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### Artistic expressions of the visual language on Sami ritual drums

The Sami world was inhabited with supernatural powers, where Sami people searched for consultation. *Rota*, the god of death, has the most powerful authority in his underworld, the residence of Sami ancestors. His riding a horse is described in most Sami drums whose segmented pattern has three levels – gods, people, and a paradise underworld. As a mediator between invisible spirits and people, shamans take their journeys by using different drums. This paper discusses of artistic expressions of the visual language on 71 surviving drums: a relationship between god (*Rota*)/ people (Shaman)/ offering (Reindeer) to understand a mental map of the Sami society.

#### SHAMANIC WORLD VIEW AND SHAMAN AS ITS MEDIATOR

The Sami are a native people constituting an ethnic minority in Scandinavia (Norway, Sweden, Finland) and Russia, preserving their own terrain, inhabitants, and tongue. Sápmi, the living area of the Sami, stretches from Idre in the Swedish southern Dalarna to the Arctic Ocean in northern Norway and the Kola Peninsula in Russia. The Sami have resided from coast to forest since the removal of the inland ice. The total population is around 70,000 based on the Swedish Sami parliament (Norway: 40,000, Sweden: 20,000, Finland: 6,000, Russia: 2,000). Although the earliest reference of the Sami traces to the Roman historian Tacitus' *Germania* (98 AD), the important Scandinavian source is Othere's story (890) of King Alfred of England, where name "finnas" and other attributes such as trapper, fowler, fisherman, and reindeer appear. Moreover *Historia Norvegiae* and the stories of the sagas validated the image painted by Othere. In dealing with the archdioceses of Hamburg and Bremen, Adam of Bremen refers the earliest missionaries to the Sami. The Danish historian Saxo Gram-



Fig. 1. A shaman with his rune drum in copper carving (Leem 1767)

maticus' *Gesta Danorum* (c.1200) mentions the Sami skill at skiing and archery, using the term "finni (skiing finni)" and the two Lapplands to the Finnmark (Fig. 1).

According to the Sami viewpoint, shamanism is beliefs and practices of communication with the spirit world, and the Sami believes that the world was inhabited with invisible spirits, which owned supernatural powers, defending all living ones and place in nature. Moreover, all life has dualism on the spiritual and physical levels. A spiritual world, where dead ancestors prolong to exist embraces the wholeness and perfection in opposition to the material world. In order to perform a flourishing hunting and fishing, Sami people also searched for consultation from counsellors of these spirits, for example, rocks, cliffs, lakes, the migratory route, or whole mountains.

As the divine spirit is believed to watch over flora and fauna, they erected a cult (totem) and made collective or individual offering, particularly at the beginning of the hunting and fishing season. The residential tent or nearby was the commonest location to pray to the divine, and there were several sacred places in hunting and fishing areas. The most sacrificial animal was the reindeer, while the bear hunting was a religious celebration.

The fact that Sami people had to collaborate with natural forces to sustain without destroying nature is attributed to an animistic, polytheistic view. This had impact on the Sami culture and traditions towards harmony with nature and the requirement for the shaman. Interpreted as "he or she who knows", shamans (*noaidi*) are universally the conventional healers of Turkic-Mongolian areas of Siberia and Mongolia. They hold the multiple codes and articulate their meanings verbally, musically, artistically and in dance. They are well-informed of the culture of their community and act consequently to be understood by their inhabitant with confidence. Particularly, shamans' mediations and communications with the spirits involving the dead ancestors on behalf of the community are illustrated on their objects and symbols on amulets and drums.

In other words, shamans achieve knowledge and power by traversing the *axis mundi* through contacts with the spirit world, bringing them back. In addition to the care of souls, they heal people, conduct a sacrificial ceremony, maintain the

traditional anecdotes and songs, and predict fortune-telling. As an all-knowing person at major sacrifices, shamans were the vital figure in Sami society. Chosen by the spirits, their primary obligation dealt with the spirit worlds, particularly the world of the dead. When people faced with famine on nature, or disease and troubles regarding a livelihood, or calamity situations in a family or society, Sami people asked solutions through the shaman, because from a Sami viewpoint, disease is considered as a disorder of the balance between the two souls and between the two realms of reality.

