



Islam and Symbolism

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ISLAMIC CULTURE is resplendent with symbols containing historical, religious, and mystical elements. Persons working in the Middle East are advised to become familiar with them.

Symbols resonate throughout Islamic cultures, from high art and literature to popular culture. They can be found everywhere in everyday social life. It is fair to say that an understanding of Islamic culture is incomplete without an appreciation for the rich panoply of symbols that tie ancient history and tradition to modern cultures and societies that have embraced or largely embraced Islam.

Islamic symbols come from diverse sources. Most share a common nexus with the life and mission of the Prophet Mohammed and the genesis of Islam, but others are legacies of ancient sources that date from before the emergence of Islam.

Angels

Among the more purely religious symbols are heavenly messengers or angels (*al-‘ilm al-malaika*) associated with the Prophet Mohammed’s life and mission. Angels are staples of Islamic literature and artistic expression. Especially prominent are the guardian angels—Jibrail (Gabriel, the angel of life), Mika’il (the angel of rain and nature), Israfil (who will blow the trumpet on Judgment Day), ‘Isra’il, ‘Azrail, or ‘Ozrin (the angel who announces death, cited only once in the Qur’an, and a rival of Gabriel).

Other religious and mystical characters associated with Mohammed, his followers (*al-muhagirun*), and the covered figure of Mohammed himself (Muslims refuse to give a face to the Prophet) have great symbolic importance. Muslims use such symbols with care to avoid offending religious authorities and popular sentiment.

Geometric Figures

Geometric figures and calligraphy taken from Islamic sacred texts have become mainstays of Islamic art. They substitute for human figures, which Islamic religious teachings believe encourage idolatry. Fortuitously, Arabic script lends itself to incorporation into physical art. Certain numerals and passages from the Qur’an have acquired special significance through repetitive use as decoration. Especially prominent are the following scripts:

- The “ninety-nine sublime attributes and beautiful names of God” (*Al-Asma Allah al-Husna*).
- The affirmation of the Muslim faith (*ash-shahada*): “*La ilah illallah Muhammad-ur Rasulul Allah*”—“There is no God but God and Mohammed is his messenger.”

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- The summary of the Muslim faith: “*Bismillah Ar-Rahman Ar-Rahim*”—“In the name of God, the Charitable, the Merciful.”

Nature

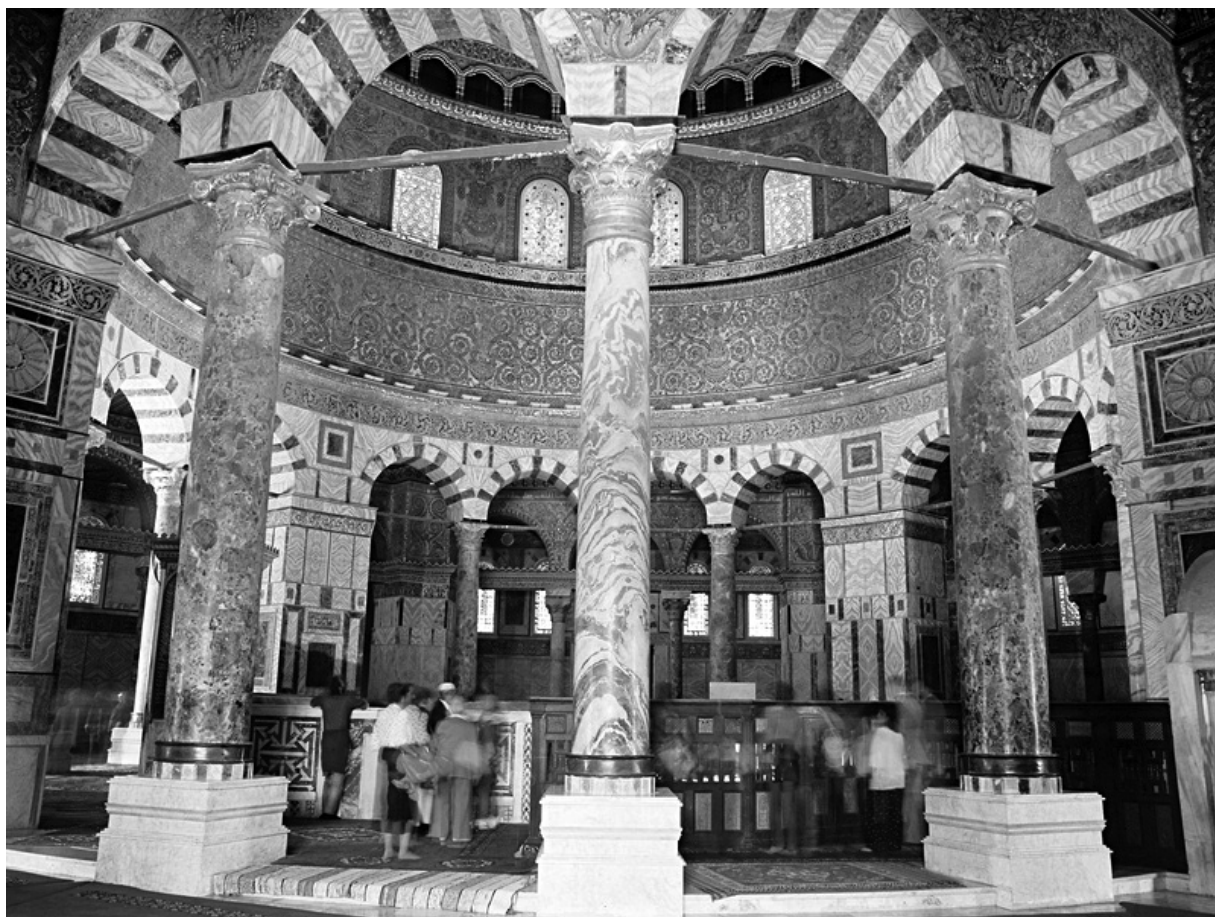
In large measure because of exhortations in the Qur’an, many prominent symbols come from nature. An evocative poetic verse exemplifies this: “If you wish to see the glory of God, contemplate a red rose.” So, too, does an exalted Muslim proverb: “*Allah jamil yhibu al-jamal*”—“God is beautiful, and He loves beauty.” Such natural phenomena as light, water, plants, animals, and heavenly bodies are popular symbols in Islamic imagery. Some of the more noteworthy of these symbols are discussed below.

