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Understanding Symbols through Mandala Art Work, Collection and Classification: Application of Autoethnography

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Abstract

This study focused on the spirit to becoming the true “I” as a human, and it attempted to pay attention to the “images” sent by the unconscious to prompt the reality of that spirit. The purpose of this study was to identify the symbols in myths and folk tales that appeared in the individual’s dreams and to shed light on how the universal experiences of humankind are re-experienced and integrated into an individual’s life. This study used a total of 105 mandala paintings collected through the researcher’s own dreams from February 2019 to September 2020. Among them, repeated symbols were classified into basic shapes, squares, crosses, triangles, circles, and spirals, as suggested by Riedel. The study truthfully described the discovery of a practical layer of psychology as a human’s individualization and changing, resulting in autoethnography, which is a type of qualitative study.

Keywords: Symbol, Mandala, Art Work, Autoethnography

1. INTRODUCTION

This study focused on the spirit to becoming the true “I” as a human, and it attempted to pay attention to the “images” sent by the unconscious to prompt the reality of that spirit. The researcher recorded and drew her dream patiently on her own, and the study included the entire process of ritualization of symbols discovered therein with a professional analyst in analytical psychology.

The purpose of this study was to identify the symbols in myths and folk tales that appeared in the individual’s dreams and to shed light on how the universal experiences of humankind are re-experienced and integrated into an individual’s life through an indefinite number of years to accelerate the “individualization process” (Johnson, 2015). My motivation as a psychology researcher to explore the reality of the individualization process and reveal it to the world led me to immerse myself in the individualization process and practice the “analysis of symbols,” the most traditional method to explore the unconscious. The purpose of people’s spiritual growth is to understand the “self” (Fincher, 2009).

In the work based on the researcher’s inquisitive mind, I was surprised by the fact that the power of the unconscious lies in its autonomy, which is difficult to control in the consciousness (Lee, 2002), confirming that the recording of the process of change is important to making its reality known to the world. During this

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process, the way the human mind comes into contact with the unconscious is vastly different from the research methods related to the consciousness. The unconscious demands an artistic and creative method, irrespective of the drawing techniques.

In the present study, when artistic works that could properly elucidate the symbols in the dream were accompanied by the analysis of symbols, the unconscious became a clearer and physical entity that the consciousness could recognize and understand. Moreover, I discovered that it could be evidence of the inner spirit. This study used a total of 105 mandala paintings collected through the researcher's own dreams from February 2019 to September 2020. Among them, repeated symbols were classified into basic shapes, squares, crosses, triangles, circles, and spirals, as suggested by Riedel (2002), and an attempt was made to elucidate their symbolism. The basic shapes of human life are squares, crosses, triangles, circles, and spirals. These figures reflect an attitude toward life as a whole, a way of life, and a style (Riedel, 2002).

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1 Auto-ethnography

The auto-ethnographic method, a qualitative research method, was used as a tool to examine in depth the understanding symbols through mandala art work, collection and classification. As a research method, auto-ethnography has been established in accordance with the increase in qualitative research that directly describes and reflects on one's own life (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Richardson, 2000; Ellis, 2004; Kim, 2010). Researchers reflect on and examine their own experience through an auto-ethnographic research, and intrapersonal data of the researcher typically in the form of self-memory, introspective, and self-interview data are used to conduct the research (Lee, 2012). Through this process of reflection, researchers understand their own experience within the social, cultural, and political contexts (Jones, 2005).

2.2 Research Participants

An auto-ethnography involves presenting the culture surrounding the "self" with others from a first-person perspective, and thus, the life and identity of the "self" must be displayed (Ji, 2014). Therefore, the participant of this paper is a university professor of art psychotherapy, as well as researcher in the field of art therapy.