The shaman in a spirit form departs from this physical world and enters into the other side, in order to restore harmony. He ascertains which offerings the gods demand for curing the disease. Moreover, the ancestors are regarded to share in the conducts of Sami peoples' living, causing troubles or protecting their descendants and reindeer herds. Travels of the shaman in and out of the spirit world were assisted by the drum which mediated the physical and spiritual worlds. The shaman with his spirits and drum was the most central figure to be a religious and spiritual leader in Sami society.

### ROTA: THE GOD OF DEATH



Among a variety of gods and goddesses in Sami religion, *Rota* has the most dominant authority. Being the god of death, he has his kingdom in the underworld (*Jabmeaimo*) where the Sami ancestors reside. *Rota* demands a horse as sacrifice to travel to the land of the dead, and his riding a horse, a terrifying and disgusting creature, is described in the majority of Sami drums.

Nevertheless, the importance of other gods and goddess deserves attentions. The goddess *Máttaráhkká* and her three daughters, *Sáráhkká*, *Uksáhkká*, and *Juoksáhkká* have their own roles in the conception and birth. As the original mother and the god of deliveries, *Máttaráhkká* acquired the human soul from *Ráddiáhkká*, and made the body for the soul. She hands the soul over to her

oldest daughter *Sáráhkká*, the most favourite guardian goddess of women who permits it in the womb to develop, helping the human into the world. *Uksáhkká*, the second daughter, guards the home and children with a responsibility for the mother from disease and infant's growth. *Juoksáhkká*, the youngest daughter and boys' goddess, can change a baby in the womb from female to male as well as takes care of the child's growth.

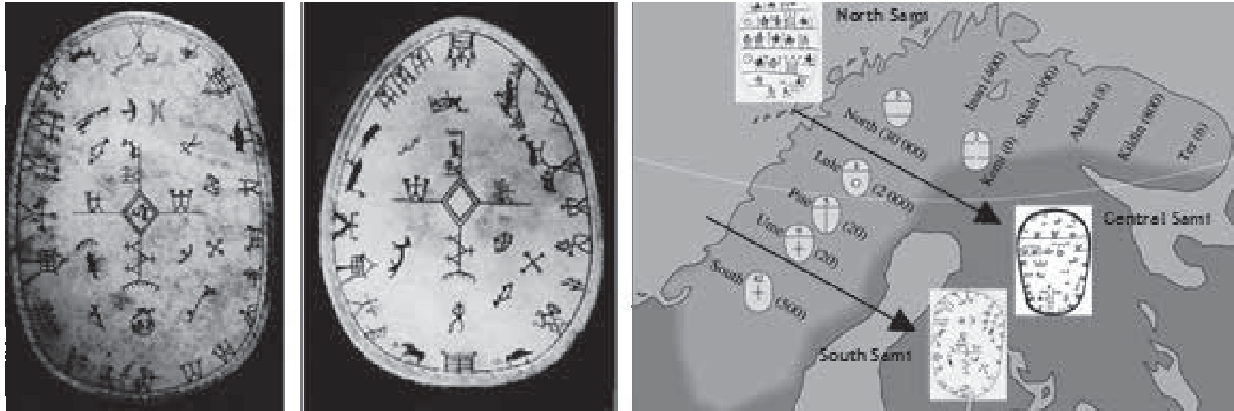
Moreover, representing as the god of vegetation and fertility, *Veraldenolmmái* is a symbol of luck for the reindeer, although *Horagalles*, the strongest, most violent thunder god who controls weather in nature, is a minor fertility god too. *Bieggolmmái*, the wind god, makes storms and bad weathers, and pushes the wind over the mountain. *Leaibeolmmái*, the hunting and forest god, rules over the animals, thus extraordinary ceremonies should take place before, during, and after the bear hunting. Above all, *Beive*, the sun god, is the most merciful and central position for the Sami life, protecting the reindeer.