Light. A symbol of the Islamic faith’s splendor, light (*an-nur*; *ad-dau’*) appears numerous times in the Qur’an as a metaphor for the revelation that gave the world Islam and that continues to “enlighten” believers. Muslim architectural stratagems empha-

size luminosity in sacred buildings and mosques. Builders have used a plentitude of arches (*rauq*), arcades (*riuqs*), and ornamental stalactite-like prisms under domes and on prominent surfaces (*muqarna*) to reflect and refract light. Tiles and mirrors amplify this effect.

Water. Water is a significant symbol with multiple meanings, most of them derived from the experiences and traditions of the Arab peoples of the desert. Not unexpectedly, they highlight its scarcity and its importance for sustaining life. The Qur’an and lifetime accounts of the Prophet Mohammed state that everyone has the right to use water as long as they do not monopolize, usurp, or waste it. The extravagant use of water, either privately or publicly, is prohibited, even if water is abundant.

Water represents fertility, creation, and growth in various contexts of life and is depicted in many forms, for example, as *an-nufta ma*, “a drop of water”; *ma hlu*, “fresh water”; *ma alah*, “salt water”; and *ma samat*, “insipid water.” Water also has



“Dome of the Rock” on the Temple Mount.



People washing before prayer at the Badshahi Mosque in Lahore, Pakistan.

acquired the socio-religious meaning or function of purifier and curative.

In mosques, water represents purification during the passage from the profane to the sacred and from the real world to the transcendent world. In an open patio (*sahn*) in front of the worship space (*haram*), there is always a source of running water (*sabil*), such as a tank or a pool (*al-bi'r*), for obligatory ritual washings. There, the faithful wash their faces, hands, forearms, and feet.

Water in its pure state is crucial to life. ("God created all living things from water," Qur'an, XXIV, 45). Thus, Muslims use water in many social practices, such as decoration, renovation, and hygienic rituals. The journey (*sa'y*) by foot between the two columns, al-Safa and al-Marwah, in Mecca during the pilgrimage (*hajj*) is associated with water. Water is a constant motif in Islamic architecture and construction, too, where a "profound enthusiasm for novel creations" is likened to "thirst."

Water also can have sexual connotations. It is sometimes used as a metaphor for semen (*al-ma*).

Gardens. With decorative flowers, trees styled into columns, and streams and springs, the garden (*riyadh*) symbolizes *firdaus*, or paradise, the supreme garden. For many Muslims, the garden is an authentic ethereal utopia, a mathematically harmonious ensemble illuminated by the sun with

fresh, pure water trickling in rose-colored streams and the muezzin singing alliterative verses from the Qur'an in the background.

