

INFLUENCE AND CONTEMPORARY CULTURE OF HAND GESTURE “THE SIGN OF THE HORNS”

อิทธิพลและวัฒนธรรมร่วมสมัยด้วยการใช้ภาษามือ “สัญลักษณ์เขาปีศาจ”

Mett Robrue¹ and Suthasinee Pongplub²

Abstract

This paper presents the influence and contemporary culture on the hand gesture called “the sign of the horns” which is an international nonverbal language. It is often used in the Mediterranean countries, the United States, and has also spread to Thailand. The sign of the horns has four hand postures: The Horns Gesture generally means greeting, The Cuckold Gesture in Italy means a man is cuckolded by his wife, Mano Cornuto means to put a curse or expel a curse, and The Devil Horns means rocking out. Each hand gesture has different usages depending on the occasion and culture of each country. The origin of the gesture is from belief in Satan many hundred years ago and from a hand gesture of Buddha image, and has since then spread to entertainment; especially rock or heavy metal music, sport, video games, etc. The sign of the horns has influence on social interaction both in positive and negative ways depending on the culture. In Thailand, the usage of this gesture can be found in entertainment and it shows cheerfulness of the people who use it or to show that they enjoy the thing they do in positive ways. The usage of the gesture should be understood according to occasion, time, and culture in order to accomplish the communication.

Keywords : Hand Gesture, the Sign of the Horns, Contemporary Culture

¹ Lecturer, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Panyapiwat Institute of Management, E-mail : mettrob@pim.ac.th

² Lecturer, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Panyapiwat Institute of Management, E-mail : suthasineepou@pim.ac.th

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้นำเสนอเกี่ยวกับอิทธิพลและวัฒนธรรมร่วมสมัยผ่านการใช้ภาษามือที่เรียกว่า “สัญลักษณ์เขาปีศาจ” ซึ่งเป็นอวัจนภาษาสากล นิยมใช้กันมากในประเทศแถบเมดิเตอร์เรเนียน อเมริกา และแพร่หลายในประเทศไทยด้วย สัญลักษณ์เขาปีศาจมีการทำรูปมือ 4 ลักษณะ คือ การทำมือรูปเขาโดยทั่วไปหมายถึงการแสดงความยินดี ชื่นชม การทำมือรูปเขาสะบัดขึ้นลง (ในอิตาลี) หมายถึง ภรรยาของคู่สมรรมามีผู้ชายคนอื่น การทำมือรูปเขาชี้ไปด้านหลัง หมายถึง การสาปแช่งและหากว่าข้อมือลงคือการถอนคำสาป และการทำมือรูปเขาชูขึ้นเหนือศีรษะหมายถึงการอวยพร รื่นเริง การใช้ภาษามือดังกล่าวจะแตกต่างกันไปตามโอกาสและวัฒนธรรมของแต่ละประเทศ แม้ว่าดั้งเดิมจะเริ่มจากความเชื่อเรื่องซาตานเมื่อหลายร้อยปีก่อน และพบในท่าทางการใช้มือของพระพุทธรูป แต่ต่อมาก็แพร่หลายในวงการบันเทิง กีฬา วิดีโอเกม และอื่นๆ อีกมากมาย โดยอิทธิพลของสัญลักษณ์เขาปีศาจมีอิทธิพลต่อการปฏิสัมพันธ์ในสังคม ทั้งในแง่บวกและแง่ลบขึ้นอยู่กับวัฒนธรรม สำหรับในประเทศไทย มักพบการใช้ในวงการบันเทิง และมีความหมายแสดงความรื่นเริงอันเป็นแง่บวก การใช้สัญลักษณ์เขาปีศาจจึงควรคำนึงถึงโอกาส เวลา และวัฒนธรรมร่วมสมัย เพื่อให้การสื่อสารดำเนินไปอย่างราบรื่น

คำสำคัญ : การสื่อสารด้วยมือ สัญลักษณ์เขาปีศาจ วัฒนธรรมร่วมสมัย

Preface

Nonverbal communication is the action to contact and share meanings between human beings without words intentionally and consciously (Fred E. Jandt, 2010) however it can be understood by others through body languages, facial expressions, eye expressions, tones of voice, materials, space, time, or other symbols. They can specify the emotions and other information which is interpreted by the receivers both directly and indirectly (Judee K. Burgoon, David B. Boller and William Gill Woodall 1988, Stewart L. Tubbs and Sylvia Moss, 2003).

