

# The Thread-Spirit Doctrine

## An Ancient Metaphor in Religion and Metaphysics with Prehistoric Roots

### Introduction

The symbolism connected with the fiber arts is remarkably consistent throughout the world and contains a number of common themes of which the most important is the “Thread-Spirit” doctrine. The great expositor and interpreter of these matters was the art historian, folklorist, and metaphysician, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) who first identified the doctrine and who applied the Sanskrit term *sutratman* to the entire tradition.

Despite its name, which is derived from the Sanskrit words *sutra* (thread) and *Atman* (Spirit), the Thread-Spirit doctrine is found in many cultures—Hindu, Islamic, European, Chinese, Amer-Indian—suggesting great antiquity. The doctrine, once understood, gives meaning to the varied symbolism derived from the related arts of knotting, sewing, spinning and weaving. The doctrine is expressed both in language and art and appears in various forms in the folktales of the world as well as in the sacred writings of the world’s major religions.

This paper will explain the doctrine and some related symbols and attempt to demonstrate its antiquity and distribution. It’s Paleolithic origins will be the subject of a separate paper.

### The Solar Breath

In the *Rg Veda* (1.115.1) we read: “The Sun is the Spirit (*Atman*) of all that is in motion or at rest” and that the Sun connects all things to Himself by means of a thread of spiritual light.<sup>1</sup> It is important to understand that these are symbolic, not scientific statements. The Sun refers to God, and not the sun we see with our eyes.

In all the contexts in which “Sun” has been capitalized the reference is, of course, to the “inward Sun” as distinguished from the “outward sun, which receives its power and lustre from the inward” —Boehme, Jacob, *Signatura Rerum* XI:75, to the “Sun of the Angels” as distinguished from the “sun of sense” —Dante, *Paradiso* X:53:54; compare *Convito* III:12, 50-60. This “Sun of the sun” — Philo Judeus, *De specialis legibus* I:279; compare *De cherubim* 97—Apollo as distinguished from Helios — Plato, *Laws* 898D, Plutarch, *Moralia* 393D, 400C, D—is not “the sun whom all men see” but “the Sun whom not all know with the mind” — *Atharva Veda* X:8.14, “whose body the sun is” — *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanisad* III:7.9. The traditional distinction of intelligible from sensible, invisible from visible “suns” is essential to any adequate understanding of “solar mythologies” and “solar cults.”<sup>2</sup>

In the *Jaiminiya Upanishad Brahmana* (III.4.13-III.5.1) we find, “By the Gale, indeed, O Gautama, as by a thread, are this and yonder world and all beings strung together.”<sup>3</sup> The Spirit or Gale (*atman*, *prana*, *vata*, *vayo*), conceived as both a breath and a ray of light—depending on the context— is the source of our being, our essence.

The progenitive power of the breath is most familiar to us from the Old Testament, beginning with *Genesis* 2:7: “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.”

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1. Coomaraswamy, *Collected Works*, I, pp. 296-297.
  2. Coomaraswamy, *The Bugbear of Literacy*, p. 108, nt. 7.
  3. Coomaraswamy, *Collected Works*, I, p. 467.

This “solar breath” is not to be identified with our physical breath that depends upon it. The invisible world of the Spirit can only be explained by analogies rooted in the world of the senses. Plotinus expresses the same vision in the *Enneads* (vi.4.3):

But are we to think of this Authentic Being as, itself, present, or does it remain detached, omnipresent in the sense only that powers from it enter everywhere?

Under the theory of presence of powers, souls are described as rays; the source remains self-locked and these are flung forth to impinge upon particular living things.<sup>1</sup>

God is connected to each of his own by a ray or thread of pneumatic light upon which life depends. This ray is bestowed at birth as a gift and revoked at death, while abiding eternally *in divinis*. All things under the Sun are in the power of death. In the *Upanishads* we find that the “Sun’s light has many rays (sons)” and that “He fills the world by a division of his essence.”<sup>2</sup> More succinctly: “God is one in himself, many in his children” and “He divides himself while remaining undivided.” We alone experience the division. The solar ray is our guide to salvation, the road back to the Source.

The generative power of the Sun is central to many traditions from the Pharaoh who “came forth from the Rays” to the French Sun King. Here the life-giving blessing of the Sun is extended like a hand toward Pharaoh Akhenaten and his family (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Akhnaten and Family

The leader embodies the power of Heaven and his radiance allows his people to prosper (Figure 2). As we live and breathe, we are God’s children, or more correctly, it is not we who breathe, but God. The world is a vast conspiracy, a “breathing together.”

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1. Plotinus, *The Enneads*, p. 590.

2. *Jaiminiya Upanishad Brahmana* (ii.9.10) and *Maitri Upanishad* (vi.26).



Figure 2: Portrait of the Roman Emperor Hadrian with solar rays

It is our Solar paternity that is reflected in Aristotle's statement, "man and the Sun generate man" (Physics II.2), in which the metaphysical and scientific outlooks are combined. Similarly, we find in Aquinas, "The power of the soul, which is in the semen through the Spirit enclosed therein, fashions the body" (ST III.II), a view apparently shared by Pythagoras.<sup>1</sup> Coomaraswamy was able to find evidence for the idea of Solar paternity in a wide variety of cultures including Indian, ancient Greek, medieval Scholastic, Sufi, American Indian, and aboriginal Australian.<sup>2</sup>

The symbolism of the *sutratman* has correspondences at every level of existence, both human and divine. Cosmologically, the Sun is spoken of as a fastener or button (Sk. *asanjanam*) to which these worlds are linked by means of the four quarters. This motif is familiar to us from folklore where the archer-hero sends a threaded arrow through four marks placed at the corners of an arena and it returns to his hand.<sup>3</sup> Often the archer is elevated and "sees the field," signifying God's omniscience and omnipresence.

In the traditional Vedic cosmology, the Sun is seven-rayed, comprising the zenith, nadir, four cardinal points, and the all-important seventh ray that alone passes through the sun to the super-solar Brahma world. This world can only be reached by the Spirit or central ray, often referred to as the Sun's "best ray," "best foot," or "light of lights."<sup>4</sup> This ray or central beam (*axis mundi*) pierces the center or navel of the world and unites the three worlds — an idea found in many traditions.

Architecturally, the *axis mundi* is symbolized by a central post (king post) that supports the house or temple and serves as the point of juncture for the roof beams. In the human body, the center post is the spine.<sup>5</sup>

There is also a theory of cognition inherent in the symbolism. Just as the king-post supports the building and unites the roof beams, so too our senses are unified in the single Solar breath. It is the goal of the yogi or adept to withdraw his senses from their various attachments back to the source from which all perception arises. Our senses are merely God's "lookouts."

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1. Diogenes Laertius, VIII.28, quoted from Coomaraswamy, *The Bugbear of Literacy*, p. 109, ft. 18.

2. See Coomaraswamy, "Spiritual Paternity and the Puppet Complex," in *The Bugbear of Literacy*.

3. In the *Sarabhanga Jataka*, the act is performed by the Bodhisattva Jotipala ("Keeper of the Light"), where it is referred to as the "threading of the circle." See Coomaraswamy, *Collected Works*, I, pp. 442-443 and "The Symbolism of Archery" in *What is Civilization?* For other versions, see Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*.

4. There is a connection here to the central candle on the Jewish menorah that is used to light the other candles.

5. See Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity* and *The Symbolism of the Stupa*.

# Puppets of God

In an essay titled, “‘Spiritual Paternity’ and the ‘Puppet Complex,’” Coomaraswamy explains the metaphysical ideas behind the symbolism of puppetry.

Puppets seem to move of themselves, but are really activated and controlled from within by the thread from which they are superseded from above, and only move intelligently in obedience to this leash: and it is in this automatism, or appearance of free will and self-motion, that the puppet most of all resembles man.<sup>1</sup>

We are the puppets or toys of God, an image taken up by Plato in *Laws* where the Athenian explains true education.

Let us suppose that each of us living creatures is an ingenious puppet of the gods, whether contrived by way of a toy of theirs or for some serious purpose—for as to what we know nothing; but this we do know, that these inward affections of ours, like sinews or cords, drag us along and, being opposed to each other, pull one against the other to opposite actions; and herein lies the dividing line between goodness and badness. For, as our argument declares, there is one of these pulling forces which every man should always follow and nohow leave hold of, counteracting thereby the pull of the other sinews: it is the leading-string, golden and holy of “calculation,” entitled the [common law of the individual]; and whereas the other cords are hard and steely and of every possible shape and semblance, this one is flexible and uniform, since it is of gold. With that most excellent leading-string of the law we must needs co-operate always; for since calculation is excellent, but gentle rather than forceful, its leading-string needs helpers to ensure that the golden kind within us may vanquish the other kinds.<sup>2</sup>

If we are the puppets of God then we ought to act accordingly, following His direction and not our own urgings. We should avoid the disorder created by our desires that pull us where they will and instead, hang onto this “golden cord.”

Our powers of perception, expression, thought and action must be guided by Reason; not what we mean by reason—which Plato calls opinion and assigns a merely pragmatic value—but rather the Divinity within us. The Stoic Marcus Aurelius was of the same mind.

Become conscious at last that thou hast in thyself something better and more god-like than that which causes the bodily passions and turns thee into a mere marionette. What is my mind now occupied with? Fear? Suspicion? Concupiscence? Some other thing?<sup>3</sup>

It is God who controls the central cord that guides the others.

Bear in mind that what pulls the strings is the Hidden thing within us: *that* makes our speech, *that* our life, *that*, one may say, makes the man.<sup>4</sup>

Our goal is to identify with the true source of all perception and action and so become a witness to our own fate. This is accomplished through a kind of automatism, not of the mechanical kind, but through grace—both spiritual and physical — as in the case of the Balinese (Figure 3). It is by means of this automatism that an intelligent and spontaneous life may be lived; an active life in the moment, in preference to a passive subjection to one’s emotions. This is the same kind of

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1. Coomaraswamy, *The Bugbear of Literacy*, pp. 99-100.

2. Plato, *Laws*, bk. 1, 644D, LCL, translated by R.G. Bury. Coomaraswamy emends the translation as indicated in brackets. The original translation reads “the public law of the State.” See *Collected Works*, II, p. 368, n. 110 for an explanation.

3. *Marcus Aurelius*, XII.19, LCL, translated by C.R. Haines.

4. *Ibid.*, X.38. Cf. III.16, VI.16, VII.3, and VII.29.

automatism advocated in the Koran when it speaks of "submission to the will of Allah" or in the New Testament where we read, "Not what I will but what thou wilt" (Mark 14:36; cf. John 8:28).



Figure 3: Balinese Dancer

The symbolism of the human puppet also appears in the odes of Rumi, the medieval Sufi poet.

O ridiculous puppet, that leapest out of thy hole (box) as if to say 'I am the lord of the land,' how long wilt thou leap? Abase thyself, or they will bend thee like a bow.<sup>1</sup>

What will bend the puppet like a bow are his own emotions, which pull him this way and that. The ancient Hebrews shared this basic conception of man and his relation to God as D. B. MacDonald tells us.

Some of them held that all the non-human creation existed for the sake of man and that man was, to some degree, a partaker of the divine nature. Others, however, held that all created things were on one level before Jehovah and existed for one purpose, to be a great animated toy with which Jehovah could occupy Himself and amuse Himself.<sup>2</sup>

India provides many examples of this motif. The Hindu god Vishnu in his role as Creator is referred to as the "Holder of every Thread." In the *Mahabharata* we find: "Human gestures are harnessed by another, as with a wooden doll strung on a thread";<sup>3</sup> and in the *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad*:

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1. Rumi, *Divan*, Ode XXXVI. Quoted from Coomaraswamy, *Collected Works*, II, p. 149, ft. 3.

2. D. B. MacDonald, *The Hebrew Philosophical Genius*, pp. 133-134.

3. *Mahabharata*, Udyoga Parvan 32:12; quoted from Coomaraswamy, *The Bugbear of Literacy*, p. 111, ft. 40.

Do you know that Thread, by which, and that Inner Controller by whom this world and the other and all beings are strung together and controlled from within, so that they move like a puppet, performing their respective functions?<sup>1</sup>

In Book VIII of the *Iliad*, Zeus seeks an end to the Trojan War and calls the gods to a conference. He warns them about interfering:

But perhaps you gods would like to put me to the test and satisfy yourselves? Suspend a golden rope from heaven and lay hold of the end of it, all of you together. Try as you may, you will never drag Zeus the High Counsellor down from heaven to the ground. But if I cared to take a hand and pulled in earnest from my end, I could haul you up, earth, sea and all. Then I should make the rope fast to a pinnacle of Olympus, and leave everything to dangle in mid-air. By so much does my strength exceed the strength of gods and men.<sup>2</sup>

A different kind of tug-of-war is described by the medieval Hasidic writer Eleazer of Worms in *Sefer Hasidim (Book of the Devout)*: “Man is a rope whose two ends are pulled by God and Satan; and in the end God proves stronger.”<sup>3</sup>

The golden cord also appears in Orphic theogony where Zeus questions Nyx (Night).