### **Sami drum and its application**

An influential tradition with a drum has been kept in the Sami spiritual rituals. The oldest identifying reference to the Sami drums can be traced back to the late 12<sup>th</sup> century *Historia Norvegiae*, where the drum is depicted as a tiny vessel. In *the History of Lapland* (1674), Johannes Schefferus includes the chapter of the magical ceremonies of the Laplanders dealing with symbols (Fig. 3).

The drum has a sectioned pattern in three parts. The upper part level represents gods, while the middle and the bottom illustrate respectively human-being and the paradise underworld (*saivo*) where the forefathers resided. An indicator (*arpa*), a ring or a triangular shape made of bone, was put on the membrane of the drum, sporadically with small rings. Sometimes, the shape of a fish or reindeer-bull or a bird is chosen. And the paintings on the membrane were executed by chewing bark from the alder which resembles blood. Each drum was made with attention, and one drum could carry 150 symbols.

Many functions can be listed in using drums: (1) to guide the daily life, (2) to attain knowledge about the future, (3) to cure disease, and (4) to which god one should do a sacrifice. In some places, every family had a drum, and famous shamans possessed several drums and powerful helping spirits. By beating the drum faster and faster, the shaman started his soul journey to the spiritual world. As soon as he was entering into an ecstasy, he fell down on the ground, putting his drum on his back. In the dream, he encountered with his helping spirits for the consultation, although he could interpret how the indicator moved, and to where it pointed, due to his ability to reach any situation at will. He can leave the body and move to a spirit or a breath of wind in a trance;

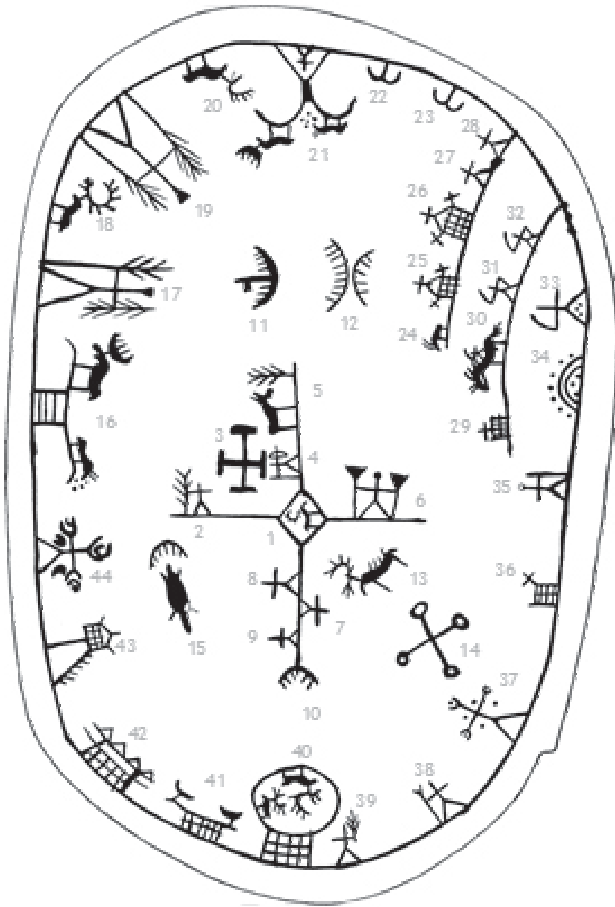


he can change himself into a reindeer; he flies over the tree tops; he swims in the shape of a fish, etc. (Fig. 4).

