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# Understanding Colour in the Human Culture with Special Emphasis on the Indian Subcontinent

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## Abstract

The paper examines the role of color vocabulary in the world culture with special emphasis on that of the Indian subcontinent. The aim of the article is to substantiate color codes depending on the cultural experience that you can already see in the origins of different culture. Color is an equivalent to the word and color vocabulary is widely used in rituals, everyday life, and color attributes are regarded as magical, sacred forces. Cultural feature in the perception of the color space is often unfairly ignored while the ratio of color is largely determined by the historical and cultural traditions and customs. Examining color in the world culture and in the culture of the Indian subcontinent reveals that the semantic field of sensation is one of the most extensive in different cultures. The authors come to the conclusion, that the color vocabulary is a specific socio-cultural marker.

**Keywords:** color, vocabulary, culture, symbol, color terms, world culture, Indian subcontinent, semantic field of sensations

Long history of the development of philosophy and science passed from the first attempts to understand the mechanisms of human sensory interaction with the world deployed to the theories of color perception. Reliance on modern science has led researchers to the conclusion that understanding of sensuality is impossible without taking into account the features of the cultural experience of humanity. Culture saves, translates and generates program of activities, behavior and communication of people as a system of historically developing over-biological programs of human activity, of behavior and communication, representing the condition of reproduction and changing of social life. (Stepin 2001, 271). It forms a social experience due to the dynamics of these programs. That is why cultural heritage is not only an indicator of the level of cultural development of past generations but also a key to understanding many of the modern processes.

Formation and understanding of color came though the certain stages in the history of culture (Papchenko 2009, 56-60). Taking into account the fact that long before the appearance of clothes Homo sapiens painted themselves with ocher, chalk, charcoal

and other dyes (as it required by the esoteric rituals). It could be assumed that man not only existed in a color medium, but also actively interacted with it (Serov 1997, 13).

The symbolic significance of colors was changing throughout the history of development of humanity simultaneously in several aspects becoming a part of the social and individual experience. Archaeological, historical and ethnographic research works revealed that mystical ideas of human and color symbolism were closely connected. Color was an equivalent to the word and color language was widely used in rituals and everyday life in the origin.

The earliest origins of color symbolism indicated that the color symbolism was closely associated with magic and religion. Color considered as an attribute of magical, sacred and divine powers, and in certain cases as divinity (Papchenko 2010, 521-526).

In the ancient Egyptian language there was only one hieroglyphics "*ewen*" for the words "color" and "the essence of the character"; color was understood as a reflection of true nature of things, their soul, but not the appearance. We can find this perception of color in all areas of the Egyptian life. Color was often mentioned in the texts as an expression of the essence of the phenomenon of subject. For example, "to make green" literally meant, "to create good things"; "to make red", on the contrary, meant, "to ruin". There was no clear preference for one or several colors in the colors of ancient Egypt; each color had its own function, its preference. Symbolism of each color was versatile and revealed its meaning in different ways. For example, white color was the symbol of purity and holiness, black and white were not opposites; in fact, there did not exist color, but rather was the negation of all colors for the Egyptians.

The system of color symbolism developed in India since the ancient times to the present time. The symbol of the world's major powers, the constituent parts of the universe was a triad color in ancient India. Therefore, an important part of Sankhya philosophy was the "theory of evolution", according to which the matter was originally located in undifferentiated form. Three Gunas (quality), the combination of which directed the movement and development of the universe, performed its transformation into a world of objects and beings, open perception. The names of the modes indicate their nature: *Tamas* (darkness) represents the inertia; *Raja* (passion) - energy and activity; *Sattva* (essence) - the clarity, balance, and peace. This certainly affects color symbolism: *Tama* is always associated with the black color, the color of denial. *Raja* is associated with the red color, the oldest in the history of the humanity; a person is associated with blood, fire, and love; *Sattva* is associated with white, expressing relief from any resistance, representing the exact opposite of black. The Indian tradition of expressing the color corresponding to the emotional state gives white color values space disposition, the properties of goodness, as it is characterized by a caste of priests (Brahmins), which remained the unchanged traditions of the society for millennia.

The same principle can be traced in the Upanishads triad. In "Chandogya Upanishad" it is said: "Red color (material) is the color of fire; white color (material) is the color of water; black (material) is the original color of the earth. So, in the fire disappears all that is usually called the fire modification. This is just the name appearing in the

speech, and only three colors (form) are true." According to the Chandogya Upanishad, the whole world is three-colored.