The rainbow. As a symbol of spring and rebirth, the rainbow represents the union of human and cosmological dualisms: masculine-feminine, earth-sky, fire-water, hot-cold, matter-light. In the Maghrib (Northern Africa), the rainbow is known as the "wife of rain" (*al-'arussat ash-shta*) or the "arc of the prophet" (*al-qaus an-nabi*). An ancient Arabic legend appreciates it as the "belt of Fatima, the resplendent" (606–632 A.D.), the fourth daughter of Mohammed.

The Earth. The Qur'an alludes to the Earth (*al-ardh*, *ad-dunia* or *al-kura ardhiya*), the terrestrial globe, as an offering God granted to humanity so that humankind could enjoy its beauty and find sustenance and comfort on it. The Qur'an is lavish in verses about the stages that preceded Earth's creation, how the Earth should be taken care of, its vital importance for all living beings, and its variety of divine creations and cycles of life: the mountains, seas, and oceans; the clouds, rain, lightning, and thunderstorms; the atmosphere; the rivers; earthquakes, floods, storms, and other cataclysms.

Trees. Trees are extraordinarily potent symbols in Middle Eastern culture. The tree (*ash-shajra*), the "Tree of the World" (*ash-shajarat al-kawn*),

and the “Tree of Eternity” (*ash-shajrati al-khuld*) all represent growth and unity. The tree’s deep roots run into the earth and its branches spread and extend into the sky, appealing to heaven and affirming the Muslim’s search for a better destiny and purification from all sins by dedicating his being (*al-kulliyya*) and willingly submitting his identity (*al-mithliyya*) to the will of God.

The traditions of Mohammed and some verses of the Qur’an discuss trees in parables and rank them in a theological pattern on a scale of reverence. The tree symbolizes magnificence, transcendence, and divine beauty. It is frequently crowned with a two-headed eagle flanked by a dragon and a lion facing each other. Just such a mythical tree, Aussaj, is held to be the first tree to have grown on Earth.

Prominent Symbols with Pre-Islamic Roots

Some Islamic symbols come from the great civilizations that preceded Islam, including those of central Africa, among the richest sources of telluric and cosmic symbols, and ancient Egypt, with its vast mythological bestiary, divine symbols of immortality, and religious rites and offerings.

The sun. In the Middle East, the sun’s zenith (*samt al-rass*) is known as the “torch of hastiness” (*sirajan uahajan*), the spirit that illuminates the world and regulates the times of prayer. The sun itself (*ash-shams*) is an ancient symbol long associated with divine glory, sustenance of life, enthusiasm, and innocence.

The dragon. Although the dragon (*at-tinnin*) is not derived from the Qur’an, Muslims have incorporated it into their architecture, heraldry, and decoration. Islamic use of the dragon as a symbol probably stems from ancient associations with other cultures, both East and West, in which dragon symbology was particularly important and extensively used. However, the dragon symbol has some Middle Eastern roots as well. For example, owing to a mythological fable dating from the Sino-Iranian Sassanid dynasty (226-651 A.D.), the dragon evokes the mythological Hydra, the guardian of a treasure said to be hidden somewhere in the south of Yemen.

Eagle. The eagle (*an-nasr*, *al-uqab*, and *ar-rakhma*), a solar symbol, also predates the emergence of Islam. It appears prominently on national

pendants, either by itself or joined with another eagle (the bicephalous or two-headed eagle), to suggest warlike ferocity, nobility, and dominion. A common figure in Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Turk-Mongol mythology, the eagle is widely used in many Middle Eastern nations today. Similarly, the large desert hawk or goshawk (*al-ibra*) connotes heroic virtues, especially in Tlemcen, to the west of Algeria, where it is nicknamed *al-mfitha*, literally “little key.”

First used by the Hittites and the Sassanids, the wing (*al-janah*) is another symbol that holds a prominent place in the Islamic mythological-religious universe. Wings are depicted on angels, who move about with extraordinary facility, and Muslims remember the legend of Jafar, son of Abu Talib and standardbearer of the Muslim army, who lost his arms in 629 A.D. during a battle against the Byzantines. As compensation for his bravery, Mohammed told Jafar, “God substituted wings for your arms, the blessing which will take you towards Paradise.” After this, Jafar was known as At-Tayyar (“the ethereal,” “he that flies”) or “the man with two wings” (*dul-janahain*).

Crescent moon and star. Depicted in diverse ways on Islamic banners, standards, diplomatic seals, and government stamps, and adorning the national flags of many current Arab states, the quarter-crescent moon and star (*an-najma*) is the symbol of Islam. It is also synonymous with the commencement of Ramadan.