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Reformation spread Lutheranism outward from Germany and arrived to the Scandinavian countries. When Sami people had to embrace Christianity, the Church directed persecutions at shamans and their drums, charging the Sami ritual practices in association with the devil and witchcraft. The ancestor worship was a particular case. Laws were written prohibiting the shamans and the other Sami from the worship, and consequently, Sami people had to abandon their drums for fear of persecutions. At the start of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a drum was common in most households. In 1725, more than 20 drums were collected at Åsele market, and accordingly, the church burned most of the confiscated drums, thus 71 drums are recorded in preservation today. Ahlbäck and Bergman in *The Sami Shaman Drum* (1901: 29) claim:

"For the Sami, the drums represented their threatened culture, the resistance against the Christian claim to exclusiveness, and a striving to preserve traditional values – i.e. 'the good' that had to be saved. For the Church authorities, on the other hand, the drums symbolized the explicit nucleus of the elusive Sami 'paganism' – i.e. 'the evil' that had to be annihilated".

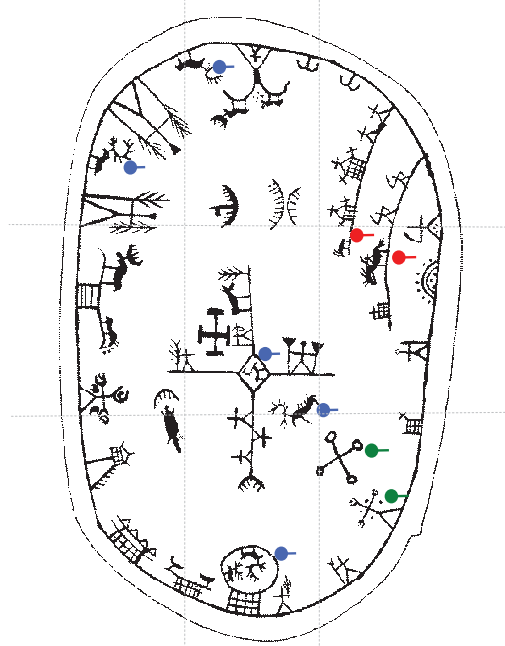
Although the eradication of the shamans led their drums to be read and understood difficult, some symbols display significant aspects of Sami life, echoing their wishes in accordance with nature. The frequent location of the sun betrays its focus in Sami culture, together with gods, goddesses, and humans. Among several animals, reindeer is the predominant on the southern Sami drums; bears, wolves and birds in other areas. Nevertheless, the involvement of non-Sami symbols emerge on a few drums, such as on Christian drums, becoming a curious feature and witnessing the transit period of the Sami conversion from shamanism to Christianity.



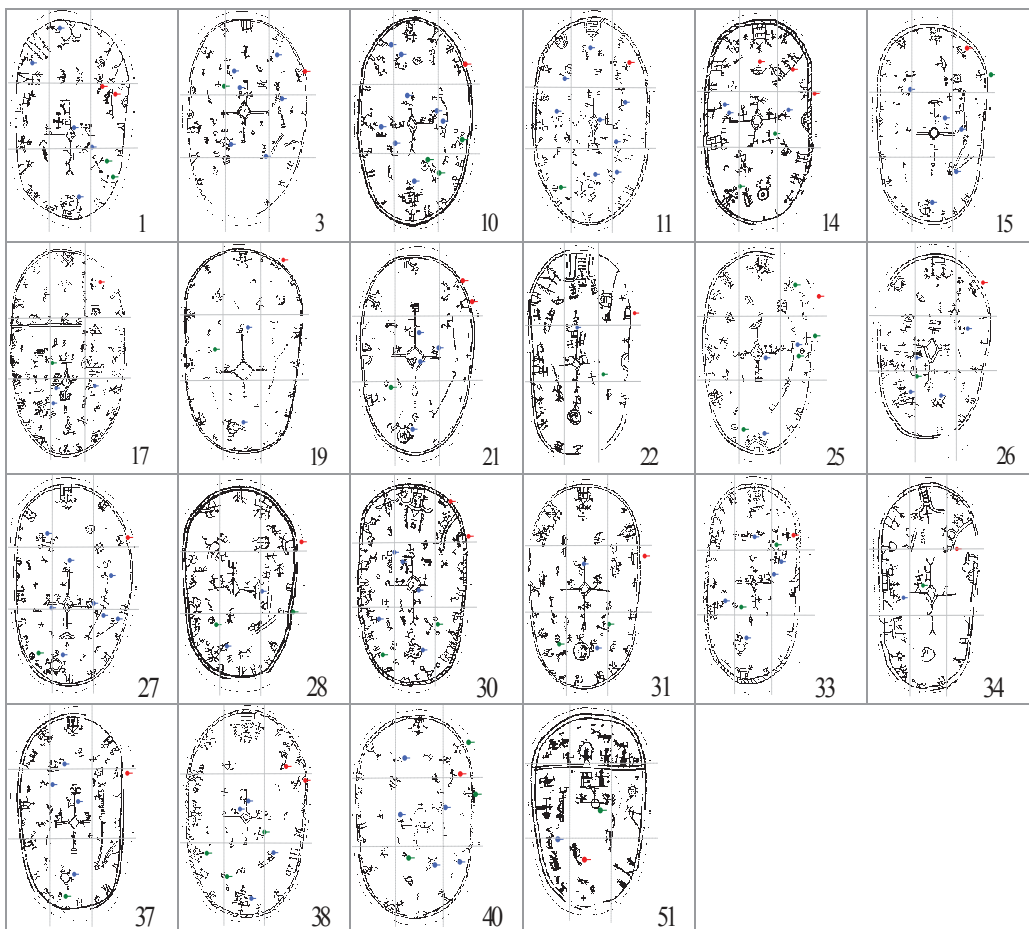
### A combination of *Rota*-Shaman/Drum-Reindeer

