Sleep, the Crescent Moon, and Islam

A key element of our interface standard is to use the metaphor of devices being *asleep* when in low-power modes. Terminology related to sleep needs to be translated into the language(s) used for each product market. We further specify that when a graphic symbol is used for sleep (e.g. on a sleep button or software control panel), that it be a crescent moon. One reason to choose the moon is that it is already the most common symbol used for sleep on office equipment, but there are other advantages as well. This discussion reviews some of the reasons for choosing the crescent moon, the relationship of the crescent moon to Islam, and implementation details for the moon symbol. This can be of assistance in promoting the standard, encouraging standards committees to adopt the moon, and to aid product designers.

The Moon as a Sleep Symbol

Common graphic associations with the idea of "sleep" in the U.S. include a bed, multiple letter "Z"s, and the moon (for its more prominent appearance at night). The bed has the disadvantage of being associated with a person going to sleep, which seems inappropriate for use on electronics. "Zzzz" incorporates the roman alphabet (letters and numbers are to be avoided in graphic symbols), though it is used on some PCs made for sale in Japan and others sold in the U.S. Of these three symbols, the moon is the most abstract, simplest to draw, and something that any sighted person can experience. All of these reasons and others presumably led most product designers to "reach for the moon" when choosing a sleep icon.

A full moon looks like any circle (and much like the IEC "Off" symbol —○). The new moon is blank. A quarter moon is already used in international standard symbols: ◖ is "light", ◗ is "dark" and ◑ is "contrast" (Symbol numbers ISO 7000-2165, ISO 7000-2166 and IEC 60417-5057 respectively). Usage naturally gravitates to the crescent moon as it is the most obviously "moonlike"[1].

There are a variety of graphic options in depicting a crescent moon.

- Craters: Few if any moon symbols use the pattern of craters on the moon. Most use just a solid fill. Such articulation is to be avoided on standard symbols anyways.
- Points: The angular distance between the points of the crescent, going around the moon, is in principle, always 180 degrees for the real moon. Some graphic representations use somewhat less, and some (particularly in Islam) use much more, as much as a full 360 degrees.
- Direction: Facing the equator in the northern hemisphere, the crescent moon opens to the left as it waxes, and to the right as it wanes. In the southern hemisphere, the directions are reversed. Astronomical symbology uses the left-facing moon. Most Islamic flags use the right-facing version (more on this below).
- Tilt: Some crescent moon symbols have the points are in a vertical line; others are at an angle, usually with the crescent opening slightly up.
- Exposure. As a quarter moon shows half of the moon surface exposed, there is a logic to have the crescent show one fourth of the surface.

[1] The moon has other minor associations, many of them culturally dependent. For example, in the U.S. at least there is the idea of the "Man in the moon", and a crescent moon was used on many outhouse doors.

The Crescent Moon —the "Hilãl"[2]

One question which arises in considering a moon as the symbol for sleep is whether it has any associations which would call its suitability into question. The principal one we have considered is the association with Islam — whether people of Islamic faith would be offended. In the United States (and presumably the rest of the industrialized west), the association does not cause any significant concern, which is demonstrated by the use of the moon on many computer products, in hardware and software. The primary question then is how it is seen from countries where Islam is dominant.

The "hilãl" is the "crescent moon" or new moon symbol, often shown with one or more stars. It is important as many events in the Islamic calendar are determined by the first sighting of the crescent moon as it begins to increase in size. The single star is presumably Venus, the "morning star". The hilãl's association with Islam is not original, but has grown over the last few centuries.

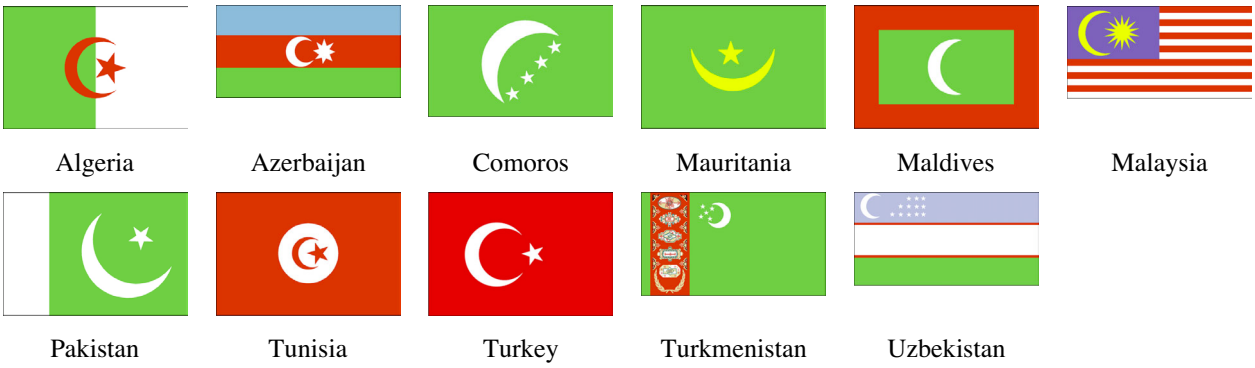
The "Encyclopaedia of Islam"[3] reviews historical use of the hilãl in art/décor, flags, and buildings, all in considerable detail. The first reported use of the crescent moon is on coins in the year 695 A.D. (year 75 in the Islamic calendar), in combination with a star. From the beginning, it was often quite stylized with the two points of the moon nearly or actually touching each other. In addition to coins and artwork, the hilãl has been sometimes used on top of mosques, in the way that a Christian cross is. However, the use of hilãl on mosques is not as universal as the cross's use on churches and cathedrals, and the hilãl has also been put atop non-religious buildings as well.