Research of color embodied the features of Indian culture in the history of India due to its special status. Colors of Indian culture are steady, prevailing for a long time phenomenon. So, quite popular decorations in the form of yellow or red spot are present in everyday culture, which a woman puts on her forehead (tilak), ornaments that have special red paint on the palms and on the feet.

During the European Middle Ages, the color became an attribute of the divine. Therefore, the medieval theologians praised color as a manifestation of the divine, however, they indicated that color can be deceptive (from Satan) and its identification with God was a delusion and even sin. The only color that remained immutable symbol of purity, truth, innocence and divinity was white. This Christian color of confirmation, marriage and other rituals symbolized the transition to another condition. White was considered as the color of spirituality and holiness, truth and revelation in Christianity. White color had no negative values in Christianity; even white shroud meant the transition to another world.

The symbolism of the other colors is ambivalent; during different periods of the Middle Ages, a particular color became either of positive or of negative value. For example, in early Christianity positive symbolic meaning of yellow was revealed as the color of the Holy Spirit, divine revelation, enlightenment. However, in the late Middle Ages yellow acquired negative meaning, which was often correlated with it in the modern European culture.

In the Renaissance color and related associations were complex and multilayered and they were determined not only by the natural properties of each color but also by the interpretation of tradition dating back to the Middle Ages and antiquity. Thus, the English Renaissance had a strong sense of color, refinement in the selection of colors, and already in 1607, the list of trading firm had seventy-four colors (Chernova 1987, 100-101). At the same time, different color names existing nowadays had certain connotation such as: "color of chimney sweeper", "color of the king", "color of wasted time", etc. Shakespeare's contemporary had the ability to take a huge amount of color differences, to create new color options, to correlate them with the name of the language of color characters, trying to refer the characters themselves to philosophical concepts. A similar trend found its roots in the Middle Ages, which had established a hierarchical sequence in color.

Studies in the history of culture show that color symbolism helped to determine the emotional character of peoples, who used colors in art, because color was used not only for decoration, but also regarded as a symbol of symbols belonging to different social strata as a symbolic sign for the expression of mythological or religious ideas (Itten 2000, 11, 15). Dating back to the history of art, particularly to painting, O. Spengler revealed that color was the main determining factor:

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"Ancient painting of strict style limited its palette by yellow, red, black and white colors. No doubt, the soul of Euclidean was revealed by this restriction. Yellow and red were antique colors, which demonstrated the language of blood. Red was actually the color of sexuality; that is why red was the only color which effected the animals. Yellow and red were popular colors, the colors of the crowd, children, women and savages. Yellow and red were Euclidean, Apollonian, political colors, the colors of the foreground; in the social sense there the colors of noisy market, folk festivals, and colors of naive life of the ancient forum and of blind chance, of the existence. Blue and green were the transcendental, spiritual, sensuous colors. Blue and green were monotheistic colors of loneliness, care, connection with past and future, the color of destiny. Dating back to the Venetians and to the XIX century blue and green became a creating element of building through all the history." (Spengler 2006, 502-504).

Color is inseparable from religion and its role in the religious consciousness of humans cannot be overestimated (Papchenko 2013, 10-13). All the religious attributes such as banners, canopies, fonts, altars, vestments, robes, monstrance, ribbons, etc. reflect brilliance and charm for the believers through sound and music, choir singing and the smell of incense. Activation of all modalities of sensuality is widely used in establishing an emotional connection between people in the performance of religious rites. "After all, what is religion? It is psychoanalytic and color-therapeutic layout of our obscure, oppressive feelings" emphasizes Serov (Serov 2001, 58-59).

In conclusion, it should be noted, the history of culture confirms that color vision is determined not only by the physiological structure of eye and brain, but also by the evolution depending on the culture. This assumption is confirmed by the state of the color vocabulary reflecting the state of the world, which is influenced by cultural and historical experience. The body of knowledge and understanding of color reflects a color picture of the world, which is the part of the linguistic world and is included in the cultural and conceptual picture of the world accordingly. The world picture of linguistic color reveals color perception under the influence of psycho-physiological and cultural experiences reflecting the universal national character of color.

Different cultures expand the color range using national preferences. The symbolism of colors and their interpretation in different cultures finds its confirmation in the modern theories of the connection of color and emotional and volitional states of both the individual and the cultural communities.

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