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data for the auto-ethnographic analysis were collected through the following methods: self-memory data, introspective data, participation observation, interview data, cultural artifacts, and preceding literature. To increase the reliability and validity of such data, the following efforts were conducted by the researcher. First, a significant quantity of data was collected for two years between February 2019 to September 2020. Second, data were collected and analyzed from a variety of methods, such as field observations, reflective journals.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Squares: inside the boundaries

The square that has corners symbolizes the domain of life made for me, now, here—I. The square encourages me to settle down, surrounds the field, and forms the floor plan of the house. Square means being constrained, within boundaries (Riedel, 2002). Personally, I do not have a deep affection for squares. Among

the forms that occur in nature, there is no such thing as a square. A square is a form created only by humans, and the symbolism of the number 4 in the background of the square is related to the symbol of femininity and is also the number of substances (Endres & Schimmel, 1996). Jung once said that the square contains contents that symbolize matter, body, and reality. In particular, the perfect balance of the cube is an image of truth and a concrete shape that signifies faith and history (Fontana, 2010). I became interested in the shape of the three-dimensional cube because of the memory of a dream I had one summer night.

Someone has sliced a properly ripe watermelon into a long rectangular shape. Thanks to my desire to eat the fruit in square shapes, I get excited and make a joke. I can see the ripe red watermelon that I visualized as a cube. I think to myself in the dream, “Why am I the watermelon?” Although I am seeing the exterior of the watermelon, I know that I am this watermelon from the inside of the watermelon. (dream content, August 15, 2019)

The red flesh and juicy bite of watermelon came to me as a primal feminine characteristic. Is this the feeling of femininity that was originally given? It was the red and moist flesh that was sexually stimulating. Inspired by this dream, I created a work with the theme of “watermelon,” but it came out rather a shape close to a curved oval. The memory of that moment, when I identified with the red flesh of the watermelon, gave a certain moist vitality to my identity as a woman. The experience of perceiving my body as a cube made me feel more secure because I felt at home in my body. The square is, after all, related to the way humans own the land, that is, the way humans separate their own living spaces, fields, and land of their houses, achieved by planting a pile from the surrounding land that has not yet been cultivated; the way they mark the boundaries and put up the fences in the land; and the way they cut trees and dig the ground to lay the foundation for house building. The human desire to have their own space, have a safe space that is suitable for them, and for housing and possessions are all embodied in the form of the square. Therefore, these desires appear in the forms of one’s own garden and house (Riedel, 2002).



Figure 1. The group of a square shape

I experienced certain limitations from my mind and body experience in the cube; that is, the experience of being a square. The reason is that each side faced a different direction, so there were tangent lines, and each of the six sides had an independent world. In other words, six different worlds existed in my one body. To gain a feeling of being whole, I had to unite the six independent worlds into one. I had to understand the gaze of each side and stand firm with a perfect sense of balance, instead of invading the adjacent sides. In other words, each of the adjacent planes was able to stand only if they possessed a sense of balance that was neither overflowing nor insufficient while also maintaining an appropriate balance of forces with one another. In this context, the square can be seen in terms of self-realization. Characterized by its four angles, the square is always a dimension that can be realized and learned only when we walk in all directions. Thus, the square is a symbol of something that can be called “self” inscribed on one’s body. In other words, this becomes the

tendency of the self to realize itself by overcoming the resistance provided by life, that is, each corner in everyday life (Riedel, 2002).

In creating a cube-shaped watermelon as a reaction to my dream, I became interested in the fact that a cross-shaped planar figure was needed to complete the cube. The three-dimensional figure of the cross-shaped planar figure was a cube. The cross figure contains a meaning that can be understood as an attempt to set one's direction in psychological wholeness.



Figure 2. The group of a square shape II

3.2 Cross: spread out

In the cross, a decision is made. Fields of forces, such as the directions of the sky, the east, west, north, and south, the top and bottom, and right and left, meet here. The cross marks the place where we stand within the tension area of the forces and represents our overcoming and enduring our complex reality, to be whole while resisting, and to be spread out vertically and horizontally (Riedel, 2002).

In one of the dreams, I was moving in a wheelchair, changing directions from east to west, south, and north. I was in a wheelchair being propelled by a certain force that was not my will. When I arrived at my final destination, I was faced with a giant cross. I immediately visualized this dream and became interested in the symbol of the cross pattern. Riedel (2002) suggested that dividing the four domains can be understood as an attempt to set one's direction in physical and psychological wholeness. At the time, I was facing a life that was characterized by a sudden stop in routine—from years of working as a professor to embarking on a year of research. Instead of feeling free and relaxed, I felt discomfort and despair, as if I faced a stop sign in the middle of running. Did I need my life to flow passively and be without self-will? From the day I had this dream, I allowed myself to put myself in the passing of time, leaving self-will behind. The dream of seeing the cross reappeared at the end of my research year.