Having asked of Nyx how all things might be both one and divided, he was bidden to wrap *aither* round the world and tie up the bundle with the ‘golden cord’.<sup>4</sup>

The Greek *aither* is not air, as it is sometimes translated, but the eternal, fiery, pneumatic power that holds the four material elements (earth, air, fire and water) together and animates them. The golden cord is itself ethereal and pervasive and holds all beings together until they die, come “unloosed,” and return to their source.<sup>5</sup>

William Blake followed the same golden cord back to its source in his poem “Jerusalem”:

I give you the end of a golden string,  
Only wind it into a ball,  
It will lead you in at Heaven’s Gate  
Built in Jerusalem’s wall.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, far away from 18th century England, among the Negritos of the Malay Peninsula, a similar connection is established with the sky during a *séance* performed by the *hala* or shaman.

During his *séance* the *hala* of the Pehang Negritos holds threads made from palm leaves or, according to other accounts, very fine cords. These threads and cords reach to Bonsu, the celestial god who dwells above the seven levels of the sky. (He lives there with his brother, Teng; the other levels have no inhabitants.) As long as

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1. *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad* III:7.1; quoted from Coomaraswamy, *The Bugbear of Literacy*, p. 111, ft. 41.
  2. *Iliad*, VIII.18 ff. Translation by E.V. Rieu. Plato comments on this passage in *Theaetetus* (153): “And shall I add to this the all-compelling and crowning argument that Homer by ‘the golden chain’ refers to nothing else than the sun, and means that so long as the heavens and the sun go round everything exists and is preserved among both gods and men, but if the motion should stop, as if bound fast, everything would be destroyed and would, as the saying is, be turned upside down.”
  3. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 92.
  4. A. B. Cook, *Zeus*, vol. II, p. 1029.
  5. Ether is considered the substance and abode of the Supreme Deity in many traditions including the Greek, Hebrew and Vedic. It is equated with the *Logos* or Word of God, which unites the contraries and holds the world in its embrace. See René Guénon, “The Ether in the Heart,” in *Fundamental Symbols* and Coomaraswamy, *Guardians of the Sudoor*, “The Concept of ‘Ether’ in Greek and Indian Cosmology.”
  6. *Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, Jerusalem 3: “To the Christians,” p. 231.

the séance continues, the *hala* is directly connected with the celestial god by these threads or cords, which the god sends down and, after the ceremony, draws back to himself.<sup>1</sup>

## Things Fall Apart

Just as the pins of a puppet hold its limbs together and allow movement, the human body is articulated by means of muscles and joints. We read in the *Maitri Upanishad*, "It is by 'the thread' that the parts are really coordinated and moved: as in man 'it is by the Breath that the joints are united....'"<sup>2</sup> This vital Breath is not our respiration but the thread-spirit that vivifies it. To use Aristotelian terminology, it is the First Cause of our being, rather than the mediate causes that govern the physical world.

Human beings depend on God to remain alive just as the puppet depends on the puppeteer to remain in motion. Death is the great devourer, the unstringer. When our life is "cut off," we are "undone," fall down, and our bones come apart. Life is a bond loosed at death. Sophocles wrote that Oedipus "blessedly loosed the bonds (*telos*) of life" much as Shakespeare has Hamlet say, "when we have shuffled off this mortal coil."<sup>3</sup>

What is true in the microcosm is true in the macrocosm. The thread-spirit holds the universe together. Dante understood this:

In the order I speak of, all natures incline  
Either more near or less near to the source  
According as their diverse lots assign.  
To diverse harbours thus they move perforce  
O'er the great ocean of being, and each one  
With instinct given it to maintain its course.  
This bears the fiery element to the moon;  
This makes the heart of mortal things to move;  
This knits the earth together into one.<sup>4</sup>

The Renaissance humanist Marsilio Ficino agreed. In *De Lumine* he compares the light that connects heaven and earth with the Spirit: "And as in us the spirit is the bond [connecting link] of soul and body, so the light is the bond of the universe (*vinculum universi*)."<sup>5</sup>

The Old Testament story of Ezekiel in the Valley of the Bones (Ezek. 37) illustrates the same principle, only here the dead are reanimated. Isaiah is asked by God to "prophesy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord." He follows God's commandment and the bones come together with a great noise, and flesh and sinew grow upon them. Next he is commanded to summon the four winds to breathe upon the slain that they may live. Again he does as instructed and the Spirit enters the bones and a great army arises. The four winds are the breath of God (thread-spirit) that act as the animating and binding force in the world, holding the quarters together.

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1. Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism*, pp. 338-339.

2. *Maitri Upanishad* 1:4; quoted from Coomaraswamy, *The Bugbear of Literacy*, p. 111, ft. 38.

3. Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, 1720; Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III, I. See R.B. Onians, *The Origins of European Thought*, p. 436 and passim.

4. Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto 1, lines 109-117. Translation by Laurence Binyon. The Italian reads: "Questi nei cor mortali e permotore, Questi la terra in se stringe."

5. Paul Oskar Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, translated by Virginia Conant, p. 116.

In the end, everything under the sun is subject to corruption and decay when the thread-spirit that supports it returns to its source. Clothing wears out, men die, buildings collapse, cities fall into ruin. In folklore, a yogi pulls a thread from his garment and a city collapses. In another tale, a man is given a test: thread the needle. If he succeeds, he is rewarded; if not, all of his belongings are confiscated.

## All the World's a Stage

Puppets, marionettes and jointed dolls were once symbols of the drama of human existence, now reduced to child's play. Religious doctrine reminds us that the artisan, in fashioning his creations, acts in imitation of God, the Master Craftsman.<sup>1</sup>

We possess puppets and dolls from many cultures and time periods, some humble and commonplace toys (Figure 4), some quite remarkable and clearly designed to create a sense of wonder and astonishment.

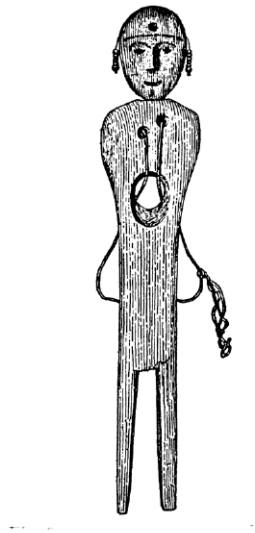


Figure 4: Eskimo Mechanical Doll

Excavations in Greece and Rome have uncovered dolls in a variety of media including wood, bone, terra cotta, ivory, marble, wax, linen and leather.<sup>2</sup> All are mature females, many with painted and modeled features including hair, earrings and inlaid eyes. Most are jointed, though the number of joints varies, and many have movable limbs, often attached by wires or cords (Figure 5). In Greece, such dolls are found in the graves of children or in temple precincts. Greek girls dedicated their dolls to Artemis or to other goddesses before marriage. Egyptian specimens have been found in wood and pottery dating from the 3rd millennium.

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1. The Creator, as Divine Artificer, may be represented in a variety of ways. Symbolically, the material world is a “wood” in which we may or may not be lost as Dante noted, and that Jesus was not coincidentally, a carpenter. He is also depicted as an architect. The traditional doctrine of art is discussed by Coomaraswamy in a number of works including *The Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art* and *The Transformation of Nature in Art*.
  2. See Kate Elderkin, “Jointed Dolls in Antiquity”. For a general review of the literary evidence for dolls and marionettes in ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome, see Charles Magnin, *Histoire des marionnettes en Europe*.



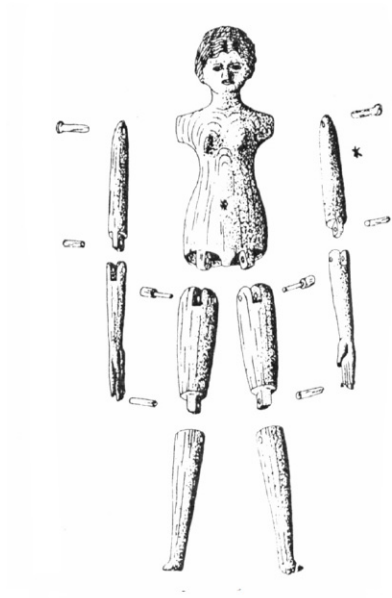


Figure 5: Jointed Roman Doll

Dolls and marionettes are often associated with ancestors, which is why we find them in graves. On Bali, the *ukur-kepeng* is a doll fashioned to the size of the corpse and cremated with it (Figure 6). It represents the skeleton, as indicated by its jointed composition. It is made of white yarn (the nerves) and “black” Chinese coins (the bones). The *ukur selaka* is used for the same purposes by the higher castes and is made of silver plaques strung on silver wires or of gold (*ukur-mas*). It is not cremated but kept as a family heirloom.<sup>1</sup>

ukur-

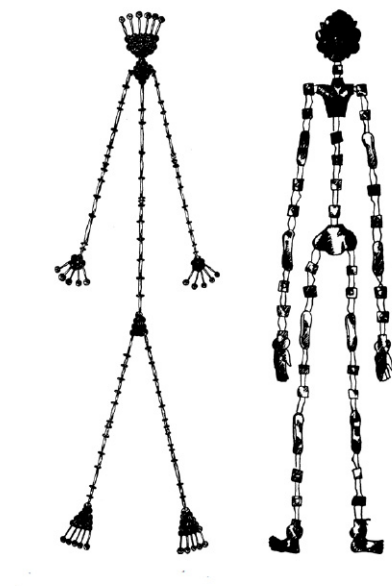


Figure 6: Balinese *ukur-kepeng* and *ukur-mas*

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1. See Miguel Covarrubias, *Island Bali*, pp. 366-367 and Paul Wirz, *Der Totenkult auf Bali*.

Indonesian *sigalegale*, giant mechanical puppets operated by strings, are even more spectacular (Figure 7).

*Sigalegale*, some of the most complex puppets in the world, are made to propitiate the spirits of the dead who lack offspring to provide for them. Typically nearly life-sized, the puppets are capable of dancing, blinking, and even crying, and they appear to be self-animated because the puppeteer is at a distance behind the wooden box underneath. Formerly the puppet head was an overmodeled human skull or a wooden head covered with human skin....<sup>1</sup>

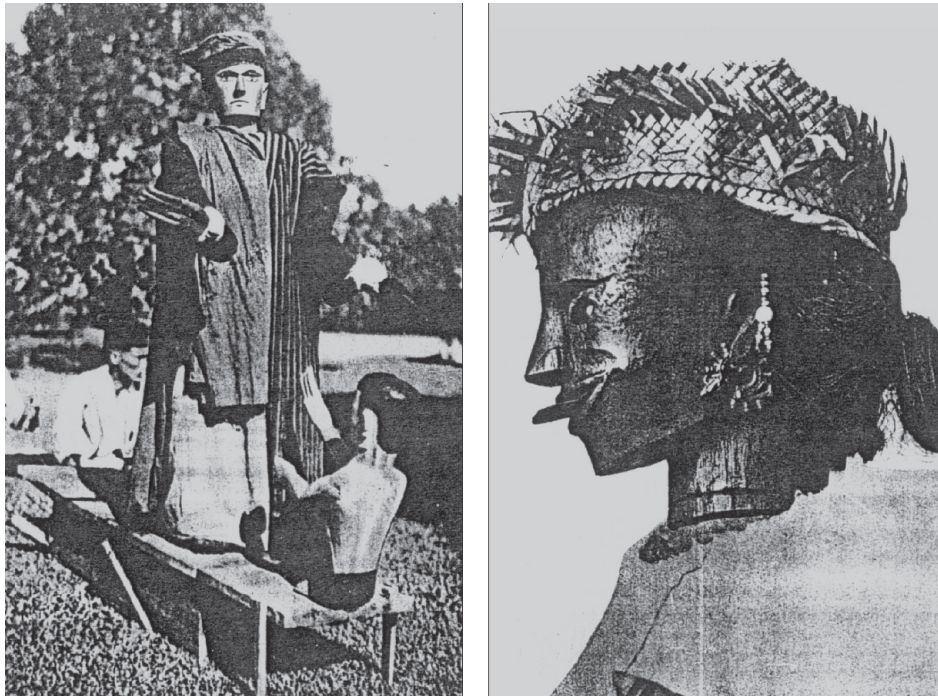


Figure 7: Life-size mechanical doll (*Sigalegale*) and detail of face.

The symbolism of dolls and puppets reminds us that “all the world’s a stage” with God the stage manager working behind the scenes. This conceit is best known to us from Shakespeare but is actually a rhetorical commonplace of ancient vintage.<sup>2</sup>

## Man as a Jointed Being

It is worth noting again that the joints are of primary importance both in the operation of dolls and marionettes and in the composition and movement of the human body. Body joints make man a composite creature while sinews allow movement and hold the body members together. As Coomaraswamy noted, the sinews are the physical counterpart of the psychic “bonds of life.”<sup>3</sup>

According to Bruno Snell, the archaic Greeks possessed no single word for the human body. Homer generally refers to limbs or to the skin but not to the entire body (Figure 8).

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1. Jerome Feldman, *Arc of the Ancestors*, p. 29.
  2. See Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, pp. 138-139, for examples including Plato, Seneca, Horace, Clement of Alexandria and St. Augustine.
  3. Coomaraswamy, *The Bugbear of Literacy*, p. 111, ft. 38.