This research investigates a relationship between god (*Rota*), people (Shaman or Drum) and offering (Reindeer) in the Sami world. It seeks to verify how the visual expressions on existing Sami drums can explain Sami's wishes for harmony with their surroundings and nature. In order to do so, a combination of three pictorial signs (*Rota*-Shaman/Drum-Reindeer) had to be assessed in 71 drums. As full definitions and meanings of all pictorial signs on the 71 drums are hardly achievable, and are disputable if there are, the researcher assessed them, based on (1) literary sources on Sami, and (2) researcher's observation trained in visual communications, hoping to acquire further information of the relationship between *Rota*-Shaman/Drum-Reindeer at large. On this process, if any combination between them is found, the next assessment is to investigate what kind of a graphic diagram can appear. In this regard, shape (square, triangular, rectangular, etc.), a design element, is an indicator to solve this. Finally, interpretation to its finding is suggested (Fig. 5).

Before drawing a conclusion, a few preliminary findings from the 71 drums can shed light to our understanding as follow: (1) *Rota* (2) Combination of *Rota*-



Frame drum 1	rota	●	shaman/drum	●	reindeer	●
Number	2		2		5	
Position	upper/right		lower/right		middle/center	





	rota/shaman/reindeer	rota ●			shaman/drum ●			reindeer ●		
		qn	horizontal	vertical	qn	horizontal	vertical	qn	horizontal	vertical
F1	S	2	U	R	2	L	R	5	M	C
F3	S	1	U	R	1	U	L	6	U	R
F10	S	1	U	R	3	L	C	8	M	C
F11	S	1	U	R	1	L	L	8	M	C
F14	S	3	U	R	2	M	C	3	M	C
F15	S	1	U	R	1	U	R	5	M	C
F17	T	1	U	R	1	M	C	3	L	C
F19	T	1	U	R	1	M	L	2	M	C
F21	S	2	U	R	1	L	L	4	M	C
F22	T	1	U	R	1	M	C	1	M	C
F25	S	1	U	R	3	M	R	2	M	C
F26	T	1	U	R	1	L	C	4	M	C
F27	S	1	U	R	1	L	L	8	M	C
F28	S	1	U	R	2	L	L	2	M	C
F30	S	2	U	R	2	L	C	5	M	C
F31	T	1	U	R	2	L	C	2	M	C
F33	T	1	U	R	2	U	R	5	M	C
F34	T	1	U	R	1	M	C	1	M	L
F37	T	1	U	R	1	L	C	4	M	C
F38	S	2	U	R	3	L	C	4	M	C
F40	S	1	U	R	3	U	R	5	M	C
B51	T	1	L	C	1	M	C	1	L	L
sum	<b>S13</b> T9	28	<b>U21</b> L1	<b>R21</b> C1	36	<b>L11</b> M7 U4	<b>C11</b> L6 R 5	88	<b>M19</b> U1 L2	<b>C19</b> L2 R1