We are engaged in activities (education, seminars, experiments, etc.) in which we can determine what is true. I see three large feathers. They look like the feathers from a big wing of a very large white bird. The tip of the feathers is a zigzag, lacking uniformity. A guide (The guide is shapeless. It does not have any form, or I do not remember) tells us to put something at the end of the wing if we want to know the truth. After checking three times (the three feathers are placed one after another, and the overall sizes of the feathers increase in order and the curvature of the tip of the wing becomes more complex). If something interlocks with the end of the feathers, the guide says that is the truth. Now, we are told to do it ourselves: once horizontally and once vertically (it looks like a cross). (dream content, September 3, 2019)

As a sign of healing and perfection, the cross shows the needs at a specific time and the types of supplements needed. Therefore, it becomes a measure of the human state at a specific time, indicating physical and spiritual states (Riedel, 2002). Gold symbolizes the final value; it cannot be purified nor altered

(Riedel, 1999). Riedel (2002) argued that the horizontal line of the cross expresses feminine connectivity and maternal protection, whereas the vertical line implies the movement of activity and dynamics, suitable for expressing a tremendous steep slope. Interestingly, the inverted triangle represents maternal traits, and the equilateral triangle represents masculine traits, analogous to the horizontal of the cross symbolically expressing feminine attributes and the vertical, masculine attributes. In the next section, a symbol of the triangle is discussed.



Figure 3. The group of a cross shape

3.3 Triangle: relatedness

Triangles are shapes that are connected to form tension but are also shapes that can balance forces that may have been torn apart in other compositions. The form of triangles indicates relatedness (Riedel, 2002). From my view, the most dynamic figure is the triangle, and the most dynamic number is 3. I do not like the triangular shape because I do not like the vertices, which are pointed rather than round. The vertices of the triangle are repeated three times at the point where the two lines meet.

The hexagonal shape is a shape made up of the meeting (overlapping) of a triangle and an inverted triangle, and I paid attention to the potential and creativity of the triangular shape. If the triangle has masculine traits, the inverted triangle serves as its opposite pole, with feminine characteristics, and the overlapping of the two figures represents different creativity and productivity. This overlap is also the moment when the static and dynamic aspects of the triangle are in harmony. The equilateral triangle rises upward and faces fiercely toward the sky, whereas the feminine triangle, the inverted triangle, transcends the ordinary consciousness layer and moves downward, dwelling in the depths inherent in life (Riedel, 2002).

One fall night during my research year, I dreamed I was riding a small minibus that was climbing a mountain in a spiral shape. A few months later, I had a dream of descending in a lively manner on the skies. These two dreams gave me a feeling of the contrasting dynamism of ascent and descent.

1. I am at the top of a snowy mountain. I sit my hips on the ground and go down the mountain like I was sledding or skiing. As I descend, I see a lake in the mountains, and an old man is enjoying a hot spring in the lake. (dream content, June 11, 2019)
2. I am at an unfamiliar place, which may be a travel destination. I seem to be going shopping and on tours with a group of women. Next, I get on a small bus, and the bus is taking me uphill, taking me to a magnificent stone mountain. It looks like a sacred place. I see magnificent temples, and three Buddha statues are lying down in a space where a stone mountain has been hollowed to make a half cave or eaves, and below it, I can see three Buddha statues that are smaller in size than the ones lying above (Stonehenge-like structure with three legs). Among the three, I see a bright, clear, red crystal-like figure from the center one. His demeanor is so gentle and calm, and I like that. (dream content, November 24, 2019)

Looking at the shape of these mountains from a distance, I make out the shape of a large triangle, which is also in the rhombus shape in which the masculine and feminine triangles are connected at the base. This rhombus has a meaning of number 4, the number of the earth. I am standing on the ground.

The mountain is one of the oldest images of the gods (Taschen, 2010). The masculine upper triangle, which is a symbol of divine and celestial things, is in contrast to the feminine and divine upper triangle. When these two are combined, the number 4, a square, a rhombus, and the earth are formed. The rhombus not only has the divine feminine triangle but also the divine masculine triangle, which has the earth as an opponent. The masculine and feminine mentalities are opposites that are embodied in physicality and materiality (Riedel, 2002).