How the quarter-crescent moon came to symbolize Islam is uncertain. Many explanations with varying degrees of plausibility have been offered. Among the most popular is the assertion that the symbol signifies the position of the moon and the planet Venus at dawn on 23 July 610 A.D., when the Prophet Mohammed received his initial revelation from God.

In pre-Islamic times, the Middle East and the Aegean regions believed the star and crescent were symbols of authority, nobility, openness, victory, divine approbation, and worldly sovereignty. In ancient times, the star and the crescent were monograms of Tanit, a goddess of the Semite sector of the Roman Empire. The symbol was absorbed into Islam via the conquest of Byzantium and reinterpreted and recast by those practicing the new faith. (The Byzantines started to use the crescent around 610 A.D., on the birthday of Heraclius.) In Constantinople,

the ancient capital of Byzantium, Christian religious authority saw the star and crescent as a symbol of the Virgin Mary and other Christian figures. According to the memorials of the epoch, in 339 B.C. a bright moon saved Byzantium (Istanbul) from an attack by Philip of Macedon. To show their gratitude, the city's pagan citizenry adopted the crescent of Diana as the emblem of the city.

According to tradition, while Sultan Osman was in the process of conquering Turkey, including Constantinople, in 1299, he had a vision of a crescent moon hanging over the world. When Constantinople capitulated to Mohammed II in 1453, the crescent moon was adopted to symbolize the Turkish empire. From that point on, it became an emblem of the Ottoman Dynasty—and gradually, by association, of the Muslim world. Muslims from all around the world started to make use of the crescent and moon. In 1793, Sultan Selim III added a star, and its five points were inserted later in 1844.

Islamic emblems feature different types of crescents, designed to reflect the moon's phases. When the moon is in the waning quarter, the crescent faces left and represents longevity, aptitude, and ability. The moon is also represented in the ascending horizontal position, with a crescent raising its points upward (the Pakistani flag), and in the descending horizontal position, with the crescent pointing downward (Malaysia).

To Arabs, the changing appearance of the moon represents a cycle of divine interest and intervention

in earthly affairs. They believe the cycle regulates earthly reckoning and represents isolation, change, transformation, and passage to a new world. The cycle connotes subtle growth toward a transformed, rejuvenated, and cured world followed by a period that permits earthly affairs to recede back into decadence and spiritual darkness.

In Arabic poetry, the moon is a symbol of beauty par excellence. One consequence of this is that many names given to Arab women come from the moon: Kmar (Full Moon); Kamriya (Little Moon); Bedra or Badriya (Full Moon); Badr An-Nur (Moonlight); and Munira (Luminous).

The temple of Kaaba in Mecca, the spiritual center of Islam, is precisely aligned with two celestial phenomena: the lunar cycle and the rise of Canopus, the brightest star in the sky after Sirius.

Stars. Other stars also have potent symbolic meaning. According to their positions in the constellations, stars are fixed (*falak al-kauakib* or *falak al-manazil*); virtual (*maqadir*); stationary (*manazil*); head (*rass*); shoulder-blade (*mankib*); umbilical (*surra*); tail (*danab*); lion's tail (*danab al-'assad*); wing; and falling (*shahab thaquib*). The Qur'an declares that falling stars are thrown down by God to pursue indiscreet demons who come too close to heaven (*as-sama*) trying to listen to divine whispers.

The Colors of Islam

Color symbolism in Islam follows a pattern that reputedly goes back to the time of Mohammed. All colors (*al-lauun*; plural *al-aluuan*) are respected and, in some cases, feared or privileged. However, Muslims exalt the color green (*al-akhdar*), which has acquired special significance.

Green. Today, green is widely recognized as a symbol of Islam and of Muslim dignitaries. The color's figurative importance comes from the belief that Mohammed frequently wore a green cloak. (Green was his favorite color.)

A sign of renovation and vigor, green conveys the happiness and success that are said to come from living as a devout Muslim. It denotes devotion to Islamic dogma and symbolizes the hope for peace won by doing God's will. Green is a prominent color in Arab-Islamic heraldry; royal, tribal, and family emblems; and the flags of Arabic countries. Muslims frequently adorn mosques and interiors of houses with this color.



The national flag of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. The right (shaded) field is green, the traditional color of Islam and a symbol of prosperity. The left (white) field represents Pakistan's non-Muslim minorities. The rising quarter-crescent moon (white) stands for progress, and the five-pointed star (also white) symbolizes light and knowledge. (infopak.gov.pk)

Some Muslims display such pious regard for the color green that they decline to use it for pedestrian purposes, including in the coloration of their carpets, because doing so might allow the color of Islam to be stepped on by human feet, an act of disrespect.