Table 1. F(frame), B(bowl), S(square), T(triangle), U(upper), M(middle), L(lower), R(right), C(centre), L(left)

Shaman/Drum-Reindeer (3) Diagram of *Rota-Shaman/Drum-Reindeer*, and (4) Interpretation.

(1) *Rota*

Of 71 drums, 39 have a rota motif or a similar one which describes the rota.

Of 42 frame drums (including ring frame and flanged frame drums), 32 have a rota motif or a similar one which describes the rota.

Of 29 bowl drums, 7 have a rota motif or a similar one which describes the rota.

South drums have more rota motifs than North drums.

South drums have traditional rota motifs, compared to a similar one in North drums.

Some drums have two rota motifs in a drum, either traditional or combination of rota and similar ones.

As some motifs in North drums cannot be fully identified, they could be extremely stylised rota motifs.

(2) Combination of *Rota-Shaman/Drum-Reindeer*



Of 42 frame and 28 bowl drums, 21 frame (1, 3, 10, 11, 14, 15, 17, 19, 21, 22, 25, 26, 27, 28, 30, 31, 33, 34, 37, 38, 40) and 1 bowl (51) drums have all three elements (*Rota*, Shaman/Drum, Reindeer).

(3) Diagram of *Rota*-Shaman/Drum-Reindeer (Shape: square, triangular, rectangular, etc)

A short introduction of shape is worthy to explain for the diagram of *Rota*-Shaman/Drum-Reindeer, if there appears. To begin with, square, an attribute of the shape as a design element, points to the four ends of the compass in prehistoric times. Symbolically, it denotes the earth opposed to the circle of the heavens. Square is an early existence and static perfection which God manifests in creation, and is the fixation of death, contrasted by the dynamic circle of life. In architectural symbolism, it represents the firm buildings of sedentary peoples, and signifies transcendent knowledge in sacred buildings. It is also a talismanic assurance of permanence and stability, and the mystical union of the four elements in return to primordial simplicity. In Pythagorean thought, square symbolizes the soul.

Regarding triangle, another attribute of the shape, Gestalt psychology claims that human attention is attracted by vertical and horizontal movements in triangle. The viewer will place them as a sign, interpreted by his physiological position in terms of vertical (force of gravity) and horizontal (standing level) direction. If it is judged vertically on its apex, it obtains a direction-giving character with movement transferred from the vertical to the horizontal.

The triangle with horizontal base conveys an impression of stability and permanence, while the reversed triangle has a more active character. In symbolism, triangle is the threefold nature of the universe (heavens/earth/man, body/soul/spirit). The equilateral triangle depicts completion. The upward-pointing triangle symbolises life, fire, masculinity, the spiritual world, and the trinity of love/truth/wisdom.

(4) Interpretation

(Fig. 6)

A combination of all three motifs (*Rota*-Shaman/Drum-Reindeer) was found in 22 drums, which were assessed by the shape thereafter. The result shows preference of square (13) than triangle (9), suggesting a universal idea of Sami people's wishes of stabilising harmony with nature and surroundings, due to being agricultural and sedentary peo-

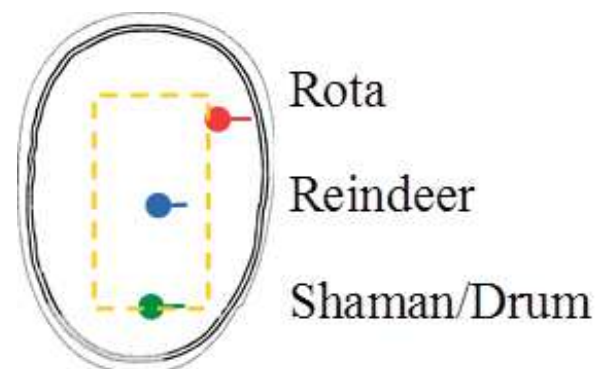


Fig. 6. Relationship between the three elements

ple. Moreover, the favourite position among the three motifs, *Rota* has his position at the upper/right level, while Shaman /Drum is seen at the lower/centre. Reindeer appears at the centre.