Figure 8: Ancient Greek depiction of the human body.

We find it difficult to conceive of a mentality which made no provision for the body as such. Among the early expressions designating what was later rendered as *soma* or 'body', only the plurals *guia* [limbs as moved by the joints], *melea* [limbs in their muscular strength], etc. refer to the physical nature of the body; for *chros* is merely the limit of the body, and *demas* represents the frame, the structure, and occurs only in the accusative of specification. As it is, early Greek art actually corroborates our impression that the physical body of man was comprehended, not as a unit but as an aggregate.<sup>1</sup>

We find the same idea of "human puppets" and the same concern for body joints in Balinese culture. In a photographic study published in 1942, *Balinese Character*, Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson remark on the strong kinesthetic basis of Balinese education (Figure 9).



Figure 9: Balinese teacher guiding a student in dancing.

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1. Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind*, pp. 5-7.

Learning to walk, learning the first appropriate gestures of playing musical instruments, learning to eat, and to dance are all accomplished with the teacher behind the pupil, conveying directly by pressure, and almost always with a minimum of words, the gesture to be performed. Under such a system of learning, one can only learn if one is extremely relaxed and if will and consciousness as we understand those terms are almost in abeyance.<sup>1</sup>

Further, children are taught an economy of movement wherein they contract only those muscles required to perform a given activity.

Total involvement in any activity occurs in trance and in children's tantrums, but for the rest, an act is not performed by the whole body. The involved muscle does not draw all the others into a unified act, but smoothly and simply, a few small units are moved—the fingers alone, the hand and the forearm alone, or the eyes alone, as in the characteristic Balinese habit of slewing the eyes to one side without turning the head.<sup>2</sup>

The result of this training is an extraordinary grace of movement as regards the body as a whole, as well as an unusual capacity for controlling individual body parts—seen most notably in the posturing and movement of the fingers while dancing (Figure 10).



*Figure 10: Balinese dancer.*

This kind of physical training both supports and is supported by two predominant ideas within the culture:

These two habits, that of going waxy limp in the hands of a teacher and permitting the body to be manipulated from without, and that of moving only the minimum of muscles necessary to any act, find expression in the whole puppet complex on the one hand, and in the fear of decomposition on the other.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead, *Balinese Character*, p. 15.
  2. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
  3. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

This “puppet complex” takes a number of forms. Trance states are not uncommon among the Balinese especially during ritual and dance. In the *sangiang deling*, puppets, weighed with bells and representing *dedari* (angels) dance on a string that is tied at the ends to two sticks, each supported on a stand (Figure 11). Each stick is held by a man who sits with his arm slightly flexed at the elbow. The tension of the string produces muscle contractions in the arms of the men, which shake the stick and move the puppets. Such clonic contractions appear involuntary (they are actually self-generated) adding to the feeling of possession.



*Figure 11: Balinese sangiang deling ritual*

Once the puppets are moving, two young girls come and sit beside the men. They grasp the lower end of the sticks. Older girls support them from behind. As the sticks move, one of the girls enters a trance. On-lookers begin singing and the girl sways sideways. Later she beats the sticks on the supporting stand to the sound of the music. When the song is finished the girl collapses into the arms of the older girls who are supporting her. She is then dressed in the appropriate garb and dances as a *dedari*.

The Balinese are also preoccupied with dismemberment and decay.

The Balinese cemetery is haunted not by whole ghosts but by the ghosts of separate limbs. Headless bodies, separate legs, and unattached arms that jump around and sometime a scrotum that crawls slowly over the ground—these are the boggles of Balinese fantasy. From this it is a small step to perceiving the body as a puppet or to imagining such supernaturals as *Bala Serijoet...*, the “Multiple Soldier” whose every joint—shoulders, elbows, knees, ankles, and so on—is separately animated and provided with an eye [Figure 12].<sup>1</sup>



Figure 12: Balinese protective spirit (*Multiple Soldier*) and shadow puppets of graveyard spirits.

1. Gregory Bateson, *A Sacred Unity* (1991), p. 86. Perhaps we find echoes of these ideas in the fragments of Empedocles, where he describes the genesis of humans from the aggregation of isolated organs. See John Burnett, *Early Greek Philosophy*, fragments 58-63.

Ananda Coomaraswamy's comments on *Balinese Character* put the matter in a larger context.

It is implied that these are especially Balinese peculiarities. Although the observation is unrelated to any governing first principle, and so not fully understood, it is excellent in itself: for it is realized that the dancer's puppet-like relaxation is that of an obedient pupil, who would be guided not by her own will, but by a teacher's. One cannot but recall the words of Christ: "I do nothing of myself," and "not what I will, but what thou wilt."<sup>1</sup>

## The Fates

Writing about the ancient Greek notion of fate, William Onians introduces another aspect of the *sutratman* doctrine.

In Homer, one is struck by the fact that his heroes with all their magnificent vitality and activity feel themselves at every turn not free agents but passive instruments or victims of other powers. It is not merely that they and their foes 'lived dangerously' and life and fortune were precarious possessions. A man felt that he could not help his own actions. An idea, an impulse came to him; he acted and presently rejoiced or lamented. Some god had inspired or blinded him. He prospered, then was poor, perhaps enslaved; he wasted away with disease, or died in battle. It was divinely ordained (*theophton*), his portion (*aisa, moira*) appointed long before.<sup>2</sup>

A man's fate was conceived as a thread bound around him at birth or as an allotment of wool from which his life was spun.<sup>3</sup> In referring to a hero's future, Homer uses the expression, "it lies on the knees of the gods," a reference to spinning, which was often done sitting down.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* we read that the gods "spin" or "weave" the threads of a man's fate at birth and bind it upon him, and that death—the ultimate bond—hangs over each man like a thread. Fate is spun by Zeus or by an *aisa, moira, or daimon*.<sup>5</sup> The thread that binds a man is invisible to normal eyes and can be known only to those with "second sight."

In Hesiod, we find the more familiar spinners (*Klotes*), the three daughters of Zeus and Themis in this version of the myth.<sup>6</sup> Clotho (spinner) spins the thread of life; Atropos (unturnable) severs the thread; and Lachesis (allotment) allots each man's portion. The Fates are depicted in classical Greek art holding their identifying symbols: a spindle, shears, and a globe and scroll, respectively (Figure 13).

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1. Coomaraswamy, *The Bugbear of Literacy*, p. 97.
  2. R. B. Onians, *The Origins of European Thought*, p. 303.
  3. These are not mere figures of speech as Onians points out "but allusions to one of the images under which a whole people interpreted life and saw the workings of fate, the action of the gods in things human...." Coomaraswamy called them "figures of thought" and demonstrated that they constituted a symbolic 'language' that was everywhere consistent and could be understood. René Guénon and Carl Schuster shared these basic assumptions.
  4. See R. B. Onians, "On the Knees of the Gods".
  5. The gods act providentially and atemporally, a point that confuses Onians, who tries to assign a temporal sequence to their actions. There is no predestination here. In the more fully articulated Hindu, Buddhist and Christian doctrines of fate and Providence, fate is described as residing in created causes themselves, which Aristotle and the Scholastic philosophers termed "mediate causes." Men have free will but are subject to the cause and effect relations governing the material world. God is only involved providentially, as First Cause. We tend to think of a man's fate as his end but as Coomaraswamy notes, the word is plural in Latin (*fata*), which suggests all the things that happen to him. In Greek mythology, the Fates are conceived as powers of Zeus over whom he has no direct control. "But it is essential to the conception that the allotment once made be respected. There is a moral sanction intrinsic in it. *Aisa* is the expression of an ordered world, 'measure' that should be observed.... Thus it is that Zeus is restrained. He cannot play 'fast and loose.'" *Origins of European Thought*, p. 390. Similarly, in the Bible we are told that the world was made according to form and measure.
  6. Pindar makes them bridal attendants of Themis during her marriage to Zeus while a third version describes them as the children of Erebus (Hades) and Nyx (Night).



Figure 13: The Three Fates (Clotho, Atropos, Lachesis).

The Greek word *moirai* means those who apportion and is equivalent to the word *daimon*, which at root indicates something given, a gift. These terms are synonymous with the Christian Holy Spirit, God's gift of life. If Christian propagandists chose to emphasize the demonic at the expense of the *daimon* it was only to further their own cause. The gods of the old religion become the devils of the new.

In Norse mythology, the Norns both spin and weave. As Disir or "weird sisters" they weave the woof of war. Darrud in Caithness provides a gruesome vision of their work in the *Njals Saga*, which recounts the Battle of Clontarf (A.D. 1014) between the Norse and Irish:

A loom has been set up, stretching afar and portending slaughter...and a rain of blood is pouring. Upon it has been stretched a warp of human beings—a warp grey with spears which the valkyries are filling with weft of crimson. The warp is formed of human entrails and is heavily weighted with human heads. Bloodstained javelins serve as heddles, the spool is shod with iron, the hræll is formed of arrows and it is with swords that we must slay this web of battle. Hildir is going to weave and Hjorbrimul, Sanngridr and Svipul with drawn swords...We are weaving, weaving the web of the spear. Young is the king who owned it in the past. Forth must we step and make our way into the battle where the arms of our friends are clashing.... We are weaving, weaving the web of the spear while the standard of the valiant warrior is advancing...I declare that death is ordained for a mighty prince. Even now the earl has been laid low by the spears. The Irish too will suffer a sorrow which will never be forgotten by men. Now the web is woven and the field dyed crimson.<sup>1</sup>

The Norns also supervise the birth of children as does their Greek and Roman counterpart, Eileithyia. Some are given easy lives, others hard.

In *Beowulf*, God grants Beowulf and his men "a weaving of war luck" and Hoc's daughter mourns "the web's short measure" when her son and brother are killed in battle.<sup>2</sup> Howell D. Chickering Jr. comments on the Anglo-Saxon concept of destiny:

1. R. B. Onians, *The Origins of European Thought*, pp. 355-56.

2. *Beowulf*, lines 698, 1077.



The Anglo-Saxons believed that life was a struggle against insuperable odds and that a man's *wyrd* or 'lot' would be what it would be....Even in early pagan days, they do not seem to have believed in a supernatural conception of Destiny. *Wyrd* originally meant simply "what happens" and later was used by King Alfred in his translation of Boethius as a term for "what comes to pass" under the ...'forethought' of God's Providence.<sup>1</sup>

Let us not forget that epic itself is a kind of weaving. The Greek word *rhapsodein* refers to the bard who "stitches together" new songs out of old and familiar material.

## The Needle

The technology of sewing is central to the symbolism of the sutratman doctrine in which the Sun connects all things to Himself by means of a thread of spiritual light. This thread-spirit, seen in its progenitive aspect, holds the world together and all the beings in it.

Primitive man already possessed his needle and thread of sinew, and just because his thread was of sinew could have felt in a designation of the act of kind as a sewing (cf. *Rg Veda* II.32.4 cited above, and *syuti* as both "sewing" and "offspring"), and in the expression "unstrung" applied to the body at death—and hence analogically to the cosmos at the end of the world—an image even more vivid than at a later time, when thread was of cotton.<sup>2</sup>

There are a number of reasons to regard creation as a kind of sewing. Carl Schuster believed that in Paleolithic times, human social identity was expressed through designs painted on or sewn into the skin as well as by clothing designs sewn from animal skins (Figure 14). Tattoos and clothing transformed a spirit into a human being; that is, they provided people with a social identity without which they would be alive but not fully human. "Clothes make the man." Further, clothing acts as an extension of the skin, helping to keep us alive. Because the body is held together by sinews and falls apart upon death, it too appears to be sewn. The thread-spirit doctrine is not as esoteric as it might seem because most traditional symbolism is rooted in observation of the physical world.



Figure 14: Samoyad woman sewing

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1. Ibid., p. 269.
  2. Coomaraswamy, *Collected Works*, I, p. 484. Coomaraswamy adds a footnote (nt. 95): "More vivid, too, inasmuch as 'in Indian vehicles the different parts are held together by cords' (Eggeling on SB XIII.2.7.8), and *ratha* as the typical 'vehicle' is employed throughout the Indian tradition as a valid symbol of the bodily 'vehicle' of the Spirit."

In practice, threading a needle is difficult and symbolically the eye of the needle serves as the narrow entrance into Heaven, excluding all but the worthy. Only our real Self can gain entrance when all of its disguises have been shed. The needle's "eye" is described alternately as the "Sundoor" or "Eye of the World" from which life emanates and returns.

The process of emanation and return can be seen in the design of the double spiral fibula, another kind of needle or brooch (Figure 15). Here, the paired spirals represent opposing forces such as day and night, inhalation and exhalation, and birth and death, which are inherent in the manifested world.