An extensive Arabic vocabulary is associated with green and its various tones. Green appears in theological language, popular literature, and classical Arab poetry. For example, in Syria, a person who has made a pilgrimage to Mecca is said to have a “green hand” or to have received a blessing or hereditary privilege of holiness (*baraka*).

Other colors with special significance in Islamic culture are white, black, yellow, red, blue, and indigo.

White. White (*al-abiadh*) is a positive color in Islam. A passage from a hadith attributed to Mohammed reads, “God loves white raiment, and He created paradise white.” White is the color of angels, the color of the shroud used to cover the bodies of the deceased, the color of a sheik’s gandoura, or gown, and a student’s long tunic (*qamis*). White is also a metaphor for beauty and femininity. For example, some Muslims believe that “the whiter and stronger a woman is, the higher hypothesis that she will find a husband.”

Black. In contrast, black (*al-akhal, assuud*) is a symbolically complex color for Muslims. On one hand, it is the color of the wool tunic that Mohammed wore on the day he conquered Mecca. On the other hand, black is regarded as a bad omen and is associated with the black-feathered raven (*al-gurab*), which has a pernicious reputation in the Arab world and the memorable nickname “son of misfortune” (*ibn al-barah*). In the Sunni tradition, black also symbolizes rage. In the Maghrib and Algeria, black is seen as malignant.

The Shi’a regard black as a “cursed color,” hue of the devil and morbidity. Nevertheless, since the assassination of Imam Hussain in 680 A.D., black, the sign of sadness and sorrow, has been adopted as the color of Shi’ite spiritual guides. The black veil (*shador*) of the Iranians borrows from that context.

Red. To Muslims, red (*al-ahmar*) symbolizes the life force. It appears prominently in the flags of many Muslim countries, including Tunisia, Indonesia, the Kingdom of Morocco, Turkey, Jordan, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Sudan, Yemen, Egypt, Iraq, and Syria. Along with other colors (most commonly white, black, or green), it expresses pan-Arabism.

During the Arab occupation of Andalusia, Muslims associated red and purple (*al-urjuuanii*)—“colors of fascination” thought to inspire poets and writers—with roses, fire, and blood. The garish red colors worn by women flamenco dancers come from Arabic culture, and reflect the fire and passion in the dance. Today, Muslims frequently use red in common apparel and in decorations. For ancient Zoroastrians, red symbolized war; for example, the jellaba of the war-like natives of the Riff in northeastern Morocco is red.

Blue. In Islamic tradition, blue (*al-azraq*) often signifies the impenetrable depths of the universe, and turquoise blue is thought to have mystical qualities. As a result, Muslims imagine that a person with blue eyes has divinely endowed qualities. Similarly, indigo or dark violet-blue (*an-nili*) has mystical qualities in certain regions of the Sahel.

Natural colors. In the Maghrib and Egypt, the natural colors associated with the Earth symbolize noble, abstract sentiments. Colors linked to geographical areas include the chestnut-colored kachabia cloaks of the great plains of Algeria and the dun-colored costumes of the Berbers. In the Suss region, the Berbers wear a color similar to that of the eternal snow of the Atlas Mountains.

Paradise colors. Muslims imagine paradise as having a white aura, but they also envision it as an exceedingly fertile place with features that display a thousand and one colors. According to the Qur’an, the Paradise of the Chosen is a place where believers “will attain the Garden of Eden (*al-‘and*), beneath which the rivers run, where they will use bracelets of gold, wear green clothes of smooth and lustrous fabric and brocade, and repose on elevated thrones. What an optimal compensation and what a happy repose!” (XVIII: 31). A passage in chapter LXXVI: 21, adds: “They will be dressed up in bracelets of silver and our Father will satiate their thirst with a pure drink.” Some believe this paradise will be graced by delightful nights of poetry, delicious nectars, fresh fruit, streams of honey, large shaded areas, running water, and beautiful women with green eyes whose virginity is constantly renewed.

Islam and Animal Symbolism

Animal symbols abound in Arab-Islamic imagery. Hunting and the study of horses and fish have been practiced since ancient times, but the Qur’an and the

traditions of Mohammed added new precepts to an extant pre-Islamic pantheon of animal symbols.

By custom, the pagan inhabitants of pre-Islamic Arabia named their sons after animals as protective talismans to defend the children against magical attacks or misfortunes provoked by the evil eye. Some common names were Kalb (Dog), Hurira (Kitten), Himar (Burro), Gu'l (Scarab), and Qird (Monkey).

