

The Hand of Hamsa: Interpretation across the Globe

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Abstract:

Symbolism cultivates artistic and human endeavors, things that can't be expressed through words. This paper highlights the different interpretations of the Hand of Hamsa that have been adopted by different sects across the world along similar lines. The prime rationale of the Hand of Hamsa or Hand of Fatima was to serve as an amulet or talisman to ward off evil. It aims to capture the essence of its origin and draw similarity amongst different cultures adopting it as a talisman with diverse philosophical and religious connotations.

Keywords: Hand of Hamsa, Amulet, Talisman, Hand of Fatima

Introduction

Symbols are reflective expressions of human nature and transpire in all cultures at various phases of human development. The human communication fundamentally relies on symbols in different forms such as written or spoken words, imagery or even bodily movements. These symbols are mindful and clear representations of veracity of objects, actions and perceptions in the world around us. Furthermore, symbolism is closely associated with our inner emotional and religious world. A symbol can be a powerful source to correspond to some deep perceptive knowledge that may not be expressed directly. The civilizations of the past captured the power of symbols and used them extensively through rituals, art, religions and myths.

This paper highlights the different interpretations of the Hand of Hamsa that have been adopted by different sects across the world along similar lines. The prime purpose of the Hand of Hamsa or Hand of Fatimah served as an amulet or talisman to ward off evil. It aims to capture the essence of its origin and draw similarity amongst different cultures adopting it as a talisman with diverse philosophical and religious connotations.

Origins of Hamsa

The Hamsa is basically a palm-shaped amulet popular all over the Middle East as well as North Africa. The shape depicts the open right hand that has been documented and used as a symbol of protection throughout history in different cultures. Irrespective of the culture that it was adopted, the symbol of hamsa was believed to offer defense against the evil eye. In accordance to the historical facts¹, its origins are found in Carthage (modern-day Tunisia) closely associated with the Goddess Tanit. The Phoenicians² represented Tanit, the patron goddess of their capital Carthage and controller of the lunar cycle through depicting a hand. Over the course of history, her hand became a defensive amulet or talisman to ward off the evil eye³. Later on, the symbol was embraced as the Hand of Maryam⁵ by the ancient Sephardic Jewish community spreads across the Iberian Peninsula.

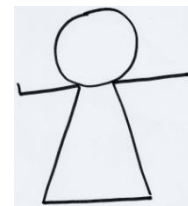


Fig. 2 Symbolic Representation of Goddess Tanit with raised Hands

¹ Patricia Monaghan *Goddesses in World Culture*, Volume 1 ABC-CLIO, 2011

² The Civilization of Phoenicia inhabited the land across the Mediterranean amid 1550-330BCE.

³ Evil Eye is one of the oldest manifestations of human fear.

⁴ Barbara Black Koltuv, *Amulets, Talismans, and Magical Jewelry: A Way to the Unseen, Everpresent, Almighty God* Nicolas-Hays, Inc., Aug 20, 2005

⁵ Maryam: after the sister of the Biblical Moses and Aaron and mother to Isa. The Islamic traditions also corresponds the Biblical philosophy.

Hamsa Hand Symbology

The majority of the cultures and faiths have adopted this symbol as a protective sign with regional variations.

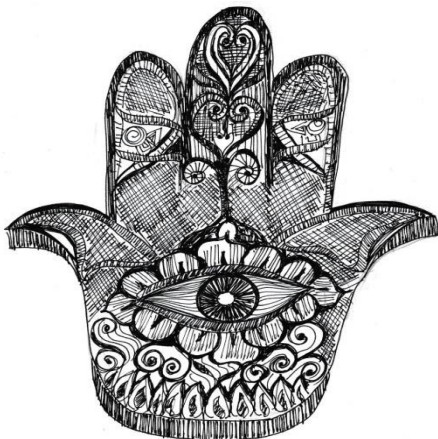


Fig. 2: Hand of Hamas or Hand of Fatima

The amulet is the omen of its owner happiness, good fortune, luck, health. The hand of hamsa is referred by numerous names such as hamsa, khamsa, hamsa hand, hamesh hand, hamesh, and chamsa. The word 'Khamsah' is primarily an Arabic word that signifies "five", but also "the five fingers of the hand". In the Jewish and Islamic traditions, the number Five is significant. Five (hamesh in Hebrew) represents the five books of the Torah for Jews. It also symbolizes the fifth letter of the Hebrew alphabet, "Heh", which denotes one of God's holy names. It is considered as a constant reminder to use their five senses while praising God.

It stands for the Five Pillars of Islam¹ for Sunnis and the Five People of the veil (Prophet's Family for Shiites). Despite the fact that the Hamsa symbol is associated with Islamic cultures, the Qur'an law prohibits the wearing of charms and amulets.

The symbol of Khamsa is usually depicted as an open hand. It is a popular representation in jewelry of the Middle East, with gold and silver as the common components. The amulet was commonly carved in silver as the metal signified purity and enhanced the magical properties. Apart from jewelry, the symbol is also painted on the walls of the house using the blood of a sacrificial animal especially as a sign of protection for an expectant mother or new baby².

Hand of Hamsa primarily appears in two forms: one that is stylized with two symmetrical thumbs and another with asymmetrical, with a clearly defined thumb and pinkie finger. Both of these forms may be depicted with fingers either up or down. Customary, the palm of the hand often contains further symbols in particular that of an eye, nevertheless different cultures may display the hand with imagery related to them.