The primary sense of "broach" (= brooch) is that of anything acute, such as a pin, awl or spear, that penetrates a material; the same implement, bent upon itself, fastens or sews things together, as if it were in fact a thread. French fibule, as a surgical term, is in fact suture. It is only when we substitute a soft thread for the stiff wire that a way must be made for it by a needle; and then the thread remaining in the material is the trace, evidence and "clew" to the passage of the needle; just as our own short life is the trace of the unbroken Life whence it originates.<sup>1</sup>

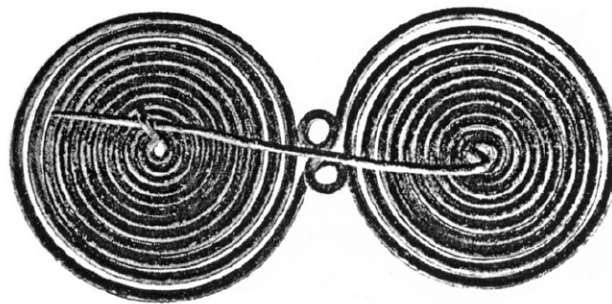


Figure 15: Double spiral fibula (Greek Geometric period)

Drawn from a single piece of wire, the spiral fibula forms a continuous path ending where it begins, a trait common to a number of art forms including sand drawings and cat's cradles. In the New Testament, Jesus is described both as a "Door" and as the "Alpha and Omega." The same may be said for the spiral fibula.

This association is reflected equally well in the work of Claude Mellan (fl. 1598–1688), whose remarkable engraving of Christ is composed from a single spiraling line (Figure 16). The Latin words underneath, *Formatur unicus una* (By one the One is formed") refer both to Christ and to the technique used to construct the work.

The Sundoor or needle's eye can also be seen as death's noose, ready to snare the unworthy. In Pali, the eye of the needle is designated by the term *pasa*.

This word is the same as the Sanskrit word *pasha* which originally had the meaning of 'knot' or 'loop'. This seems first of all to indicate, as Coomaraswamy observed, that in a very remote epic needles were not perforated as they were later, but simply bent over at one end so as to form a kind of loop through which the thread was passed...<sup>2</sup>

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1. Coomaraswamy, "The Iconography of Durer's 'Knots' and Leonardo's 'Concatenation,'" op. cit., p. 120.

2. René Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, p. 231.



Figure 16: Claude Mellan, *Face of Christ on the Sudary* (1649)

The lasso or running knot is used in many cultures to capture animals and it is one of the emblems of Mrityu or Yama as well as Varuna.<sup>1</sup> René Guénon explains this aspect of the symbolism:

...the 'animals' that they take by means of this *pasha* are in reality all the living beings (*pashu*). Hence also the meaning of 'bond': the animal once it is taken, finds itself tied by the running knot which tightens around him; similarly, the living being is bound by the limiting conditions which hold it in its particular state of manifested existence. In order to come out of this state of *pashu* it is necessary that the being be set free from these conditions, that is to say, in symbolic terms, that he escape from the *pashu*, or that he pass through the running knot without its tightening around him.<sup>2</sup>

Like the knot in the rope, bondage is necessary for individuation. This "vital knot" holds together the different elements that make up each created being.<sup>3</sup> Elizabethan science supported this view.

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1. See also, Mircea Eliade, "The 'God Who Binds' and the Symbolism of Knots" in *Images and Symbols*, pp. 92-124. It is believed in many cultures that the dead may be netted, snared, tangled, or mazed in the underworld and never reach Heaven.
  2. René Guénon, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

Man in his 'natural' life (that is mortal life, supported by the physiological processes described) is a fusion of corruptible, mortal, physical body and incorruptible, perfect, immortal, spiritual soul. The fusion is the result of the 'subtle' substance, at once body and soul, called spirit. 'Subtle and serious' is the description of spirit in a serious medical work; and 'that subtle knot' is John Donne's term for it in *The Extasy*, 'That subtle knot which makes us man.'<sup>1</sup>

Each human life is an opportunity, a chance to untie the knot before we die and return to the source of our being.

On the other hand all determinations or knots are bonds from which one could wish to be freed rather than remain forever "all tied up in knots." One would be released from all these "knots (*granthi*) of the heart," which we should now call "complexes" and of which the ego-complex (*ahamkara*, *abhimana*, Philo's *oiesis*) is the tightest and hardest to be undone.<sup>2</sup>

Everything under the sun is in the grip of death as *Ecclesiastes* tells us, and the Sundoor is not only the way to the other world, but the very figure of Death the Devourer, sometimes figured as a lion, gorgon or makara.<sup>3</sup>

The upright needle forms an *axis mundi* through which the ethereal counter-currents flow to produce fire, light and life. This is how God creates the garments that adorn the world, like a tailor or embroiderer with an invisible thread. The phallic aspect of the needle expresses the vivifying and generative aspect of the Deity. Men enjoy a spiritual paternity which precedes and is the First Cause of sexual reproduction, a theme taken up by Coomaraswamy in "Spiritual Paternity and the Puppet Complex" where he quotes Matthew (23:9): "And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven."<sup>4</sup>

Needles are also related to fishing hooks. In the New Testament the fish are the souls of men. "And he saith unto them, follow me and I will make ye fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19) and "No man can come to me except the Father which hath sent me draw him" (John 6:44). Similarly, "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me" (John 12:32). God is the supreme angler who sports with mankind with his solar, pneumatic fishing line.

There is also the matter of archery. The arrow is a kind of needle, used ritually to "sew the four quarters," while the "bull's eye" is the entrance to Heaven and the arrow the immanent Deity returning to itself.<sup>5</sup> For this reason Christ was sometimes referred to as the "Chosen Arrow" in early Christian writings.

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3. For an explanation of the "vital knot," which plays a role in the guild system and in sacred architecture, see René Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, p. 232.
  1. B. L. Joseph, *Shakespeare's Eden*, p. 254.
  2. Coomaraswamy, "The Iconography of Durer's 'Knots' and Leonardo's 'Concatenation,'" op. cit., p. 117.
  3. Lions' heads often appear on doorknockers. The ring hanging from the lion's mouth is the entrance to heaven. The snakes surrounding the gorgon's head are solar rays.
  4. Coomaraswamy, *The Bugbear of Literacy*, p. 95.
  5. See Coomaraswamy, "The Symbolism of Archery," pp. 105-119. Similarly, the shuttle of the loom is an arrow and the *kairos* the entrance to heaven.

## Warp and Weft

Nowhere is the sutratman doctrine more carefully elaborated than in the symbolism connected with looms and weaving. Looms are generally categorized into two related types, the horizontal or ground loom and the vertical loom (Figure 17).<sup>1</sup>

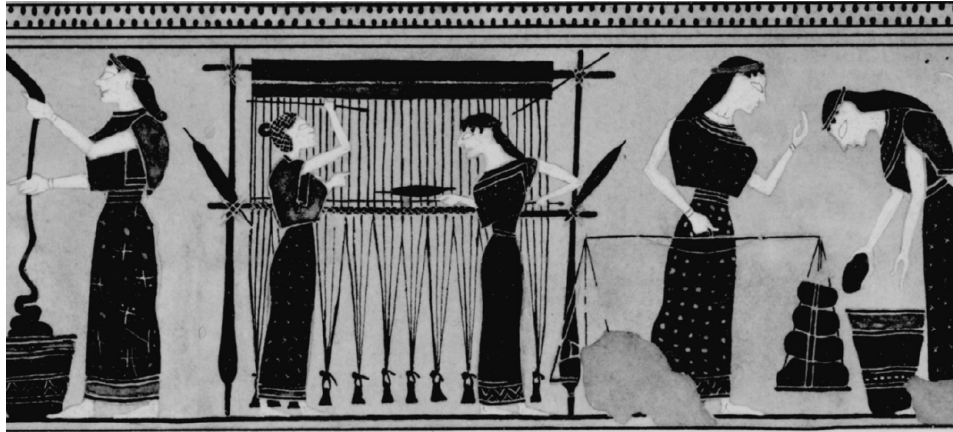


Figure 17: Details of an Attic Greek vase (560 B.C.) showing vertical loom.

Both kinds were known in Neolithic times and probably developed in the Middle East from whence they spread in opposite directions. Elizabeth Barber comments:

What I find most fascinating about these two early looms is that neither is logically derivable from the other, but both are easily derived from a simple band loom. With a band loom, the weaver normally ties the near end of the warp in a single bunch to a post or her own waist and the far end to something else, like a tree or another post or her big toe. If the weaving is tied to the weaver, the tension of the warp that is necessary for weaving is provided by simply leaning back.<sup>2</sup>

Such primitive looms, often called belt looms or backstrap looms, were used in many parts of the world including Asia, throughout the Pacific, and in the Americas in Pre-Columbian times (Figure 18).<sup>3</sup>

The development of vertical and horizontal looms from these earlier prototypes offered a definite technical advantage: a wider cloth could be woven once the weaver sat outside the work. These new looms were less portable which suggests that the change may have been related to a more sedentary lifestyle.

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 [Fig. 3.20].”<sup>4</sup>

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1. See E. Barber, *Prehistoric Textiles* and Marta Hoffman, *The Warp Weighted Loom* for a history of weaving and looms. Vertical looms are generally subdivided into two classes: tapestry looms and warp-weighted looms. The tapestry loom has two beams; the weaver sits and beats the weft threads down. The warp-weighted loom has one beam; the weaver walks about and beats the weft threads upward.
  2. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
  3. See H. Ling Roth, “Ancient Egyptian and Greek Looms” and Otis Tufton Mason, *Aboriginal Indian Basketry*.
  4. 73. Coomaraswamy, *Collected Works*, II, p. 415, ft. 13.

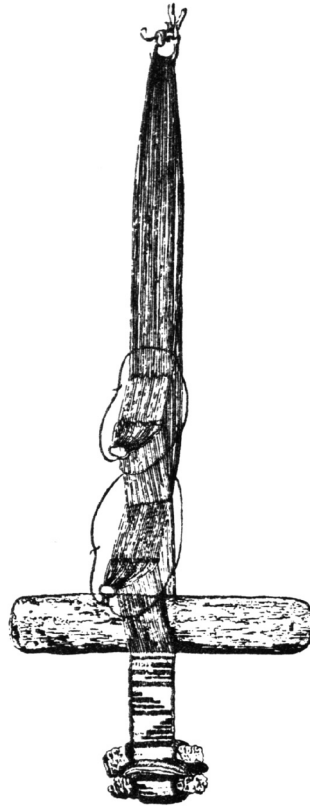


Figure 18: Chirguano band loom with a single point of attachment (Bolivia).

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 counter-currents 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 (Figure 19) 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.<sup>1</sup>

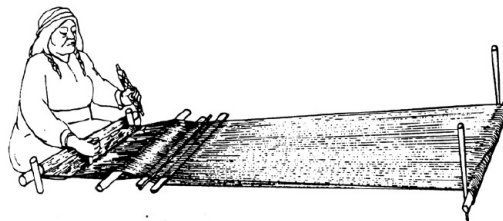


Figure 19: Horizontal ground loom.

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1. Compare the burning bush of the Old Testament (Exodus 3:1). Note also the traditional etymology connecting the Latin *ignis* (fire) and *lignis* (wood). The ancients were fond of rooting out these hidden connections between words. Such etymologies would hardly satisfy a modern linguist but they are significant from the perspective of traditional symbolism.

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 *sûrat* 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 *smriti*, 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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1. René Guénon, *Symbolism of the Cross*, p. 67.

2. The cross is the proper setting for the crucifixion of Jesus in that the vertical and the horizontal beams represent respectively his Divine and human natures.

3. Robert Lawlor, *Sacred Geometry*, p. 24. In the same regard, ‘In the Sumerian number sequence, “one” and “two” have the meaning “man” and “woman,” respectively.’ Menninger, *Number Words and Number Symbols*, p. 13.

Carl Schuster was interested in crossed figures and collected examples from many cultures and time periods (Figure 20).<sup>1</sup> 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 (Figure 20).



Figure 20: Steatite figurine of crossed male/female, Neolithic Cyprus.

The point of crossing was the center or navel of the world where creation began. In later periods, a square or checkerboard was placed at this point and used for divination or gambling (Figure 21). Crossed male and female figures would appear to be the root of the idea that all creation comes from contraries. It is at heart, a social idea, describing the generation of society and the cosmos from a First Man and a First Woman. Time does not permit an expansion of this important idea which I have addressed in a separate paper, "Crossed Figures."<sup>2</sup>

If the intersection of each warp and weft thread represents a human existence then we need only recall the *Njals Saga* to understand the significance of loom weights, used to provide tension for warp threads in some vertical looms.

A loom has been set up, stretching afar and portending slaughter...and a rain of blood in pouring. Upon it has been stretched a warp of human beings—a warp grey with spears which the valkyries are filling with weft of crimson. The warp is formed of human entrails and is heavily weighted with human heads.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Carl Schuster and Edmund Carpenter, op. cit., vol. 1, bk. 1, pp. 239-251.

