if the article might have appeared more focused if all the various wide-ranging discussions had been integrated into an autoethnographical account of the authors' own creative processes and experiences. At times, the article reads as a commentary on the doctoral thesis of one of the authors, and I wonder if readers who wanted to pursue this line of thought further would be advised to look at this thesis, which does not appear to be in the references.

I enjoyed reading this article, but its wide-ranging sources and disciplines may to some eyes appear to be somewhat unfocused. However, it is very difficult to embark on such interdisciplinary exploration, and I commend the authors for making a courageous attempt at it.

The Rev Dr June Boyce-Tillman MBE PhD, MA, LRAM, FRSA, FHEA

Professor Emerita of Applied Music, University of Winchester

Extraordinary Professor, North West University, South Africa