Each animal has a history, a parable about it, and certain qualities or characteristics that could be imparted by emulation. The noble species were, and still are, the horse (*al-hissan*); the lion (*al-assad*), a symbol of strength, bravery, courage, and force; and the falcon (*al-ibaz*), a noble, proud, faithful bird and a preeminent hunter.

Other favored species include the eagle (as aforementioned), the serpent (*al-azrim*), and the wolf (*ad-dib*), all suggesting astute awareness and resourcefulness; the partridge (*at-tasikkurt*), symbolizing loveliness; the nightingale (*al-bulbul*), signifying an eloquent and melodious maker of music; and the pigeon (*al-ahman*), connoting tenderness.

Species of a lower reputation include the hedgehog (*al-ganfud* or *al-mudijij*, literally "totally covered with armor"); the vulture (*an-nassar*); the hyena (*ad-dhabu*), symbol of imbecility, occupying the lowest place in the Islamic bestiary; the rat (*al-far*); the raven (*al-ghurab*, *al-khaliq*, *al-qaq* or *an-na'ab*—from the verb *na'aba*: "to caw"); the rabid dog; and the pig (*al-khanzir*), symbol of impurity and defilement. (The Qur'an prohibits the consumption of pork.)

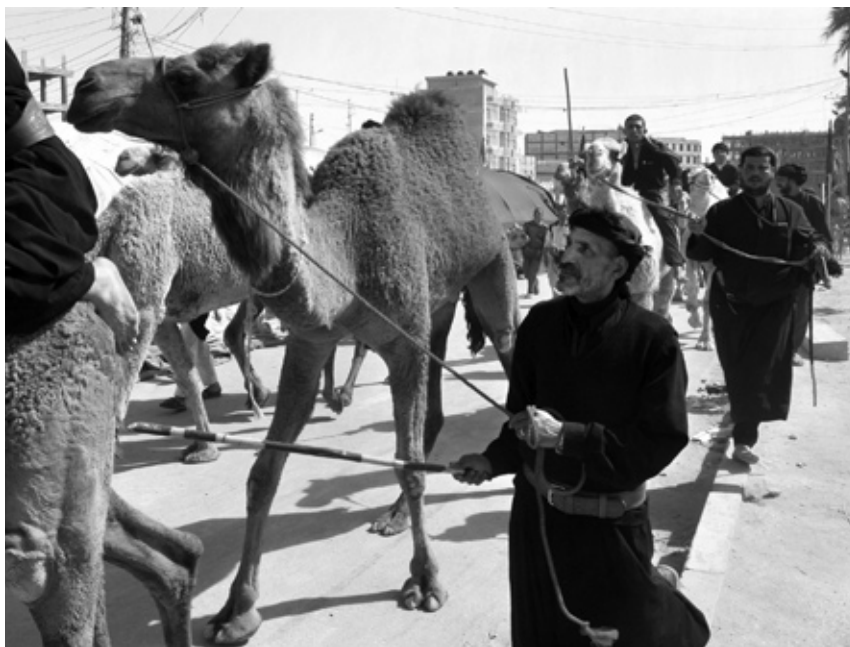
Another animal with high symbolic significance is the stork (*al-laqlaq*). Protected by tacit Arabian laws and blessed with an appearance that gives the impression of power, the stork is an esteemed animal especially revered by rural dwellers. The bird is a good omen, as suggested by the nickname given to it by ancient Jordanians: "that which brings happiness" (*al-abu sa'd*).

The camel is preeminent

among animal symbols. The Bedouins call the camel "Gift from God" (*ata' Allah*). "God," they say, "has 100 Beautiful Names, or Attributes. Of these, Man knows only 99. The camel knows the 100th, but doesn't reveal it—which helps to explain his arrogant appearance."

Domesticated around 2500 B.C., camels can transport loads weighing nearly 200 kg (441 pounds), travel distances of 300 km (186 miles) a day, and go 6 weeks without drinking water in the winter (or several days in the height of summer heat). For the nomadic peoples of the Middle East, the single-humped camel (an animal given numerous names according to its numerous uses) is synonymous with life itself. Entire desert cultures depend on the animal. The camel is not only an incomparable beast of burden; it provides the desert peoples an array of products: meat and milk; leather, waterskins, and sandals made from its skin; blankets, clothing, twine, and tents woven from its hair, wool, and tendons; fuel from its dung; and cleansers and even an anti-septic to treat wounds from its urine.

Despite its volatile temper and the irritating noises it makes, the camel is an integral part of the Arab economy, lifestyle, and folklore throughout the Middle East. At night around campfires, Muslims sometimes perform reverential dances for camels.