2. Posted on Academia.edu.

3. R. B. Onians, op. cit., pp. 355-356.



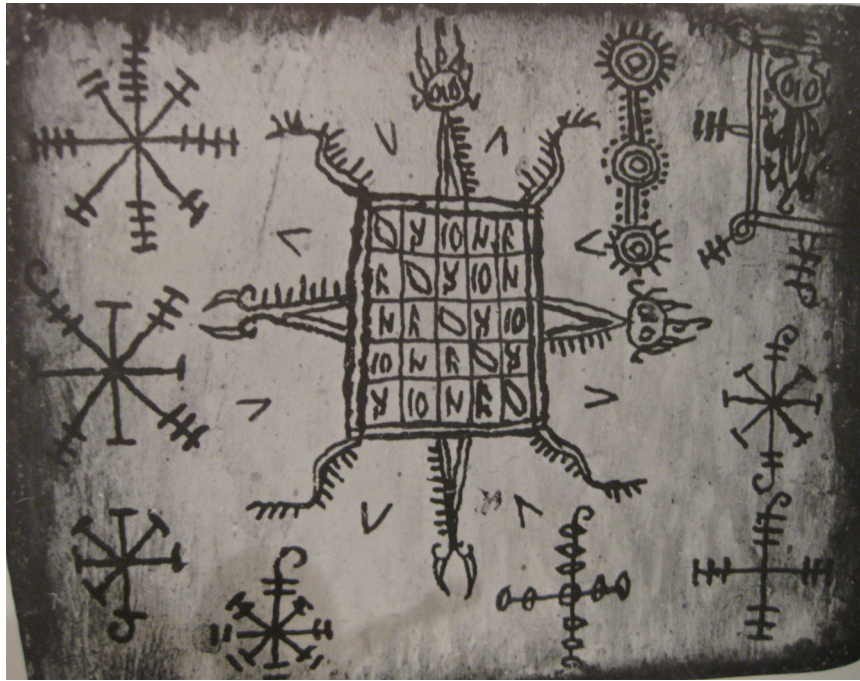


Figure 21: Batak divination diagram, illustrated in a bark book, Sumatra.

Here each warp thread represents an individual life and the loom weight the head. The fact that the loom weight hangs downward can be explained by the frequent association of inversion with the world of the dead (Figure 22).<sup>1</sup> That is, these figures represent ancestors.



Figure 22: Inverted figure on tombstone, Bella Coola, British Columbia.

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1. See Carl Schuster and Edmund Carpenter, *op. cit.*, vol. 3, bk. 3, for a discussion of inversion; in particular, the use of inverted human figurines to represent ancestors.

Onians comments on this symbolism by noting the commonly repeated saying that a man's life hangs by a thread. He continues:

A curious parallel to this exists among the Koryaks (N.E. Asia), who believe that the Supreme Being sends down from the sky the souls of departed ancestors to be reborn. He keeps a supply suspended from the cross-beams of the house; and as is the length of a soul's strap so will be the length of his life when he is reborn into the world.<sup>1</sup>

A single loom weight is never assigned to each warp thread; rather, a cord called a "thrum" is used to connect several warp thread to a common weight. This brings us closer to the true intent of the symbolism. If each intersection of warp and weft is a life then an individual warp tread, in toto, represents a succession of generations from a single group. Several groups are linked to a common head which represents the original ancestor of all of the groups within this "tribe." Put another way, the entire weaving represents the "social fabric," hardly a fortuitous expression.

Each warp thread by itself can be conceived as a spinal column with the weft crossing representing a vertebrae and the loom weight the head. The spine belongs to a cosmic man (Adam, Manu, etc.) who comprises his descendants, one generation after another. This is the same model used for a mnemonic cord where names are associated with each knot. "From great-grandparents to great-grandchildren we are only knots in a string" say the Naskapi of Labrador.<sup>2</sup>

## The Loom of Life

The sutratman doctrine has managed to survive among a few remote peoples like the Kogi of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in northern Columbia.<sup>3</sup> Weaving and spinning are spiritual activities and occupy a central role in the religious life of the Kogi. Men do the weaving, producing simple, course, cotton garments on an upright loom for themselves and their families (Figure 23).

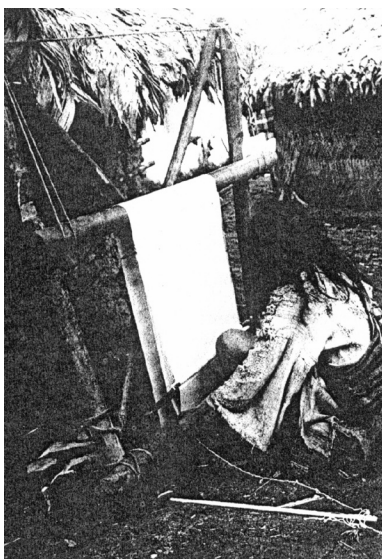


Figure 23: Kogi Indian man weaving a cloth, Columbia.

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1. R. B. Onians, op. cit., pp. 349, ft. 5. Some vertical looms are hung from roof beams.
  2. Frank Speck, *Naskapi*, p. 236.
  3. The material on the Kogi is summarized from G. Reichel-Dolmatoff, "The Loom of Life: A Kogi Principle of Integration," *Journal of Latin American Lore*, vol. 4:1, (1978), pp. 5-27 and G. Reichel-Dolmatoff, *The Sacred Mountain of Columbia's Kogi Indians*.

The Kogi are well aware of this technical simplicity and soberness of their dress. Almost all their material possessions, all the artifacts and utensils, are sturdy and devoid of ornamentation. The pottery, the few household goods, and even the houses themselves are bare and undifferentiated. And with an aloof expression their owners will say, "Yes, our things are simple, but they live."<sup>1</sup>

Despite this Shaker-like aesthetic, the objects of daily life are symbolically meaningful, acting as microcosmic models of the universe, the inner life, and the afterlife.

...these objects or phenomena contain a mass of condensed information, a wealth of associations and meanings that make of each object a storehouse of detailed codes that are linked into interrelated concepts. These objects or phenomena, then, "speak" to the beholder; they can even answer his questions and guide his actions; they are his memory, his points of reference.<sup>2</sup>

The spindle, the loom and the act of weaving itself are central symbols to the Kogi and contain multiple meanings. This is in keeping with the nature of all traditional symbolism where, in the words of René Guénon, "the same symbol is always applicable to different levels in virtue of the correspondences that exist between them."<sup>3</sup> Among the Kogi, this symbolism is known to everyone but is understood in depth by only a few.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, a loom is kept in the temple and used for teaching purposes by Kogi priests. An examination of the symbolism of the spindle and loom reveals roots firmly within the ancient sutratman doctrine.

In the Kogi creation myth, it was the Great Mother who first taught men to weave. In the beginning she pushed an upright spindle into the newly created earth in the center of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. This formed the central post or *axis mundi*. Then, drawing a length of yarn from the spindle she drew a circle around the spindle whorl and said, "this shall be the land of my children."<sup>5</sup>

The spindle serves as a model of the cosmos; the flat whorl is the earth on which rests a cone-shaped body of white yarn wound around the world axis. The yarn, described as the "thought of the sun," represents life, light and the masculine seminal element of fertility and growth. The white cone is divided horizontally into four ascending levels that form the Upper World. Underneath the disk rests an invisible, inverted cone of black yarn also divided into four levels that forms the corresponding Lower World.

The sun, by spiraling around the world, spins the Thread of Life and twists it around the cosmic axis: during the day a left-spun white thread and during the night a right-spun black one.<sup>6</sup>

The Kogi loom consists of a strong rectangular frame reinforced by two cross-poles (Figure 24). The structure forms a Saint Andrew's cross (or hourglass figure) within a four-sided square framework. A number of meanings are associated with this design.

Topographically, the loom is a map of certain features of the Sierra Nevada. The four corners of the square are the four Colombian cities in the region: Santa Marta, Riohacha, Fundación and Valledupar. The center of the square where the cross-poles meet represents the snow peaks. Other geographical landmarks such as rivers can then be located within this conceptual framework.

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1. G. Reichel-Dolmatoff, "The Loom of Life," p. 8.

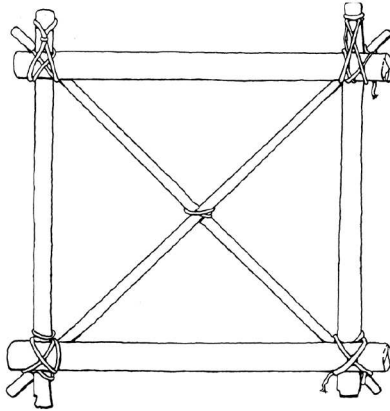
2. Ibid., pp. 9-10.

3. René Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, p. 206.

4. Such was the case with the Dogon of Mali, where the underlying metaphysics governing the culture was known in full only by a selected group of elders. See Marcel Griaule, *Conversations With Ogotemmêli*.

5. G. Reichel-Dolmatoff, op. cit., p. 13.

6. Ibid., p. 14.



*Figure 24: Model of Kogi Loom*

Anatomically the loom is a model of the human body from the shoulders to the hips. The five points where the wooden pieces are lashed together represent, from the top, the left and right shoulders, the heart in the center, and the left and right hips at the bottom. To represent a loom, a man crosses his arms over his chest with the outstretched fingers of his right hand touching his left shoulder and his left hand touching his right shoulder (Figure 25). This is considered a ritual posture.



*Figure 25: Kogi ritual posture of listening.*

The five cross-points are also identified with the five main ceremonial centers of the Kogi founded by the five principal sons of the Mother Goddess. It is these "Lords of the World-Quarters" who rule over the five points of the loom and the human body.<sup>1</sup>

The progenitive power of the solar thread is reflected in the sexual symbolism associated with spinning and weaving. The spindle combines a "male" shaft that pierces a perforated "female" whorl. Further, the Kogi compare the act of weaving to copulation, with the warp thread conceived as the female element and the shuttle the male. Cosmically, Father Sun as Great Weaver uses a beam of impregnating light to weave on the cosmic loom or Mother.

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1. The correspondences outlined here are sketchy at best and do not represent the full texture of all the associations derived from the loom. Each ceremonial center has associated priests, lords, mythological beings, plants and animals. The symbols help to maintain a larger body of oral lore and tradition. The shape of the loom is also incorporated into architectural construction where the square frame and cross-poles playing a role in reinforcing the walls of the houses and temples.

In an all-important cosmic vision, complementary to that of the spindle as world axis, the Kogi conceptualize the earth as an immense loom on which the sun weaves the Fabric of Life. This image is patterned after an empirical observation. The Indians are well aware of solstices and equinoxes; as a matter of fact these phenomena are the foundations of their agricultural and ritual calendars, and Kogi priests have considerable astronomical knowledge. The upper bar of the world loom is formed by the line traced between sunrise and sunset at the summer solstice, whereas the lower bar is drawn at the winter solstice. The equinoctial line is the central rod of the loom.<sup>1</sup>

This cosmic vision is enacted yearly within the temple, which serves as the womb of the Mother Goddess.



*Figure 26: The main Kogi temple at Takina.*

Kogi temples are large, beehive-shaped structures about as tall as they are wide—seven to nine meters—made of wood and grass with a foundation formed of a circle of rough stone slabs (Figure 26). There are two opposing doors generally placed on an east-to-west axis. Two main posts support each half of the building raised on both sides of the central axis. An open pathway runs from east to west. There are four corner posts, placed in the northeast, northwest, southeast and southwest of the temple and 40 to 50 smaller posts circling the walls. Four hearths are located on the radii running from the center of the temple to the main posts.

The temple is a universe in miniature and its construction is based on the same patterns exemplified by the spindle and loom. For example, the Kogi believe that the temple continues underground in an inverted form, in the same way as the spindle has a dark underside. Likewise:

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1. G. Reichel-Dolmatoff, op. cit., p. 15.

The four hearths correspond to the four lineages that were founded in the beginning of time by the Four Lords of the World-Quarters who are associated with the four corner posts of the circular periphery of the temple. The fifth lord is associated with the center and has his seat in the middle of the pathway between the two doors, exactly beneath the peak of the conical roof. The fifth lord represents the sun and is the Lord of Fire.<sup>1</sup>

There is a small hole at the top of temple roof normally kept covered with a potsherd. When the priests remove this sherd—generally on the days of the solstice or equinox—a beam of sunlight falls on the temple floor.

...if this should be done on 21 June, a remarkable phenomenon will occur. At about 9 A.M. a thin ray of sunlight will fall into the dark interior of the temple, and a small brilliant spot will touch the hearth of the southwestern corner. In the course of the day the spot of sunlight will slowly wander across the floor, until, at about 3 P.M., it will have reached the hearth of the southeastern corner and will then disappear. If one were to leave the small orifice uncovered throughout the year, one would be able to watch the slow northward progress of the parallel lines traced by the spot of light until, at the equinox of 21 September, it has reached the equatorial line between the two doors. On 21 December the line will be drawn between the northwestern and northeastern hearths, and in this manner the sun will have delineated the sacred quincuncial space of the temple.<sup>2</sup>

In such a way, the sun weaves the Fabric of Life on the temple floor, which serves as the loom. The warp threads are conceived as part of the loom into which the solar ray puts a single weft thread each day, moving from left to right. As the sun moves through the sky from east to west, the beam moves widdershins, west to east. At the end of each day, the Kogi believe that the light, now referred to as the "black sun," enters the inverted temple beneath the earth where it weaves the underside of the garment, this time moving from right to left. One side of the textile that is produced symbolizes daylight and life, the other, darkness and death.

The sun weaves two such garments a year, one for himself and one for his wife, the moon. They are finished at the spring and fall equinoxes, in March and September.