The hilãl is reported to be used on military flags beginning in the 15th century. Modern nations began using it on national flags beginning in the early 1800s with the Ottoman Empire / Turkey, Tunisia, and Egypt. In the 1900s, other countries adopted it as part of their flags, such as Pakistan in 1947.

Modern Flags

Quite a few countries use a crescent moon on their national flag, as shown in Figure 1. Most Islamic flags use the right-facing crescent, even though it is to symbolise the first sighting of the waxing crescent, which would be left-facing as facing the equator in the northern hemisphere. One possibility is that the goal of having the moon face away from the flag hoist (flag depictions by convention have the hoist on the left) was a higher priority.

Figure 1. Crescent moons on National Flags as of 2002



Source: The CIA "World Factbook 2001" http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/

For those with monochrome copies of this discussion, green is the most common color of the flag fields, with red the second. Most of the moons are white with two yellow and two red.

[2] The word "hilal" is supposed to have a long bar "-" on top of the "a", not the tilde as shown here. Advice on how to do this in modern word processors would be appreciated.

[3] Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition, edited by R. Lewis, V.L. Menage, Ch. Pellat, and J. Schacht., Volume III, 1971.

Most of the flags have some moving of the points past 180 degrees, with Turkey's (the oldest) the most stylized. All but one have one or more stars, and all but two have five-pointed stars (this last point is significant in Islam). Most have the points aligned vertically, and only two resemble our proposed moon — Pakistan's, though it has a prominent star on top of the moon, and Maldives, which has the points in a vertical line.

The Red Crescent

The "Red Crescent" is used in place of the Red Cross as the basic medical relief symbol in dominantly Islamic countries. It has its origin in the Ottoman Empire, shortly after the Red Cross began to be used by European wartime medical relief services. While many in the Red Cross movement insist that the Red Cross is not a Christian cross, the perception that it is is remains strong despite many attempts to unify the movement around the Red Cross (or some other symbol). Thus, the dual emblems remain[4], and are shown in Figure 2.

While the documentation of the origins of the Red Cross symbol is scant, it is not intended to be a religious symbol, and officially the Red Crescent is neither, though clearly many people perceive otherwise. Regardless, the Red Crescent does not seem to pose a problem for our moon.

Figure 2. The Red Cross and Red Crescent

Source: The International Committee of the Red Cross, http://www.icrc.org, April, 2002.

Some Expert Opinion

It is always helpful to consult those who are experts in a field, so we contacted one — Dr. Alan Godlas, Associate Professor (Islamic Studies and Arabic), Department of Religion, University of Georgia. We put the questions of using the moon as a sleep symbol on electronics to him and he kindly queried colleagues and students on the matter. He told us via email:

> "As far as I can see, it would NOT be offensive. Nevertheless, I am in the process of polling both a number of colleagues who are professors of Islamic Studies as well as local Muslims from a variety of countries. Thus far all agree with me.." (November 6, 2001)
>
> "Nine professors of Islamic Studies from all over the US, most of whom are also Muslims, responded to my query. Eight of them said it would NOT be offensive, one said it might be. Also, nine members of the local Muslim student association responded (and they are all from various Muslim countries and ethnic origins) and they unanimously said it would NOT be offensive." (November 10, 2001)

[4] Israel uses a red Star of David, though this is not recognized as an official international symbol by the movement. Iran used a Red Lion and Sun until 1980.

Conclusions

The crescent moon used on some existing PCs and proposed for use as a standard symbol lacks the specific stylization of Islamic use, particularly the points moved much closer to each other and the presence of one or more stars. For this and other reasons, the use of the moon as a symbol for sleep does not seem problematic culturally.

For the graphic options in depicting a crescent moon, we recommend

- Craters: Use just a solid fill, or a blank outline, not craters. After all, we are referring to a moon's association's (with sleep in this case), not the moon itself.
- Points: The angular distance between the points of the crescent, going around the moon, should be about 180 degrees. Anything more will be unnecessarily imitative of the hilãl.
- Direction: As astronomical symbology uses the left-facing moon, using the right-facing one for sleep provides a modicum of differentiation.
- Tilt: A slight tilt seems pleasing to the eye, and helps to differentiate it from the symbol. There is a potential similarity to the telephone symbol — (IEC 60417-5090) but hopefully that will not be a problem (and as fewer phone handsets are the traditional shape, perhaps that symbol will ultimately be changed). We propose to "tilt" the moon by 23 degrees, the earth's angle of inclination. There is no rational basis for this specific choice — just some subtle fun.
- Exposure. As a quarter moon shows half of the moon surface exposed, it would be logical for the crescent to show one fourth of the surface.

In addition, we recommend:

- Do not use a red crescent, to avoid causing confusion with the International Committee of the Red Cross logo.
- If stars are used, place them scattered all around it, never on it, or concentrated near its open end, so as to not imitate the hilãl — but it is best to avoid stars entirely.

IEC 80416 specifies how to construct symbol originals precisely. Office equipment and consumer electronics often stylize existing standard symbols, and we expect the moon to be treated the same. These specifics are for the standard version, and should be reviewed by those who stylize the symbols as background.

Some Current Moons

The following are found on office equipment already.