Iraqi Shi'ites arrive with camels, "gifts from God," in Karbala, Iraq, 28 March 2005, in advance of Al-Arbaeen ceremonies.

AP, Hadi Mizban

The spider (*al-ankabut*) is highly regarded by Muslims in large part due to a story in which a spider plays a prominent role in saving the life of Mohammed. The Prophet and his companion Abu Bakr Ibn Quhafa were being pursued by the Quraishitas. To elude their pursuers, the two hid in a cave for three days. A group of armed horsemen pursuing Mohammed approached the cave, but were unable to see it because a spider had spun a compact web that completely camouflaged its entrance. Some Muslims believe this was a miraculous act of providence, God using a spider to save the lives of Mohammed and his friend.

Muslims favor other animals such as the dragon, the lanky Saluki hunting dog, the tiger, the hare, and waterbirds (the crane, the royal heron, and the duck). These animals occupy preferred places in the architecture and decoration of palaces; in fables and legends such as *A Thousand and One Nights*; in classic texts such as *The Marvels of Creation*, by Abu Yahya al-Qazwini; and in literary-theological stories by Attar, Jahiz, Damiri, Mas'udi, and Ibn al-Muqaffa, where they appear in ordinary scenes, assuming roles usually played by humans.

A popular legend also makes the black (*aqrab akhal*) or yellow (*aqrab asfar*) scorpion a symbol of treachery. The expression “like a scorpion” (“*matl al-‘aqrab*”) describes a person of bad temperament, uncertain and vengeful.

Numerology and Arab Mysticism

Besides beasts and other natural phenomena, numbers and numerical patterns are thought to have mystical significance. Ancient Arabian alchemists, who believed that numbers can reveal concealed supernatural wisdom or are the materialization of ideas or emotions, created numerology (*ilm al-huruf*), the study of numbers and their influence. Practitioners of numerology believe they can interpret algorisms and discover patterns of numbers that link the metaphysical, the eternal, and the divine with the human and the temporal.

One. For numerologists, everything begins with algorism one (*uahid*), which corresponds to God, “The Unique/The Without Equal” (*Al-Fard*). One also represents singleness, righteousness (*al-qauan*), valor (*al-qaim*), virility (*al-muntasiban*), equilibrium (*al-mu'adilan*), the unknowable (*al-malakut*) and the knowable, as well as destiny and time.

Three. Algorism three symbolizes the soul (*talata*), which Muslims associate with the three levels of knowledge (*al-‘aqil ua al-ma’qul ua al-‘aql*): the expert, what is known, and the knowledge. The number three also represents the physical universe (head, body, and members).

Four. The number four (*arba’a*) represents matter and the balance between things created and the four elements (earth, air, fire, and water). It also signifies the seasons of the year (*fusul*): winter (*fasl ash-shita*); spring (*fasl ar-rabi’*); summer (*saif*); fall (*kharif*).

Five. The fifth algorism (*khamis*) can stand for the five senses and the five canonic obligations, or pillars (*al-arkan al-khams*), of the Islamic faith, which are—

- Profession of the faith and belief in God, the prophets, the sacred writings, angels, predestination, the resurrection (*al-quiyama*), and the final judgment.

- Orations (*salat*).
- Fasting (*siiam*).
- Charity/alms (*zakat*).
- The hajj.

Islam prescribes five daily prayers: dawn (*al-fajr’* or *as-subh*), mid-day (*az-zuhr*), afternoon (*al-‘asr*), sunset (*al-maghrib*), and night (*al-‘isha*). The five fingers of each hand are also represented by this algorism—each finger associated phonetically with the name Allah: the pinky (*khansar*), the ring-finger (*bansar*), the middle-finger (*al-ustani*), the index finger (*sabbaba*), and the thumb (*abham*).

The Qur’an describes five natural products of the Earth, which have therapeutic as well as mystical properties: vegetables (*al-bakliha*), cucumbers (*al-qittaiha*), garlic (*al-fumiha*), lentils (*al-‘adassih*), and onions (*al-bassaliha*).

Seven. Muslims can attach deep significance to the number seven (*sab’*). They swear divine fealty (*uujud mutlaq*) in patterns of seven. This algorism is of ancient Babylonian origin, but the Qur’an uses the number seven in repeating patterns such as—

- The seven heavens (*sab’ samauati*).
- The seven lands.
- The seven seas.
- The seven divisions of Hell, each one known by a compelling epitaph and each with doors as gateways unbelievers must pass through enroute to their final damnations of torture (*adab*), fire (*nar*), forge (*jahim*), and conflagration (*hariq*).