On these dates the priests begin to dance at the eastern door of the temple and slowly proceed toward the western door, always dancing and gesturing as if they were drawing behind them a rope or a stick. This dance symbolizes the act of drawing out the rod located in the center of the loom. When the priest at last dances out of the western door, he completely draws out the rod; the fabric unfolds toward the north and the south, and the next day the sun begins to weave another piece of cloth, and life continues.<sup>3</sup>

This remarkable application of the sutratman doctrine does not exhaust the symbolic implications of the loom. There are eschatological considerations as well. The St. Andrew's cross formed by the cross-sticks of the loom represents the crossroads of eternity where departed souls await judgment. The soul remains at this juncture until a waft of incense from the Funeral Priest's hand points in the right direction.

... the X-shaped cross is ever present among the Kogi. It stands for deliverance, for the fate of souls, for obedience to what the Kogi call "The Law of the Mother." It is found in nature and culture, in artifacts and gestures, in fleeting shapes, and in firmly traced lines.<sup>4</sup>

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1. G. Reichel-Dolmatoff, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

The ultimate goal is to return to the Mother Goddess, but many paths diverge from the crossroads. Souls can go up or descend into the maze-like underworld and lose their way. The soul's destination is determined by the kind of life a person has led. To find the right road in the afterlife a man must fulfill certain spiritual conditions during life, conditions which are not foreign to other religious traditions.

In the first place, a person must turn *seivake* by becoming "like a boy," an innocent youth. He must be "whole," "complete," and "perfect" like a child. Second, the person must become *nakuiza*, that is, he must renounce all knowledge and must forget everything he has experienced in life. The third condition is that the person must "feel cold" (*sui seisi*), meaning that he must have mastered all emotions, he must be without passion, anger or sorrow.<sup>1</sup>

Lastly, the loom is a place of death, a sacrificial post or Holy Rood. "Crazy Brother (*Due Nugì*), the mythical adulterer, rapist, and incarnation of all vices, was tied to a loom in punishment."<sup>2</sup>

There is an even more ancient level of symbolism that forms the substructure of Kogi culture, centered on the hourglass or X-shaped figure of the Mother Goddess formed by the crosspieces of the loom. Carl Schuster identified such figures as generic ancestors.

## As the World Turns

In many traditions the alternation of day and night and the turning of the seasons are symbolized as the working of a cosmic spindle or loom. The symbolism of the spindle is of particular interest since it shares a common form with other simple technologies like the wheel, the fire drill and the milk churn, which employ a similar rotary motion.<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of a spindle is to pull and twist fiber into thread (Figure 27). A simple but ingenious device, it overcomes the problems inherent in producing thread by hand.

Thread can be spun with no tools at all, simply by using the fingers to draw out and twist the fibers, perhaps on the thigh or leg as a handy working surface. The method has two disadvantages, however. The twisting process is tediously slow, since each movement of the fingers gives only a few twists to the strands. Moreover, there is a serious problem of keeping the finished part of the yarn from tangling, untwisting, or performing any of an amazing variety of nasty feats the moment you let go of any of it to make more; and let go you must when the yarn reaches arm's length. The thread has to stay constantly under tension until the twist has been permanently set, for example by wetting or plying.<sup>4</sup>

Most spindles consist of a shaft with an impaled flywheel, called a "spindle whorl." In some cultures a mere stick or rock suffices. As Elizabeth Barber points out, the shaft and whorl are really just a combination of these simpler forms.<sup>5</sup> Each part of the spindle serves a different function. The

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1. G. Reichel-Dolmatoff, op. cit., p. 21.

2. Ibid., p. 23.

3. Under the heading of rotary devices we include chariot wheels, potter's wheels, prayer wheels, and millstones. We add such natural phenomena as whirlpools and whirlwinds that play a role in many mythologies. In regard to the whirlwind, so prominent in the Old Testament, the Hebrew word *chul* signifies both "to turn about," "twist," and "whirl," as well as "to bear," "bring forth," "create" or "form". It also has the meaning, "to dance," bringing to mind the whirling dervishes of Sufism. Lastly, the symbolism associated with rotation is embodied in children's toys like tops, yo-yos and buzzers. As a point of clarification, the Indian milk churn, which forms the cosmic axis in the Vedic myth of the "Churning of the Sea of Milk," was not operated with a pumping motion. Instead, a stick with a rope twisted around it stood upright in the milk and was pulled alternately from opposite ends. Some ancient drills were operated in the same manner.

4. Elizabeth Barber, *Prehistoric Textiles*, p. 42.

5. Ibid., p. 42.

shaft is used to wind the completed thread while the whorl provides the tension and balanced spin that helps to draw and twist the fiber.

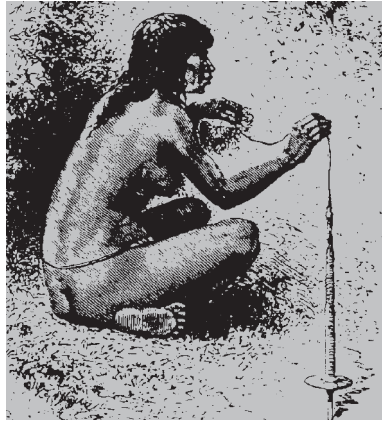


Figure 27: Rucuyen woman spinning (French Guiana).

The act of spinning is associated with procreation in many cultures, as we saw with the Kogi. The shaft represents the male element and the whorl represents the female. Cosmologically, the spindle also functions as an *axis mundi*, uniting the three worlds and acting as a conduit for the Spirit—solar in origin and often conceived as a ray of light—that endows the newborn with life. The thread may also be conceived as an umbilicus, connecting the child to the Great Mother, everywhere associated with the earth. The raw fiber used in spinning is the *prima materia*, which must be given form.<sup>1</sup> The act of spinning provides this, producing a life. Johannes Wilbert writes:

The representations on Ecuadorian spindle whorls [Figure 28], as well as the insight of Estrada and others that spindle whorls belong to a prehistoric “cult of fertility” in Ecuador, leave no doubt that the ancient artist who created the designs and the women who used them shared with many peoples, past and present, the symbolic meaning of the Magical Spinners, the Parcae, the Whirred Sisters, the Norns, and others. The dynamics of the ever-busy spindle, and its dualistic nature were no secret to them. Almost universally, the spindle-shaped mandorla...is perceived as the product of the conjunction of the sphere of matter (left) and the sphere of spirit (right).<sup>2</sup>



Figure 28: Spindle whorl, Ecuador.

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1. Jason’s search for the Golden Fleece is relevant here. Gold is a symbol of light, life, and immortality, and is to be equated with the Sun, the source of all life. The fleece is akin to Soma, the tree, plant, food, or water of life. The Fleece, Soma, and the Holy Grail are equivalent formulations for the vivifying principle that gives life to all things.
  2. Johannes Wilbert, “The Thread of Life. Symbolism of Miniature Art from Ecuador,” p. 31.



The rotation of the spindle symbolizes the passing of time, another reason for its association with the mysteries of birth and death. Many cultures use the metaphor of the spindle to describe the turning of the heavens around the *axis mundi*. Like the planets in their orbits or the rings of Saturn, the spindle was often thought to contain “whorls within the whorl.” These multiple whorls were held accountable for the varying pace of day and night, the seasons, and the world ages. In Plato’s Myth of Er (*Republic*, X.613), the stars and planets are likened to nested bowls turning at different speeds and in different directions around a central shaft. The entire spindle-like device is turned by the Fates, who govern the destinies of souls awaiting rebirth.

The mill embodies the same cosmology in many traditions. The *Bhagavata Purana* relates how prince Dhruva, by virtue of his merit, ascended to the highest pole, “to the exalted seat of Vishnu, round which the starry spheres forever wander, like the upright axle of the corn mill circled without end by the laboring oxen.”<sup>1</sup> Dhruva is associated with Polaris, the Pole Star.

Just as oxen, fastened to a post fixed in the center of a threshing floor, leaving their own stations, go round at shorter, middle or longer distances, similarly fixed on the inside and outside of the circle of time, stars and planets exist, supporting themselves on Dhruva; and propelled by the wind, they range in every direction till the end of a kalpa.<sup>2</sup>

From the grinding of grain we move to the churning of liquid; specifically, the Vedic myth of the Churning of the Sea of Milk, a sort of cosmic tug-of-war orchestrated by Vishnu (Figure 29).<sup>3</sup>

A Cambodian bas-relief at Ankor Wat, represents the mythic theme of the Churning of the Sea of Milk. Here the churning pole pivots on the back of a turtle, twirled by gods & demi-gods pulling alternately on the body of Vasuki, King of Snakes. Two disks representing the sun & moon, identify the lotus stem as the axis of the universe, shown here with the God Vishnu in climbing posture, directing the twirling of the pole.<sup>4</sup>

According to tradition, two churning motions are involved, a slow churning brought on by the motion of the sun and causing the passage of time, and a fast churning centered within the churning stick (*axis mundi*) that produces Soma, the drink of immortality.<sup>5</sup> Since Soma is reserved for the gods, its creation does not occur within time and thus involves no physical motion. The center of the milk churn (or other rotary device) is conceived as immobile and immutable but the source of all motion and rest. All things revolve around it, but it does not participate in the motion, reflecting the basic distinction between time and eternity.<sup>6</sup> The center of the shaft is equivalent to

1. De Santillana and Von Duchend, *Hamlet’s Mill*, p. 138. The authors provide a great deal of evidence for the antiquity of this motif which is related to that of the whirlpool, seen as a kind of undersea mill that provides a conduit to the lower world. The attempt to connect the symbolism of the mill to the precession of the equinoxes and the related idea that myth is encoded science rest on less solid ground.
2. Ibid., ft. 2. We are also told that Dhruva earned his exalted seat by standing on one foot for a month. Carl Schuster identified this particular custom—still practiced in some parts of the world both in rituals of state and as a resting posture—as an arrested step. It represents the act of climbing the *axis mundi*, much as shamans do when ascending a ritual pole or ladder to reach the heavens. This is the posture in which Vishnu is depicted during the Churning of the Sea of Milk. See Carl Schustert and Edmund Carpenter, op. cit., vol. 3, bk. 1, Ch. 8, “Climbing to Heaven.”
3. Aristotle compares the formation of the fetus to the curdling of milk (*De Generatione Animalium*, bk. I, 729a, 7-14 and bk. II, 739b, 22-31), an idea shared by the Basque people in modern times. See Sandra Ott, “Aristotle Among the Basques: ‘The Cheese Analogy’ of Conception.” She finds evidence for the same belief in India and the Old Testament. Cf. Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, which documents the survival of similar beliefs in Renaissance Italy.
4. Carl Schuster and Edmund Carpenter, op. cit., vol. 3, bk 1, p. 75. Also, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Sister Nivedita, *Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists*, pp. 314-316.
5. See Jean Canteins, *Les Barrateurs Divins*, p. 82.
6. The failure to distinguish time from eternity makes it difficult to understand many ancient doctrines such as Creationism and Transmigration, which are not historical. The *in principio* (Gr. *εν αρχη*) of Genesis is not so much a beginning as a principle. Modern languages lack the timeless tenses necessary to explain these ideas effectively. See Coomaraswamy, *Time and Eternity*.

Aristotle's "atomic now" ( $\alpha\tau\omicron\mu\omicron\varsigma \nu\upsilon\nu$ ) from which time flows, or more properly, appears to flow, much as the sun appears to move through the heavens because the world is in motion. In spiritual terms, those who are not "centered" cannot distinguish the manifested world from its unchanging source.

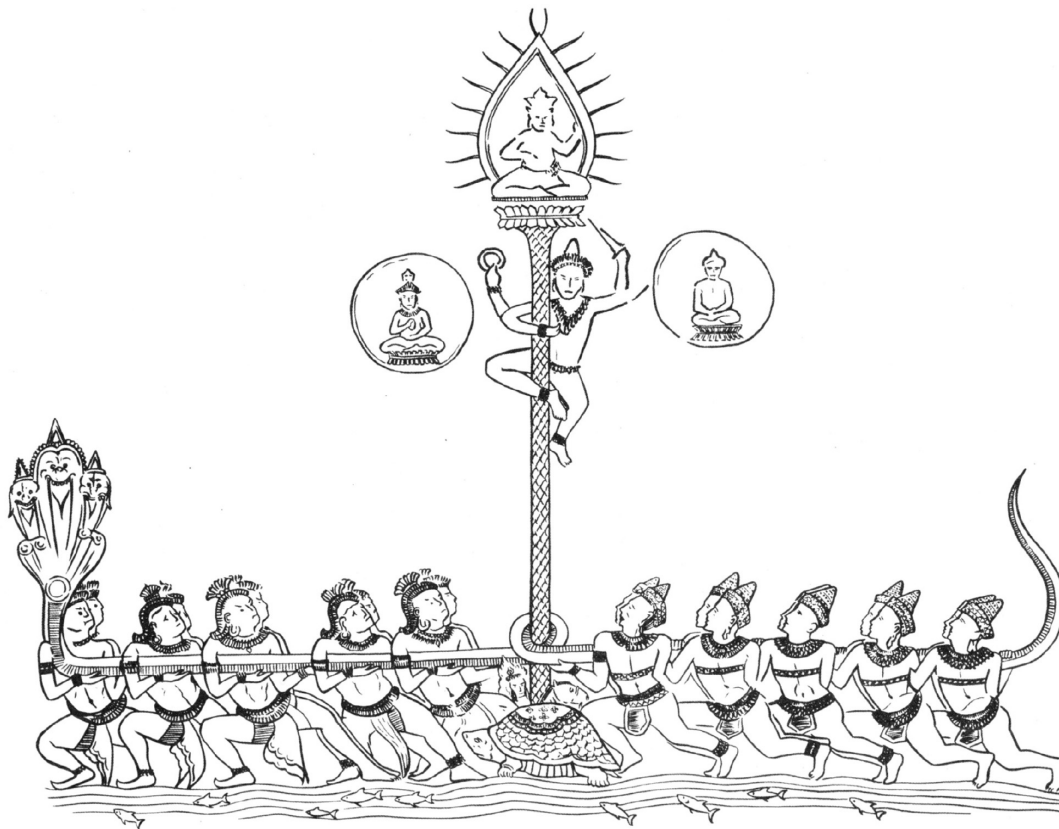


Figure 29: Churning of the Sea of Milk, Angkor Wat, Cambodia.

