

Thread-Spirit: The Symbolism of Knotting and the Fiber Arts by Mark Siegeltuch

Extract from

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Written after years of studying both the textile arts and traditional symbolism, *The Thread-Spirit* is a compendium of the wisdom of both essential human exercises. Inasmuch as we express who we are through what we create and use, through our technologies, we are the human beings described in this book.

The technology of traditional societies is based on the application of metaphysical principles to practical ends. This is particularly clear in the case of the fiber arts— knotting, weaving, spinning, basketry, and the like—where a worldwide symbolism exists which appears to have its origins in Paleolithic times.

There is an underlying historical continuity to this symbolism that survives, but has been forced underground with the rise of rationalism. These traditions survived into the 20th century in more remote parts of the world, but they were generally no longer understood. *The Thread-Spirit* attempts to examine the traditions, as they existed and continue to exist, and reunite them with their ancient meanings.

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Using a consistent set of symbols, our ancient ancestors sought to explain the relations governing the social order, the workings of the cosmos, and the mysteries surrounding birth and rebirth. The eye of the needle, for example, was understood as the entrance to heaven while the thread was the Spirit that sought to return to its Source. Creation is a kind of sewing in this version of the story as God wields his solar, pneumatic needle. Man is conceived as a jointed creature similar to a marionette or puppet but held together by an

invisible thread-spirit. When this thread is cut, a man dies, comes "unstrung," and his bones separate at the joints.

It was the American art historian, Carl Schuster who first discovered the significance of body joints in this symbolism and he believed that it was based on an analogy with the plant world where regeneration is possible from a shoot or sprout. Body joints play a role in such diverse matters as labyrinths, continuous-line drawings, cat's cradles, dismemberment and cannibalism, and various rituals meant to ensure rebirth and the continuity of the social order.

Coomaraswamy comments on the symbolism associated with primitive looms: In weaving, the warp threads are the "rays" of the Intelligible Sun (in many primitive looms they proceed from a single point), and the woof is the Primary Matter of the cosmic "tissue ."

The tree or pole to which the warp threads are attached is conceived as a Sun Pillar, Shaft of Light, World Tree, or Sacrificial Post, and serves as the axis mundi through which the ethereal countercurrents flow from Heaven to earth and back. It is only appropriate that these currents or rays—the source of all being—are physically attached to the weaver, whose work becomes an act of creation in the fullest sense.

Vertical and horizontal looms vary in design but their construction is equally symbolic. Horizontal looms are often pegged into the ground while vertical ones are sometimes hung from trees. Both kinds may employ one or more beams to provide the necessary tension for the woof threads. It is no coincidence that the word "beam" refers both to a shaft of light and to a piece of wood, with the attendant notion that the fire is immanent in the wood.

René Guénon investigated the manifold but consistent symbolism of weaving in the Hindu, Islamic, Buddhist and Taoist traditions in an article entitled "The Symbolism of Weaving." He noted the close relationship between sacred books (texts) and cloth (textiles). The Indian sacred books are composed of sutras (threads) and the same may be said for the Koran where the Arabic word sūrat refers to the chapters. A book is formed of threads in the same way a cloth is. These ideas derive from a more ancient tradition in which knotted cords were used for mnemonic purposes.

Continuing the analogy, the Chinese associate the warp threads (king) with a fundamental text and the weft (wei) with the commentaries on it. In Hindu terminology the shruti or fruit of direct

inspiration is associated with the warp and the smṛiti, the product of reflection and

commentary on the text, is associated with the weft. More generally, the warp threads represent the divine, immutable element and the weft threads the human and contingent. It is the coming and going of the shuttle that makes possible the application of eternal principles to given conditions.

[The symbolism of weaving] is also used to represent the world, or more precisely, the aggregate of all the worlds, that is, the indefinite multitude of the states or degrees that constitute universal Existence.

What begins as an ideal pattern unextended in time and space, becomes fabric by the actions of the weaver, who creates a reflection of the divine prototype. Weaving, like all the traditional arts, has both a spiritual and material component and represents the re-creation of things as they were in the beginning.

The intersection of a warp thread with a woof thread forms a cross, representing the juncture of the Universal Spirit—which links all possible states of being—with a particular state of existence. Each human existence results from the intersection of these two threads.

The warp thread also represents the active or masculine principle (Purusha in the Hindu tradition) while the weft represents the passive or feminine (Prakriti). Or astronomically, the warp threads may be conceived as solar (direct) light and the weft lunar (reflected) light. In either case, what is stressed is creation from complementary or contrary forces.

One interesting application of this symbolism is found in the field of number theory, formulated in ancient times and bequeathed to the Middle Ages through the [quadrivium](#). By definition the square is four equal straight lines joined at right angles. But a more important definition is that the square is the fact that any number [sic], when multiplied by itself, becomes a square. Multiplication is symbolized by a cross, and this graphic symbol itself is an accurate definition of multiplication. When we cross a vertical with a horizontal giving these line-movements equal units of length, say 4 for example, we say that this crossing generates a square surface: a tangible, measurable entity coming into existence as a result of crossing. The principle can be transferred symbolically to the crossing of any contraries such as the crossing of the male and female which gives birth to the individual being, or the crossing of a warp and weft which gives birth to a cloth surface, or the crossing of darkness and light which gives birth to tangible, visible form, or the crossing of matter and spirit which gives birth to life itself. So the crossing is an action-principle which the

square perfectly represents.

Carl Schuster was interested in crossed figures and collected examples from many cultures and time periods . He believed such figures represented the first Man and Woman of the tribe or group—like Adam and Eve—and their crossing signified the act of creation