Body languages can be accepted by receivers; even though they come from different cultures such as nodding, bounding hand, smiling, hugging, etc. It is noted that each body language can also be misunderstood by contemporary culture, which is the culture that occurs during the time

a person lives. It can be seen through the usage of hands, eyes, feet, or any other part of the body. (Allan and Barbara Pease, 2004, James William Neuliep, 2009)

The hand gesture which is presented in this paper is generally called “the sign of the horns”, and is used all over the world, especially in the Mediterranean countries (Italy, Greece, and Spain), the United States, Africa, and Thailand. It is also represented with \m/ on a computer keyboard. However, this gesture is used in many cultures, though in each country it has a different meaning.

The posture of the sign of the horns can be performed with one hand or two. To perform this gesture one folds the middle and ring fingers, uses the thumb to lock those fingers then extends the index and little fingers up. The name of the gesture comes from the shape of the extended fingers that look like bull horns.

The origin of the sign of the horns is not entirely known, but the oldest evidence can be found in Kitab al-Bulhan or the Book of Wonders (an Arabic manuscript) around 600 years ago showing Satan displaying this gesture. The manuscript was written in the reign of Jalayirid Sultan Ahmad in Baghdad, which is about astrology and astronomy. (Public Domain Review, 2013)

Later the hand symbol was used for satanists. It also extends to heavy metal musicians and passed on to the audience who were unaware of its real meaning. At present most people understand this gesture as meaning to rock out. (Helen Keller referred in Whale, 2013)



Source: <http://ahmedamiruddin.wordpress.com/tag/iran/>

Figure 1 Satan makes the sign of the horns in Kitab al-Bulhan

The sign of the horns can be called by other names depending on cultures, periods or etc. as seen in the table 1:

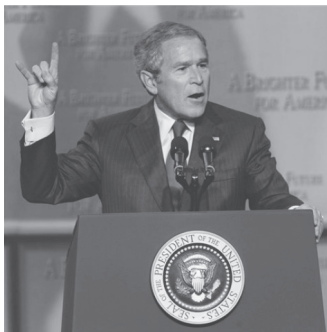
Table 1 Various names of the sign of the horns

| Other Names | Sources |
|----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| The Sign of the Horns (The Horns) | common name |
| Devil Horns (Goat Horns, Throwing the Goats) | worldwide, entertainment, sport, belief, etc. |
| Hook 'em Horns | University of Texas at Austin |
| Mano Cornuto, The Corna | the Mediterranean countries |
| Karana Mudra | Asian countries, Buddhism, Hinduism |
| P-Funk sign | parliament funkadelic (music bandname) |
| \m/ | Keyboard Symbol |

Meanings of the Sign of the Horns

The sign of the horns can be formed in several ways depending on the posture of the person who does it. Each posture also has a separate meaning. There are four postures of horned hand as follows: (Roger E. Axtell, 1998, "Reading-Body-Language", 2013)

1) The Horns Gesture



Source: <http://www.informationliberation.com/?id=4806>

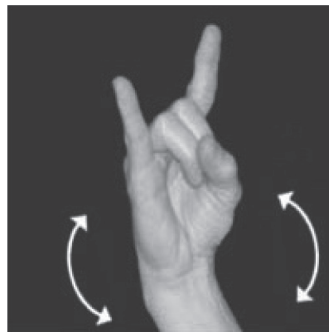
Figure 2 President George W. Bush with the horns gesture in Chicago

This hand gesture has its origin from the University of Texas at Austin's American football team which has the Texas Longhorns Bevo as its mascot. The gesture represents the long horns of the bull and it is used by supporters of the team. This gesture is also called "Hook 'em Horns".

In Brazil and Venezuela, this gesture is perceived as good luck. However, showing it in front of someone in Italy has a drastically different meaning, it signifies that that person is stupid, deceived, or infertile.

The method of forming the gesture is to bend your middle two fingers down, use the thumb to hold these fingers while holding your index and little fingers up as shown in Figure 2.

2) The Cuckold Gesture



Source: <http://www.reading-body-language.co.uk/gestures2.html>

Figure 3 The Cuckold Sign

This hand gesture is used as a sign to imply that a person (usually a man) has been cuckolded by his wife. This is well-known by Italians and it is considered an insult.

A person can form this gesture by pointing the two fingers at someone and twist the hand around (as seen in Figure 3).

3) Mano Cornuto or Camel's Head (Steve Appleford, 2004)



Source: <http://www.reading-body-language.co.uk/pictures/bl-evileye.jpg>

Figure 4 The sign of the horns used for inflict a curse upon someone.