The central shaft is also conceived as the passageway to and from the other worlds. Once the device is set in motion, birth and death are possible. This is why the spindle is sometimes equated with the caduceus, with its upward and downward paths, symbolized by two snakes.

Yet another thought concerning the symbolic meaning of the spindle arises from the image of the accumulating thread coiling itself like a snake around the shaft. This symbol has been understood as one of mediation between earth and heaven. Hermes, the psychopomp of Greek mythology, carried it, as did the Roman god Mercury.<sup>1</sup>

The upward and downward paths of the caduceus have their astronomical counterparts in an ancient belief, articulated most clearly in Pythagoreanism and Hinduism, that the wheel of the heavens has two doors, the "gateway of men" and the "gateway of the gods." The gateway of men opens during the summer solstice in the sign of Cancer and facilitates the departure of souls to Heaven. The gate of the gods opens during the winter solstice in the sign of Capricorn and marks the incarnation of souls into bodies.<sup>2</sup>

1. Johannes Wilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

2. See René Guénon, "The Symbolism of the Zodiac Among the Pythagoreans," *Fundamental Symbols*, pp. 162-166.

These same pneumatic counter-currents can be activated when another rotary device, the prayer wheel, is set in motion (Figure 30). Here the spinning carries prayers to heaven and brings back blessings. Often referred to as “Wheels of Time,” “Wheels of Life,” or “Wheels of Transmigration,” prayer wheels are models of the Wheel of Law (*Dharma Chakra*) set in motion by Buddha when he delivered his initial teaching.<sup>1</sup>

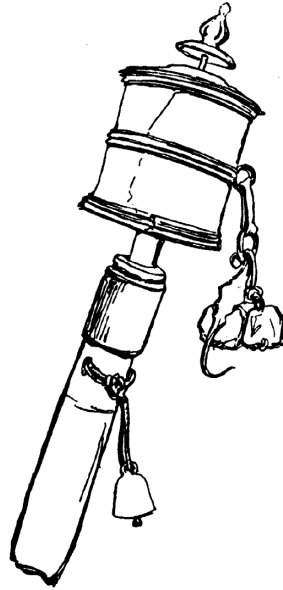


Figure 30: Hand-held prayer wheel, India.

Another rotary device reflects the same principles, the drill, used to generate fire—a sacred act—and to drill holes, often for divination purposes.<sup>2</sup> The earliest fire drills were probably simple sticks rotated between the palms. A thong of sinew twisted around the stick made the process easier by converting horizontal motion into rotary motion, the same technique used with the Indian milk churn. This reduced the amount of labor involved. It was then discovered that the ends of the thong could be attached to a bow to make the device even easier to operate. The result was the bow drill, used by Egyptians and Eskimos alike. A last variation, the pump drill employs an up-and-down motion to turn the drill-head, but it seems to have been a later development used primarily for drilling holes (Figures 31 and 32). Fire drills were used in Neolithic times, if not earlier, and are found in all parts of the world except Polynesia. (Fire, as every scout knows, can also be made through percussion or by sawing or “plowing” a block of wood.)

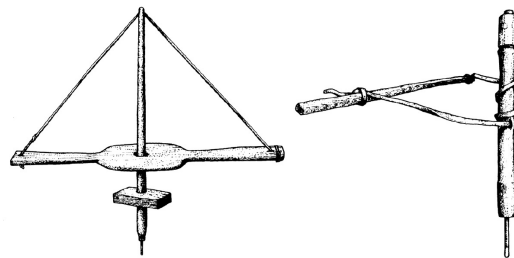


Figure 31: Pump and Bow drills.

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1. See William Simpson, *The Buddhist Praying Wheel*. Some prayer wheels were even designed as revolving bookshelves, meant to hold religious scripture, giving new meaning to the term “circulating library”. For a discussion of the symbolism of wheels, see A. K. Coomaraswamy, *Collected Works*, vols. 1 and 2, *passim*.
  2. For a history of fire drills, see Charles Singer, *A History of Technology*, vol. 1, pp. 189-228.



Figure 32: Eskimo with Bow drill.

As with the spindle, the shaft of the fire drill is meant to represent the *axis mundi* that separates the three worlds and forms the channel through which the Spirit, in its manifestation as fire, is drawn down from Heaven. What is returned is smoke, an offering to the Deity, often associated with the sacrifice of animals or the cremation of human bodies. The needle-like point of the drill is a phallus and the drilling the act of creation.

In the Vedic rite of fire-making, two sticks (*arani*) designated male (*uttarani*) and female (*adharani*) are employed. The vertical male stick is inserted into a notch on the horizontal female stick and rotated to produce fire.<sup>1</sup> The ancient Greeks had a similar practice involving sacred fire sticks and attributed the invention of fire-making to Hermes, the messenger god.

The Chukchee and Koryak of Siberia drilled into a board carved in the likeness of the First Ancestor (Figure 33).<sup>2</sup> They believed the creation of the world and the tribe had its origin in a sexual act performed at the base of the *axis mundi*, the center or navel of the world.

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1. It is of some interest that the Hindus used percussion to produce fire at home and reserved fire sticks for ritual occasions. The same division took place with pottery making. Both men and women make pottery by hand but pottery wheels, at least until recent times, were reserved for men, due to their ritual nature. See Jean Canteins, *Les Baratteurs Divins*, p. 18, for a more complete discussion of these issues.
  2. Carl Schuster and Edmund Carpenter, op. cit., vol. 3, bk. 1, pp. 70-75.

Fireboards were also drilled for divination purposes, as were turtle shells in ancient China.<sup>1</sup> We should remember that the turtle also served as the support for the *axis mundi* during the Churning of the Sea of Milk.

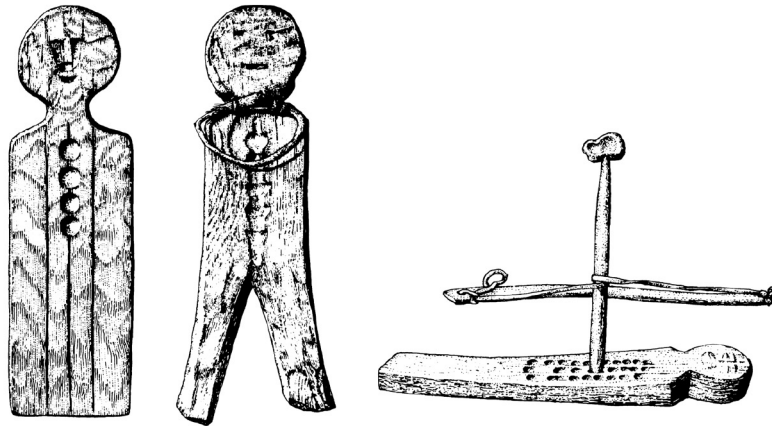


Figure 33: Maritime Koryak fire boards and drill.

The cosmic and procreative symbolism of spindles is also reflected in the designs carved on spindle whorls. Not all whorls are decorated, but those that are often feature designs found on other disk-shaped objects like coins, gambling chips and buzzers (Figure 34).

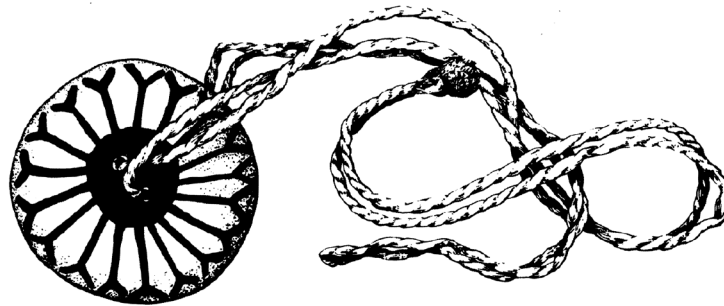


Figure 34: Hopi Indian buzzer.

Johannes Wilbert's study of designs on spindle whorls from prehistoric Central America revealed a common motif.

A frequent representation in spindle-whorl iconography is a figure shown with knees apart of the type sometimes described as the "hocker" motif [Figure 35]. Similar figures can be found in the Manteno Culture, carved in low relief and on stone slabs where "the upper end of one surface is dominated by a human or animal figure with the legs and arms bent to one side. The head often fits into a niche in an ornamental frieze with a repetitive geometric pattern. A pair of birds, disks, or monkeys often accompanies the principal figure" (Meggers 1966: 126).<sup>2</sup>

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1. The turtle as a creature of the earth supports the *axis mundi* in many traditions and is widely used for divination. It is believed to be asexual or bisexual which makes it suitable as a totemic First Ancestor. See Edmund Carpenter, *ibid.*, pp. 76-79.
  2. Johannes Wilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 98.



Figure 35: Spindle whorl with hockers, Ecuador.

The hocker, as Wibert notes, is often identified with the so-called “heraldic woman” or “shameless woman” motif found widely in Oceanic art and elsewhere, so named because the figure appears to be giving birth or in coitus (Figure 26). Such figures appear both in human and animal form.



Figure 36: Painted wooden house gable with hocker, Palau.

In Mexico, the Earth Mother as monstrous toad (Tlalecuhtli), is depicted in the same “hocker” position, emphasizing her creative, birth-giving function just as her claws and fangs symbolize the other side of her dualistic life-death nature. That the “hocker” or squatting position, is in fact symbolic of birth—i.e., creation—is overwhelmingly clear from the depiction of the goddess Tlazolteotl in the *Codex Borbonicus*, where she is shown in the act of giving birth to the young maize god Centéotl.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Johannes Wilbert, op. cit., p.98.

It fell to Carl Schuster to identify the hocker more precisely as an ancestor figure excerpted from a repeating pattern, and to demonstrate its prehistoric roots. While the squatting position may have come to be associated with birth or coitus this was not its original significance. These meanings are not mutually exclusive, however, in that they both involve generation.

The Tlingit of Alaska sometimes place a large hocker in the center of a wall-screen: its open vagina serves as a threshold to an inner chamber behind the screen. On Salish spindle-whorls, a hocker's vagina or navel often marks the point where the *axis mundi* penetrates This World, linking it to the World Above and the World Below: again, the cosmic threshold [Figure 37]. This symbolism goes on & on, supporting, elaborating beliefs wholly congenial to genealogical iconography.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 37: Salish Indian spindle whorl.

Again we should note that the act of spinning sets these hocker figures in motion, surely a significant element in the design. Carl Schuster found another specimen, a wooden spindle whorl from the San Juan province of Argentina attributed to the Barreales culture (fl. A.D. 500), which reinforces this idea (Figure 38).

Inscribed on this object, which was apparently intended to be rotated around its central hole, are two human-headed mazes in inverse relation to each other. The twirling of the disk (which was evidently a spindle-whorl, perhaps made in imitation of a ritual object) would then have had the effect of facilitating the passage of the soul into the Afterworld.<sup>2</sup>

The two heads represent the point of departure from this world and of arrival in the other. Schuster also linked these human-headed mazes to continuous-line drawings and to the labyrinth motif. These mazes were conceived as ancestors through whom one could pass to enter the World Beyond, if properly prepared. The question of qualification is paramount because the spinning of any rotary device was also seen as a barrier. The two opposing heads of San Juan spindle whorl

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1. Carl Schuster and Edmund Carpenter, op. cit., vol. 1, bk. 1, p. 233.

2. Carl Schuster, "Genealogical Patterns in the Old and New Worlds," p. 54. Schuster adds an interesting footnote relevant to the subject at hand: "Since the purpose of the San Juan disk thus appears to be similar to that of the Tibetan prayer-wheel, could there be an historical connection between the two devices? What is the relation between such ritual uses of the 'wheel' and its practical use as a bearing for vehicle, which developed in the Old World but hardly in the New? Did ritual carts precede secular conveyances?"

also act as the clashing rocks, monstrous jaws, or automatic jams of folklore, which seek to prevent the hero from entering the Other World.<sup>1</sup>

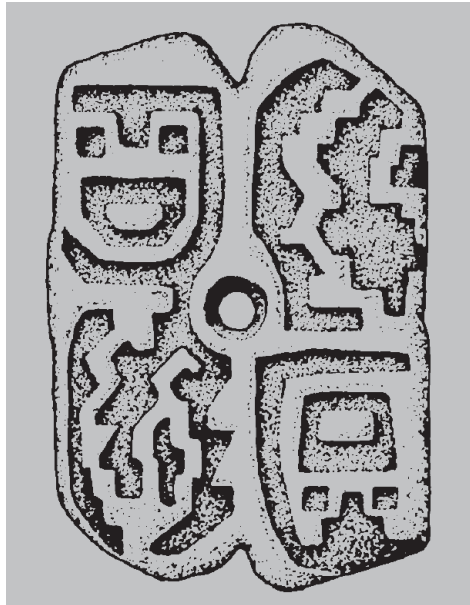


Figure 38: Wooden spindle whorl, Argentina.