The number seven also connotes the seven days of the week, known as “the seven days of God” (*al-ayyam Allah*): Friday (*al-jumu’a*), the Islamic sacred day; Saturday (*as-sabt*); Sunday (*al-ahad*); Monday (*al-itnain*); Tuesday (*at-tulata*); Wednesday (*al-’arbi’a*); and Thursday (*al-khamis*).

Elsewhere, the chronicles of Mohammed relate that he had seven sabers and seven horses—Sakh, Murtadjiz, Lizaz, La’hif, Zharib, Ward, and Ya’sub.

Eight. Muslims associate the number eight (*taman*) with the eight cardinal directions of the wind (*ar-rih*), known in the Western Sahara and Mauritania as *sulaiman*.

Twelve. There are 12 months in the Muslim religious calendar: *Muharram* (literally “the Sacred”); *Safar* (“Felicity”); *Rabi al-auual*; *Rabi at-thani*; *Jamad’at-thani*; *Rajab*; *Shaaban*; *Ramadan* (“Fire from Heaven,” mentioned in the Qur’an as the “Night of Destiny,” or the “Night of Glory,” the Friday night that preceded the day Mohammed received his first great revelation; *Shauul*; *Zu-al*; *Qadah*; and *Ru-alhijjah*. In addition, Mohammed betrothed 12 women: Khadija, Sudiah, ‘Aisha, Hafsa, Zaynab, Umm Salamih, Zaynab, Juayriah, Safiab, Umm Habibah, Maria, and Maymunah.

Other numbers. For devotees of Sufism, the number 28 (*tamania ‘ishrun*) corresponds to the 28 houses of the moon and the 28 vertebrae of the human body; 70 (*sab’un*) is dedicated to the source of intellect; 90 (*tis’un*) connotes sincerity and truth; 300 (*talat mi’a*) represents mystical knowledge and understanding; 400 (*arba’mi’a*) relates to bliss and the discovery of God (*thauba*); and 500 (*khams mi’a*) suggests the consolidation (*thubut*) of man with his Creator. For all Muslims, the number 600 (*sitt mi’a*), associated with the letter *kha*, symbolizes the “Eternal Good” (*khayer da’im*). The number 700 (*sab’mi’a*—equivalent to the letter *zal* of the alphabet) represents the mystic

value of noble ideas. Finally, the number 1,000 (*alf*, letter *ghain*) is said to hold the absolute and unfathomable secret.

Conclusion

The significance attributed to symbols and numbers is similar among Muslim communities in the four corners of the world. However, there is also great diversity and novelty in regional beliefs, customs, art, literature, and religious practices.

The Druz of the Syrian and Lebanese mountains, the Kurds, the Shi’ites of the Elburz Mountains, the Muslims of Russia and Mongolia, the Turks of Istanbul and Konya, the nomads of the Anatolian Steppes, the Albanians of Tirana, the Muslims of Central Europe, Asia Minor, the Indian Ocean, and East Africa’s Swahili Coast—these groups all have distinct cosmographies.

Islamic culture has a high regard for the skillful and artistic use of language, especially the effective, evocative use of poetry. As a result, poetic language often appears in everyday venues in Islamic countries, considerably more so than it does in the West. This predilection sometimes puzzles and even frustrates Westerners attempting to understand Muslim culture.

In many settings, Muslims use poetry to extol the beauty of gardens, fields, flowers, and such natural events as the setting of the sun. By praising the nature God created, poets or those who recite their poems obliquely praise God.

Each people, each ethnic group, and each cultural community has a repository of symbols it relies on to a certain extent for its identity. Owing to its history and age, Islamic culture contains an unusually rich supply of such symbols. Only a few of them have been discussed here, but unless one understands Islamic symbols, understanding modern Islamic civilizations will be difficult. **MR**

ANNOUNCING the 2008 James Lawton Collins Jr. Special Topics Writing Competition

★ **Contest closes 1 August 2008** ★

The U.S. Army Center of Military History invites Army officers in the rank of major or below, warrant officers, and noncommissioned officers to submit an original unclassified essay about a small U.S. Army unit or team, no larger than a company, engaged in the War on Terrorism in Afghanistan. Submissions must be received by 1 August 2008. Competition enrollment forms and further information about the competition will be posted at <<http://www.army.mil/cmh-pg/2008Contest.htm>>. Questions about the contest should be directed to Jon Hoffman at the Center of Military History (202) 685-2360 or DSN 325-2360 or by email at hoffmanjt@hqda.army.mil.