Source: http://ovo127.com/media/ovo_figure_2_sm.jpg

Figure 5 The sign of the horns used for protect from a curse.

This hand gesture mostly used by Napolitanos and in some African countries, nevertheless its origin is unknown. The meaning of this gesture is to put a curse on someone. See Figure 4.

It looks similar to the horns gesture except that the index and little fingers directly point out toward the chest of the targeted person.

While expelling a curse has a similar position to the horns gestures, (see Figure 5) but pointing the index and little fingers downward and outward, normally lower than the heart position.

4) The Devil Horns

This gesture was popularised by Ronnie James Dio, the ex-singer of heavy metal band Black Sabbath. Forming this gesture means long live rock and roll (Ronnie James Dio's speech referred in Sirclaudioblackmore 2010) and support heavy metal.



Source: http://the5kinny.files.wordpress.com/2010/05/ronnie_james_dio.jpg

Figure 6 Ronnie James Dio shows the sign of the horns during a concert

In addition, both heavy metal musicians and fans also relate this gesture to devil worshipping due to the nature of heavy metal which its image, lyrics and intense music giving the impression of something bad or evil. However, nowadays other musicians and singers outside of heavy metal and ordinary people also adopt this gesture and use it when they are taking photographs to show that they are content with what they are doing, or that everything is fantastic or enjoy the music.

The posture looks similar to the horns gesture. It is usually made across the stomach, chest or sometimes the horned hand is raised in the air.

Usage and Occasion in Contemporary Culture

In the past, the evidence of the sign of the horns was found in Arabic manuscript for astronomy or astrology in Baghdad, then its influence was passed on to heavy metal music. However the usage of this gesture nowadays

has spread across the world in contemporary culture, especially in religious belief, entertainment, sport, and etc.

1) Religious belief

In the West, the sign of the horns or devil horns is related to the belief and veneration of Satan, and Christ denial many hundred years ago. The posture of the hand is similar to the horns of devil. When it looked at the lateral side, it looks like “666” which is the number of the beast in the Book of Revelation. It is used as a sign for worshipping Satan in some cultures. (Brutalgrinder, 2009)

Until the 21st century, some groups of people still believed that. As it was seen in the news in western Germany about killer couples, Daniel and Manuela Ruda, who showed great faith in Satan by killing their friends and drinking their blood. They explained this to the interviewers with the horns gesture. (Toby Helm, 2002)

In term of religious belief in the East, the sign of the horns is related to Buddhism and Hinduism. It is a Buddha ritual hand gesture called “Karana Mudra” which is used for warding off bad luck, sickness, or evil. This gesture can also be used by other gods such as the goddess of Mercy and compassion named Kwan Yin (“Hand Gestures in Different Cultures”, 2014, Rodika Tchi, 2014, Squidoo, 2014)



Source: <http://0.tqn.com/d/fengshui/1/0/-/M/-/-/karana-mudra-buzzlecom.jpg>

Figure 7 Karana Mudra represented to ward off bad things

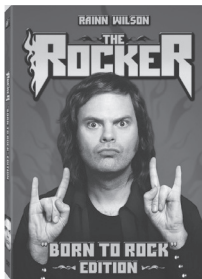
2) Entertainment

The origin of the sign of the horns in music is unknown but it can be said that its early use can be found in late 1960s on the back cover of a Chicago occult rock band named Coven on their first album - Witchcraft Destroys Minds & Reaps Souls in 1969. The picture depicts two band members showing the sign before an altar. Another account of the gesture is on the cover of The Beatle's Yellow Submarine (1969) which has the cartoon image of John Lennon showing the sign above Paul McCartney's head.

Moreover, this gesture can be seen among Parliament-Funkadelic enthusiasts. It is called P-Funk sign and was introduced by George Clinton-Lead singer of the band as the password to the band's stage prop the Mothership in the early 1970s. (Steve Appleford, 2004)

Many actors and actresses in the present adopt this gesture when they are taken photograph. Some post it on stage or publish in magazines. There are several meanings when forming this gesture ranging from respect, everything is fantastic, rocks on and etc.

Likewise, it is presented in movie posters.



