

Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India

Darśan is an incredibly powerful concept. Much like the Yoruba philosophy of *ase*, *darśan* has power of incomprehensible proportions. According to Hindu worship, *darśan* is the “seeing” of a holy figure such as a god or a goddess. (Eck, 3) These sacred seeings connect mere humans with the most powerful of beings.

The temple images of deities hold significant importance within the Hindu religion. The images of deities are often adorned with fresh flowers as the deities deserve to be celebrated in such a manner. (Eck, 3) During certain times of the day, curtains obscuring the view of the sacred images are drawn back to allow those who wish to see a full and clear view of the deity. But, *darśan* is more than just seeing an image of a deity, it is about connecting with the deity itself. According to Hindu culture, these images of the deities are not just mere images, but rather visual embodiments of the deities themselves. When people engage in *darśan*, they are making a true connection with the deity that they are in the presence of.

There are many naturally occurring images of holy importance as well such as The Himalayas, the River Ganga, as well as places associated with holy scriptures. (Eck, 5) The ability to experience *darśan* is not limited to inanimate objects, however. Certain people are able to contain the power of *darśan* as well. Such people are *sants* (saints), *sadhus* (holy men), as well as *sannyasins* (renouncers). (Eck, 5) When these exceptional individuals travel throughout Hindu communities, people will flock to the person trying to catch a glimpse of the special person. Some individuals which others have tried to experience the *darśan* of include Mahatma Gandhi, as well as Swami Karpatri, to name a few. (Eck, 5)

While the entire depiction of a deity is of high importance, the eyes themselves maintain an elevated level of sacredness. This is primarily due to the belief that not only is a person able to

view an image of a deity, but also that a deity is able to look back at a person through the eyes within their image. Because of this, the eyes of depictions of the deities are treated with extreme care. (Eck, 7) Oftentimes, when an artist is creating a depiction of a deity, the eyes are the final element to be added to the piece. The finalising of the eyes is viewed as a symbolic, “opening of the eyes,” as the deity is able to breathe life into the new depiction. (Eck,7) This act is not without its risks, however. According to Hindu tradition, it is imperative that the first sight that newly-opened deity eyes see is something pleasant. If this powerful gaze were to fall on a person for example, that person would perish. In order to welcome the deity with a pleasant image, the eyes are often opened in the presence of an offering to the deity or to a mirror so that the deity may be greeted by a view of itself. This level of danger as it relates to the eyes and sacred power within is very similar to *ase*.

In Yoruba culture, *ase* is one of the most important aspects of life and the spiritual realm. *Ase* is essentially a person’s energy or life force. (Blumenthal, 1) The face and head are key elements to the concept of *ase*. In the Yoruba language, “head” translates to *ori*. In Yoruba art, the head is often enlarged to showcase the importance of the head and the *ase* within it. (Blumenthal, 1) As with *darśan*, *ase* can be found within nature as well as the altars dedicated to the deities, or *orisha* in Yoruba terms. (Blumenthal, 1) *Ase* is believed to come from the face or eyes, known as *oju*. (Blumenthal, 2) Because of the power in one’s *oju*, it is believed to be dangerous to look directly at someone’s *oju*. Since the power of one’s *oju* is so strong, *oba* (leaders) wear veils to keep others from looking at their *oju*. (Blumenthal, 2) Yoruba leaders wear beaded headpieces. The tall pointed crown, known as *ade*, is part of the “uniform” for an *oba*. The long beaded veil keeps others from seeing his *oju*. (Blumenthal, 2) This veil also protects others from the *oba*’s ever-so-powerful *ase* in case it is accidentally released.

While parallels between western African culture and Hinduism can be drawn, the concept of *darśan* is not so relevant to western religions such as Christianity. While western religions have a sense of sacredness, there is not an equivalent to the supreme power that can be harnessed by mere eye contact, nor is it believed that God walks amongst people. Depending on the Christian denomination, there is the concept of the Holy Spirit. According to some interpretations of the Bible, God gave humans Jesus Christ. As God's only son, Christ sacrificed himself for the betterment of humanity. His death freed humans from the repercussions of sin. Upon his death, the Holy Spirit was released. The Holy Spirit is a holy power that is said to reside within all people. This belief system feels that humans are all connected through the Holy Spirit to Jesus Christ and God. This is known as the Holy Trinity, and in practice, may be referred to as The Father, The Son, and The Holy Spirit. Despite this, there is no way to be in the direct presence of God or Christ as they are omniscient beings, rather than beings which can be visited as with the Hindu deities. Through the Holy Spirit, God is within everyone, [and cannot be separated from, unless taken away from God's love through the denial of Christ's sacrifice (according to some denominations)]. In Mormon culture, an offshoot of Protestant faith, the Holy Trinity is thought of as separate entities, rather than various portions of the same essence. According to M. Hanson, renounced Mormon and personal friend, "Mormons believe that communication occurs between people and God. The Holy Spirit is the messenger. During Prayer, the Holy Spirit will speak in response. It is through this interaction that one may develop a relationship with God." Because of the lack of understanding of forces so strong as *ase* or *darśan*, western historians have been delayed in the appreciation and research regarding artwork related to these concepts as the importance is incomprehensible to western culture.

Darśan is an incredibly powerful aspect of Hindu culture. Through *darśan*, people are able to see, and be seen, by the Hindu deities. There is a strong sense of power and importance which can be channeled through depictions of the deities. *Darśan* allows people to make a direct connection with the supernatural. The power harnessed within this philosophy is something practically unfathomable to the western mind. While other parallels can be drawn, there is a special level of sacredness associated with the images of these deities and the ability to be in their presence.

Works Cited

Blumenthal, L. E. (2020, December 11). *Yoruba Asey*. Retrieved April 05, 2021.

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