A question arises.

“What does the position of Reindeer (centre) between *Rota* (top) and Shaman/Drum (bottom) imply, in terms of artistic expressions of the visual language on Sami ritual drums? Should Reindeer be the central position as a sacrificial object for *Rota*, the god of death, who controls the underworld?”

If it is the case, sacrificial ceremonies using Reindeer are undoubtedly required by the Shaman and his Drums, in order to tribute *Rota* for the Sami’s harmony and peace in eternity.

## Conclusion

Historically, the spectator guesses a latent connotation and yearns for an interpretation to all kind of objects. The more aesthetic excellence of its content to appearance is, the greater its symbolic value becomes worthy of worship. Abstraction has dwelt on the human mental activity, thus reduced form is more memorable than an ordinary picture to meditation and association with the occult. Creatures in nature have been applied to symbolic signs, and beasts were profoundly rooted in the human psyche, due to their archetypes of all instincts in material, spirituality, and cosmic powers. The gods are personified in animal figures appeared in Egyptian gods’ head. Even, Christ was described as the Lamb of God, while the Holy Ghost was visualised in a downward-flying dove. Moreover, birds are associated with the “heavenly” and “earthly”, thus peacock’s fan is a sign of the sun, stars, and the eye of God.

However, for the representation in symbolism, serpent has a leading role in life and death among many beliefs across time and space. Its circular shape signifies perpetual recurrences; its skin of rebirth and immortality. Interestingly, the serpent line has contributed to linear and area ornamentation in art history. In his *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753), the English painter William Hogarth introduces the aesthetic concept of his precise serpentine line as ‘line of beauty’. He supposed to define the principles of beauty and grace, considering beautifying lines as the ideal sign of artistic craftsmanship. In this context, the art historian Alois Riegl in his famous *Problems of Style: Formation for a History of Ornament* (1893) argues that line is the primary tool of the artist, and decorative art is the application of line to solve ornamental problems. The term “beautiful” is bound up with the idea of organic undulating lines and with the art of classical Greece. Logarithmic spirals enhance the dynamism of the curve, and are powerful abstractions in symbolism.

Moreover, among numerous pictorial signs, the cult of the sun seems the most extensive and ancient of all forms of worship. The circle as a key archetype in the human subconscious can be attributed to the sun as a life-giving force. Its circular body and abstract rays propose the growth and decline of warmth. It can be credited to humans' perceiving the circle as a life-giving force, and perhaps it is why Nordic people celebrate the mid-summer as the longest day of the year. But please wait! It was the Sami people who take care and adore the sun as an ultimate god for their life, even locating it at the centre in their drums.

Whatever explanations can be given to the pictorial signs, the findings of *Rota-Shaman/Drum-Reindeer* indicate that the Sami are in favour of a stabilised and permanent relationship, testified by a square diagram within a serpent line at large. And sacrificial worships to their gods or ancestors are an ultimate duty. For this, sacred reindeers are a "must" for the rituals executed by the shaman and his drum.

Finally, as the basic yet strong identity, artistic expressions of the visual language are deliberate for identifying ownership or magic. And symbolic signs are the dominant means for delivering the hidden meanings of objects to which humans are attached. Probably, Sami gods, goddess, and ancestors knew this secret beforehand, demanding their shamans and drums, in order to distribute their invisible blessings, protections, and warnings to their Sami people. It is the Sami's intangible cultural heritage at most.

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