Source: <http://insidepulse.com/2008>

Figure 8 Jack Black with horned hands from the movie “The Rocker” released in 2008

Apart from that, the Devil Horns is used as a hand weapon to release power in a famous third-person shooter video game named “Dead Space 3” which was released in 2012. (“Dead Space: The Devil Horns” 2013, “How to Unlock the Foam Finger” 2013)

3) Sport

The horn gesture is used as a sign for “two outs” in a baseball or American football match. The sign is originally used by Elston Howard, an American baseball player. (Roger E. Axtell, 1998)

4) Others

The Sign of the Horns is used in other occasions as follows:

• Emoticon



Figure 7 the Sign of Horns on Social Media

This emoticon is created from computer keyboard (\, m, and /) that is similar to the horns. It generally represents greeting for heavy metal music listeners or people often use it in chatroom, webboard, or facebook to express their emotions. It means rocking out. However, in Hawaii, it means to relax, praise, approve, or thank. (Urban Dictionary, 2013)

• A Bull

The sign of the horns is also used as a sign for a bull for Hindu dancers. This same meaning is also used by some native Americans to represent a bison by extend the two fingers to their foreheads. (Roger E. Axtell, 1998)

• Four Beers

It is used as a sign for ordering four beers. This sign is recognized in pubs and bars around foundries and factories in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Influence of the Sign of the Horns

The sign of the horns has influence on its users in each culture in different ways. In positive aspect, it is used for greeting, or to show feelings like cheerfulness, enjoyment and respect as in America. In Italy, however, if the direction of the fingers is mistaken, the meaning will be changed into negative immediately. It means to curse someone, you are cuckolded or you are fool. That means the expression of

each culture and each posture is related to the meaning and communication.

In a situation when American soldiers from Texas were in a pub in Italy. They noticed that other soldiers there were from the same state too. They started to flash Hook ‘em Horns sign to each other. However, Italian waiters and local patrons there were misunderstood and considered this gesture an insult. Later this situation got worse and led to a bar fight. (Roger E. Axtell, 1998)

On the other hand, this gesture is used to protect someone from a bad or an unlucky situation. For example, during his visit to a hospital in 1960s, the former President of Italy Giovanni Leone shook hands of cholera patients with one hand but secretly made a horns gesture with the other hand. His action was captured by the photographers who were around him. This caused resentment among the patients when his photo was published in a newspaper. (Serena, 2011)

In the East, the influence of the sign of the horns is related to a hand gesture of Buddha named Karana Mudra. It is believed that this gesture can ward off bad things. Later, other hand gestures or Mudra were developed to be a part of basic yoga exercise until present time. (Swami Swatmarama, 2013)

The Sign of the Horns in Thailand

With the influence of western culture and international music, the usage of the sign of the horns in Thailand can be found especially in rock or heavy metal concerts where musicians

and fans show this sign to support the music they like.

However, other people outside heavy metal also use the gesture when taking photos and in other situations but they may not know its true meaning.

In term of religious, even though Thailand is Buddhism country, people do not interpret Buddha’s hand gestures intensively, and yoga came to the attention of Thai people just around 100 years ago.

Conclusion

The hand gesture called “the sign of the horns” is generally used in the Mediterranean countries, and has spread to other countries the world over. Even though its origin is unknown, it is presumed that the horned hand was created more than 600 years ago and related to human belief about Satan, and it is well-known in rock music.

There are many other names of the sign of the horns such as Devil Horns, Hook ‘em Horns, Mano Cornuto, The Corna, etc. which depend on the countries that use it. The gesture can be divided into four postures: the horn gesture or Hook ‘em Horns means good luck in the United States, Brazil, and Venezuela, while it means stupid in Italy; the cuckold gesture, in Italy it means that a man is cuckolded by his wife; Mano Cornuto, for Naples people in Italy and some African countries it means to put a curse on someone, and the other direction of the hand means to expel a curse; The Devil Horns means long live Rock’n Roll.

The sign of the horns is used by people in the West who believe in Satan and against Christ. In the East, it can be seen in a Buddha posture. Apart from that, it can be seen in musicians, actors, actresses, video games, sports such as in baseball or American football match, emoticon in webboard. It is also the sign of a bull, and the sign to order four beers. There are many usages for the horned hands which depend on occasions, places, and times of each culture.

It is noted that the usage also has influence on social interaction in both positive and negative aspects. In a positive way, it can make a good relationship to people with a good meaning such as greeting, enjoy, rocking out, or cheerful. On the other hand, if it is used in the wrong culture or on the wrong occasion; especially in Italy, it can be misunderstood as stupidity and deceit.

The influence from western culture, rock or heavy metal music has spread to Thailand. Musicians and listeners in Thailand normally know this hand gesture, but only few people understand its true meaning. In term of religious belief, Thai people do not affected by the influence from Buddhism and Hinduism which presented in the posture of Buddha images.