The representation of the hand, the eye, as well as the number five figures notably in Arabic and Berber tradition is quite popular. In accordance to the Islamic traditions, the Hamsa is called the hand of Fatima signifying Fatima Zahra³, daughter of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

The Hamsa is popular as a protective charm in both Middle Eastern as well as western cultures, incorporated into jewelry, wall hangings, key chains and other decorative household elements.

Amongst the other symbols of divine protection associated with the hand comprise the Hand-of-Venus (or Aphrodite)⁴, the Hand-of-Mary to cater different concerns such as protection against evil eye, fertility and lactation, strengthen the weak, and also for healthy pregnancies. In the instance of Buddha's gesture or (*mudrā*), the symbol of teaching and protection.

Hamsa hand can be represented either with the fingers spread apart to ward off evil, or as closed together to bring good luck for its owner. However, the highly stylized representations of the hand can be difficult to recognize. The right hand is associated with rectitude and the left with devioysness. Open and raised right hand denotes reassurance and freedom from fear.⁵

It is also widely represented in various aspects of art in the region.

Hamsa and Cultures

MUDRAS AND HAMSA

Mudra is the symbolic language referring to the movements of hands. Hands are considered to be the prime source of healing in India. In this context, the symbol of Hamsa constitutes an integral part of Indian cultural and heritage symbolized one of the sacred symbols. In accordance to the Indian spiritual system, each of the five fingers in the hand represent the five elements of nature and as well as energy centers of our body (chakra)⁶.

¹ Five Pillars of Islam: *Shahada* (submission to Allah), *Salat* (prayers), *Zakat* (alms giving), *Sawm* (fasting), *Hajj* (pilgrimage)

² Cain Carroll, Revital Carroll, *Mudras of India: A Comprehensive Guide to the Hand Gestures of Yoga and Indian Dance*

³ One of the prominent woman figures in the Islamic tradition.

⁴ Henry Hurst, Z. Ben Abdallah, M. G. Fulford, S. Henson, The sanctuary of Tanit at Carthage in the Roman period: a re-interpretation, *The sanctuary of Tanit at Carthage in the Roman period: a re-interpretation*, (Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series), 1999

⁵ p. 214, David Fontana *The language of symbols: A visual key to symbols and their meaning*. Duncan Baird Publishers, London, 2003

⁶ Chakras are the psychic and spiritual energy centers in the etheric body corresponding to certain organs in the physical body.

Each finger represents a different element and Energy, which is represented in the table below.

Table 3: Representation of Five Fingers and related Nature's element and energy in accordance to Hindu Philosophy

Finger	Related Element	Chakra (body organs associated with it)
Thumb	Agni Tattava (Fire Element)	The Solar Plexus Chakra (From under the breastbone to the belly button)
Forefinger, index Finger	Vaayu Tattava (Air Element)	The Heart Chakra
Middle Finger	Akasa Tattava (Ethereal Elements)	The Throat Chakra
Ring Finger	Prithvi Tattava (Land Element)	The Root Chakra (To the center of the genital organs)
Pinkie, the little finger	Apas Tattava (Water Element)	The Sacral Chakra (Abdominal Region)



Apart from this, other religious philosophy in India also adopt the mudras or hand as an essential symbol of representing key elements. For instance, the Jain community has adopted an emblem that is represented as an open right palm that is used extensively for communal congregation. The symbol embodies the fundamental concepts described in the Jain Agamas². The outline of the sign represents the universe comprising of the three realms (Loks).

Fig. 3: Jain Emblem with the principle of 'Ahimsa' or Non-Violence depicted at the palm

HAMSA AS THE WOMAN'S HOLY HAND

The amulet signified femininity and embodied extraordinary characteristics. This symbolism was represented over 1,000 years to protect against the evil and establishment of peace. In fact, even today the talisman is used in several countries across Middle East. The representation of femininity is believed to symbolize in the main feminine figure as the Virgin Mary for Christianity³ and Fatima for Islam⁴. In short, the sign has been interpreted in different cultures and religions differently complying with their doctrines and philosophies.

HAMSA AS GODS HAND

In accordance to historical facts⁵, Hamsa was considered as the sacred symbol of God's hand in the Earth across the Middle East. The symbol was used in every new formation, as it represented the existence of God. The amulet or talisman served as a symbol of miracles, holiness and healing the attributes closely associated with God. In simple words, the amulet served as a weapon to neutralize the negative energies of envy and the forces of evil.

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The chakra symbolize spiritual ascent and form the basis of a system of meditation.

¹ Cain Carroll, Revital Carroll, *Mudras of India: A Comprehensive Guide to the Hand Gestures of Yoga and Indian Dance*, Singing Dragon, 2012

² Jain Religious Books

³ Madonna Gauding, *The Signs and Symbols Bible: The Definitive Guide to Mysterious Markings* Sterling Publishing Company, Inc., Oct 1, 2009

⁴ pp. 10-11, *Symbols of the faith: An exhibition celebrating the shared heritage of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* organized by National committee. Islam Centennial Fourteen in Conjunction with the National Geographic Society, 1981, Washington DC

⁵ Rabbi Jeffrey Wildstein, *Idiot's Guides: Judaism* Penguin, Jun 2, 2015

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