Figure 4. The group of a triangle shape

3.4 Circle: surrounded

The circle guarantees vastness and coziness at the same time. Circles make me want to wander around. Stepping into a circle helps the mind focus and find the center. Conversely, if it is stepped from the inside out, the circle opens up a larger space and creates a concentric circle, eventually becoming a symbol of the universe. The circle means being surrounded (Riedel, 2002) and perfection (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994). For me, the circle is the most friendly and cozy shape. It is reminiscent of an infinite space without an angled place and with a moving dynamic. In my mandala, a tangled snake often appears, described in the form of a snake orbiting its own tail, or “Ouroboros.” This symbol, a ring made by a snake, means that the conscious and the unconscious are not separate, forming the perspective of a circular symbiosis, and that they are caught in the primary process. However, the circle as a whole surface is always described as the fullness, completeness, and totality of consciousness (Riedel, 2002). In one dream, I was doing the repetitive act of picking up a rolling ball and returning to its place.



Figure 5. The circle shape

There is Chris, my advisor in graduate school, and a woman professor is sitting next to him. I walk to Chris and tell him that I have also become a professor in Korea. I cannot remember the English word for associate professor, so I tell him that I have become an assistant professor. The woman professor sitting next to me, whom I have never seen before, is now tearing up, saying she is very touched by the news. Then, a ball rolls in. Perhaps the place we sit on is slightly sloping, like a hill. The ball rolls from above, passes us, and rolls down. I think to myself that this is a good chance to excuse myself as I am getting embarrassed by the situation, so I tell them I will pick up the ball and come back. (dream content, June 16, 2019)

A play ball, especially a golden ball, always symbolizes “the round whole” of an individual. It is always on the move and promotes progress from one stage of life to another. In the fairy tale “The Frog Prince,” the princess’s golden ball disappears into the well, and in “Iron John,” the prince’s ball disappears into the hands of a savage, Eisenhans. In both fairy tales, the ball leads to the true self of a hero who is on their journey to self-growth (Riedel, 2002).



Figure 6. The group of a circle shape

3.5 Spiral: beyond Self

The spiral is the freest basic shape. In the spiral, life unfolds, develops, moves dynamically as destiny unfolds and folds again. The spiral means going beyond the self (Riedel, 2002). In Klimt’s *The Tree of Life, Stoclet Frieze* (1909), there are many spiral-shaped branches. I found them pretty and attractive because they are so different from the actual shapes of tree branches. The spiral turning to the right and ending toward the left shows the endless process of life and consciousness. Meanwhile, the spiral turning to the left expresses internal development. This development may lead to isolation from fellow human beings, but after the spiral is completely done, it turns back to “the side where they are in” (Riedel, 2002).

My brother, who is represented as animus, is spinning me like a spinning top, and I am spinning with both feet planted and centered on the ground. It is the role of animus to keep the speed constant. I became a spinning human top and was drawing a spiral with my whole body. (dream content, July 16, 2019)

The spiral movements were deeply entrenched in my daily life because I often circled around a round-shaped field. Even in my artwork, I always attempt to make it possible to describe the round expression of the spiral nature by repeatedly winding the thread. What makes all these repeated movements possible is the central point. Whether spinning outward or inward, the movements have a central point, enabling the recurring movement. The spiral turns and turns. This is not a movement that ends shortly, but one that is long and continuous.



Figure 7. The group of a spiral shape

4. CONCLUSION

This study started with identifying the contents of dreams and the pattern of symbolic images accompanying them every day during the research period in which the researcher was both a research tool and object. In preparing for this study, the researcher performed more than 24 months of analysis to check the appropriateness of herself as the research object and tool. In this process, which required courage, the researcher confirmed their conscious attitude to get in touch with the unconscious: the researcher was well prepared. The main symbolic images helped clarify the subject, made possible by the process of exploring and interpreting the dreams and symbols with an analyst from the perspective of analytical psychology. The study truthfully described the discovery of a practical layer of psychology as a human's individualization and changing, resulting in autoethnography, which is a type of qualitative study. This documentation made possible a methodology that could show the individualization of a person in text and pictures. Therefore, it is hoped that this study, which reveals the reality of the unconscious to the outer world, can contribute to explaining the minds of individuals that make up a group or society.

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