On the other hand, the meaning of this gesture between the East and the West can be interpreted differently. It is found that in the Mediterranean countries, people are very serious when using the sign of the horns, whereas in the U.S.A. people show it for entertainment. While in the East, for Buddhism and Hinduism this symbol is used for warding off evil. In conclusion, the usage of the gesture should be realized by its user in order to accomplish the intended communication. If it is used in the wrong situation, it is possible that the receivers may misunderstand the message.

References

- Appleford, Steve. (2004). *Odyssey of the Devil Horns*. Retrieved December 12, 2013, from <http://www.mk-magazine.com/news/archives/000929.php>
- Axtell, Roger E. (1998). *Gestures: the do's and taboos of body language around the world*. Rev. and expanded ed. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Brutalgrinder. (2009). *Bohemian Grove*. Retrieved December 18, 2013, from <http://www.muslimthaipost.com/mnet/index.php?p=a&bNo=60&qNo=3496>
- Burgoon, J.K., Boller, D.B., & Woodall, W.G. (1988). *Non-verbal communication: The unspoken dialogue*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Dead Space: The Devil Horns*. Retrieved December 16, 2013, from http://deadspace.wikia.com/wiki/The_Devil_Horns
- Hand Gestures in Different Cultures*. (2014). Retrieved February 9, 2014, from <http://www.buzzle.com/articles/hand-gestures-in-different-cultures.html>

- How to Unlock the Foam Finger*. Retrieved December 16, 2013, from http://www.ign.com/wikis/dead-space-3/How_to_Unlock_the_Foam_Finger
- Jandt, Fred E. (2010). *An introduction to Intercultural communication: Identities in a global community*. 6th ed. California: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Neuliep, James William. (2009). *Intercultural Communication: A Contextual Approach*. 4th ed. California: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Pease, Allan and Barbara. (2004). *The Definition Book of Body Language*. Australia: Pease International.
- Public Domain Review. (2013). *Kitab al-Bulhan or Book of Wonders (late 14th C.)*. Retrieved December 13, 2013, from <http://publicdomainreview.org/2011/11/17/kitab-al-bulhan-or-book-of-wonders-late-14thc/>
- Reading-Body-Language*. Retrieved December 10, 2013, from <http://www.reading-body-language.co.uk/gestures2.html>
- Serena. (2011). *Fare Le Corna*. Retrieved December 18, 2013, from <http://blogs.transparent.com/italian/fare-le-corna/>
- Sirclaudio Blackmore. (2010). *Dio The Meaning Of The Devil's Horns*. Retrieved February 10, 2014, from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a1HPKyUOmok>
- Squidoo. (2014). *Buddha hand gestures or mudras and meanings*. Retrieved February 10, 2014, from <http://www.squidoo.com/buddha-hand-gestures-or-mudras-and-meaning>
- Swatmarama, Swami. (2013). *Hatha Yoga*. Retrieved February 10, 2014, from <http://www.yogapoint.com/info/article11.htm>
- Tchi, Rodika. (2014). *10 Buddha Hand Gestures Placement in Your Home*. Retrieved February 9, 2014, from http://fengshui.about.com/od/use-of-feng-shui-cures/ss/Buddha-Hand-Gestures-Placement-Buddha-Home_6.htm
- Toby, Helm (2002). *Last kiss as Satanist killers are locked up*. Retrieved December 17, 2013, from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/germany/1383474/Last-kiss-as-Satanist-killers-are-locked-up.html>
- Tubbs S. L. & Moss, S. (2003). *Human Communication – Principles and Contexts*. 9th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Urban Dictionary. (2013). *vm/*. Retrieved December 13, 2013, from <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=%5Cm%2F>
- Whale. (2013). *Satanic/Lucifarian Hand Sign*. Retrieved December 17, 2013, from http://www.whale.to/b/hand.html#PHOTOGRAPHS_



Mett Robrue has currently worked as a full-time lecturer at Faculty of Liberal Arts, Panyapiwat Institute of Management. He received his Master Degree of Arts in Translation from Mahidol University. His Bachelor Degrees of Arts is English major from Burapha University. His main interests are translation and interpretation.



Suthasinee Pongplub has currently worked as a full-time lecturer at Faculty of Liberal Arts, Panyapiwat Institute of Management. She received her Master Degree of Arts in Language for Communication from Mahidol University. Her Bachelor Degrees of Arts are Thai major from Silpakorn University, and also English major from Ramkhamhaeng Open University. Her main interests include language for communication and Thai language for foreigners.