The footless Bhauvana defends the Active Door, and this is described as a revolving razor-edged sun-bright wheel, an engine (*yantra*) “fitly devised by the Gods for the cutting to pieces of Soma-thieves.”<sup>2</sup>

In this case, the hawk is swift enough to fly through the spokes in the wheel and eventually obtain the Water of Life that he “twirls” or “grinds” from the rock.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, in the Kabalistic tradition, the fiery chariot-throne (*Merkabah*) of the Creator is guarded by various hosts of angels including the *ofanim* (wheels) as described in the visions of Ezekiel in the Old Testament.<sup>4</sup>

Louis Raymond, who made a more exhaustive study of the designs carved, incised, or painted on spindle whorls—mostly in the Americas but with some older European examples—found the majority of them to be geometric. Noting that the earliest known spindle whorls date from about 7500 B.C. he suggested that the origins of these designs lay in the more distant past. A Neolithic example from Germany is typical of those found in graves near the south coast of the Baltic Sea (Figure 39).

A review of decorative art found on Paleolithic artifacts such as bone, antlers, ivory and on cave walls show the earliest use of most of the simple, primary geometric motifs found on spindle whorls, even though a time gap exists before the first recorded use of spindle whorls.<sup>5</sup>

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1. See Coomaraswamy, “The Symplegades,” *Collected Works*, I, pp. 521-544.
  2. Coomaraswamy, “The Early Iconography of Sagittarius,” in *Guardians of the Sundoor*, p. 12.
  3. See Coomaraswamy, “Angel and Titan,” pp. 373-377.
  4. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 67. Cf., Ezek., ch. 1.
  5. Louis Raymond, *Spindle Whorls in Archaeology*, p. 80.



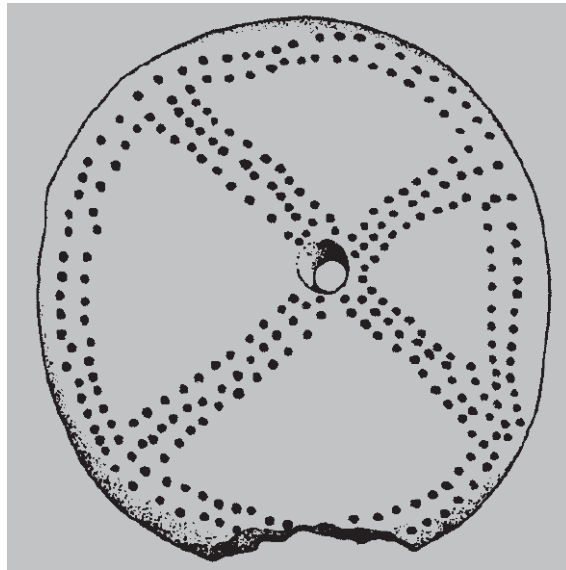


Figure 39: Neolithic perforated and drilled amber disk.

These geometric designs include dots, circles, chevrons, zigzags, diamonds, straight and undulating lines, and a variety of other simple forms. A study of Bronze Age spindle whorls from Cyprus revealed many of the same patterns (Figure 40).<sup>1</sup> In keeping with the circular nature of the whorl, designs were often disposed in sections. Human or animal figures were arranged as mirror images, one in each half or quarter of the whorl. Artists also took advantage of the movement of the whirl to create illusionistic effects; lines and dots that transform into human figures or colors that blend to the surprise of the viewer.<sup>2</sup> In some cases, designs might be hidden from view on the underside of the spindle, meant for the spirits alone, like petroglyphs carved in inaccessible locations.

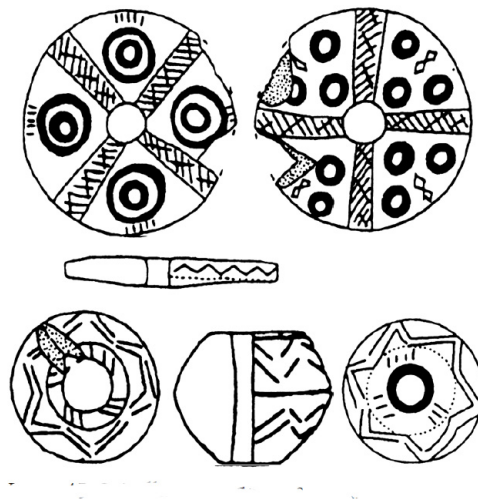


Figure 40: Spindle whorl designs, Bronze Age Cyprus.

1. Lindy Crewe, *Spindle Whorls*. For numerous examples of Chinese spindle whorls, see Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, vol. 5, part 9, section 31.
2. Some of the techniques involved are on display in the movie "Tops," by Ray and Charles Eames. The Films of Ray and Charles Eames, vol. 5.

It was Carl Schuster's belief that these "geometric patterns" were the remnants of an ancient system of linked human-like figures, intended to represent ancestors.<sup>1</sup> He also felt that the halving and quartering of the disks and other circular objects reflected basic social divisions that had an analogous cosmological significance (Figure 41). The spinning facilitated the rebirth of the Spirit (personified in some cultures as an original ancestor), while the figures on the whorl represented the enduring continuity of the group made possible by procreation.



*Figure 41: Araucanian shamans with drums.*

## **The Solar Spider**

The spider is an important figure in mythology and folklore. At once a creature of the ground and the air, the spider acts as an intermediary between earth and heaven. In many parts of West and Central Africa the spider plays a major role in the myth of creation, forming the earth and the human race, bringing fire to men and spinning a thread that provides a bridge to heaven. More significantly, the sun itself is described as a spider whose rays form the web of creation.

In Ghana, the ancestor spider is Anansi, who is both messenger and trickster, crafty and malevolent by turns. God as trickster, juggler or stranger is a common theme in folklore and signifies the multiple forms the Deity assumes in the world. As both messenger and trickster Anansi corresponds to the Greek Hermes.

The solar spider also appears in North America. M.E. Opler recounts a birth rite of the Jicarilla Apache in which "a cord of unblemished buckskin, called in the rite a 'spider's rope,' is stretched

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1. In the same regard, Johannes Wilbert wrote, "The same reservation regarding the meaning of 'representational' vs. 'abstract' or 'geometric' designs applies here as in the case of the Manabi whorls. Iconographic and symbolic studies of contemporary Indians and other non-Western art show that designs which to us look abstract or geometric may be no less 'representational' to the native observer than those we would call 'realistic.'" "The Thread of Life," p. 29.

from the umbilicus of the child towards the sun.”<sup>1</sup> Here the progenitive power of the Deity is emphasized as it is in the Hindu and Christian traditions.

This [the Jicarilla rite] combines the Indian symbolism of the Sun as a spider...whose threads are rays (*sutratman* doctrine), with the concept of the Sun equated with the vivifying Spirit, at the same time that it corresponds exactly to the Orthodox Christian conception of the Nativity, where (as at Palermo and in many Russian ikons) the Madonna is evidently the Earth Goddess, and a (seventh) ray of light extends directly from the (otherwise six-rayed) Sun to the Bambino.<sup>2</sup>



Figure 42: Silk spiders (male and female).

The solar spider represents a variant form of weaving symbolism inasmuch as the web is formed from his own substance just as the universe and all being is an extension of God (Figure 42). The circular form of the web produces a spherical cosmos with the solar spider sitting in the center, like the sun. Further:

The remarkable perfection of the “spider” symbolism extends to the fact that the radii (warp threads) of the web are not sticky, while the spiral (woof) is adhesive; the spider himself walks only on the radii while the flies are caught on the sticky thread.<sup>3</sup>

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1. M. E. Opler, *Myths and Tales of the Jicarilla Apache Indians*, p. 19.

2. Coomaraswamy, *Collected Works*, I, p. 530, ft. 22.

3. Coomaraswamy, “The Iconography of Durer’s ‘Knots’ and Leonardo’s ‘Concatenation,’” op. cit., ft. 9.

In Buddhist and Hindu contexts sense perception depends on contact and he who touches may be caught. This is the “stickfast” motif of folklore found in such diverse writings as the Buddhist *Jatakas* and the *Uncle Remus* stories, in the figure of the Tar-Baby (Figure 43).<sup>1</sup>

“All fruitions are contact-born” (*Bhagavad Gita* V.21) Perception is a “grasping,” “handling,” or “taking hold of” (*grahanam*) of objects, the sense organs themselves are referred to as “graspers” (*graha*), but in their turn are “grasped” (*grhita*) by their objects as “over-graspers,” and all these experiences “are the food of Death” (*Brhadaranyaka Up.* III.1.-10).<sup>2</sup>



Figure 43: Tar-Baby and Brer Rabbit from *Uncle Remus*.

Our sense life is a thread or ray from God. Its proper object lies not in the pleasures of perception but in the recollection of its source. Like the fly stuck in the spider’s web, attachment to the physical world is an entanglement that results in death. Liberty is attained through nonattachment. In the *Maitri Upanishad* the exaltation of the contemplative is compared to the ascent of a spider on his thread.<sup>3</sup> He who would be a “mover-at-will” must untie the bond of individuality and follow the thread back to it’s source. “Come into my parlor,” said the spider to the fly.

## The Continuous Line

Just as the solar spider spins a web from a single unbroken thread, the use of a single line to construct a work of art has a long history and examples can be found in a wide variety of media from sand drawings, to metalwork (Figure 15), to engraving.<sup>4</sup>

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1. See Coomaraswamy, “A Note on the Stickfast Motif,” pp. 128-131.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 129

3. See Coomaraswamy, *Collected Works*, I, p. 326.

4. The subject is given an abbreviated treatment here. See my paper, “The Continuous-Line” on Academia.edu for more detail.

It is of little importance, in the different forms that the symbolism takes, whether it be a thread in the literal sense, a cord, a chain, or a drawn line such as those already mentioned, or a path made by architectural means as in the case of the labyrinth, a path along which the being has to go from one end to the other in order to reach his goal. What is essential in every case is that the line should be unbroken.<sup>1</sup>

Coomaraswamy took up the matter of the continuous line in "The Iconography of Durer's 'Knots' and Leonardo's 'Concatenation'" where he discussed the symbolic meaning of certain knot-work designs found in the engravings of Albrecht Dürer and the works of Leonardo da Vinci.<sup>2</sup>

He began with a wood engraving of Albrecht Dürer's taken from a series, *Sechs Knoten* (Figure 44). In each of the six engravings, the central design is constructed from a single white line on a black ground. Four smaller knot designs, all of them identical, occupy the corners. In each case, a single white line forms an extremely complex series of knot designs that resemble lace work or embroidery patterns. The function of this artistic tour de force is uncertain, but the designs may be patterns intended for use in other media.

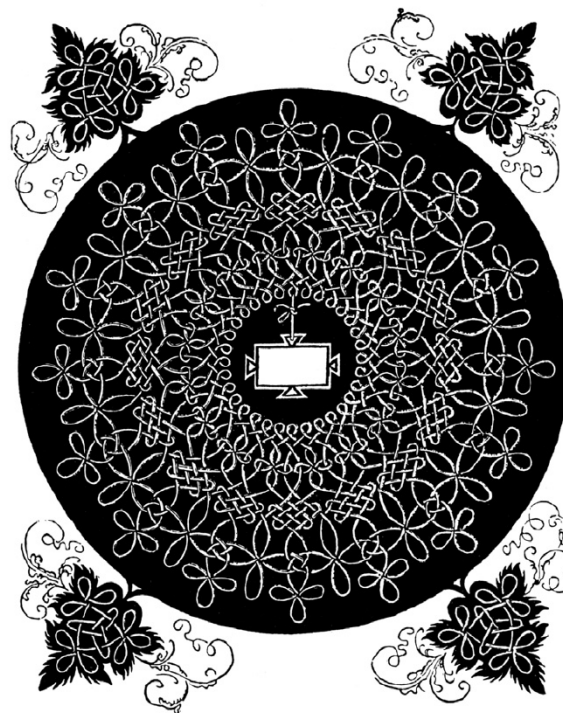


Figure 44: One of Durer's "Sechs Knoten".

In the opinion of many scholars, Dürer's knot designs are variations on a copper engraving attributed to Leonardo Da Vinci that bears the words, "Academia Leonardi Vinci" within the central medallion (Figure 45). In the words of Vasari:

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1. René Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, p. 277. This remark is more important than the author may have understood since it connects the examples in this paper to a Paleolithic iconography from which these ideas are derived. I have discussed this system of linked human figures elsewhere and interest readers can consult the work of the American art historian, Carl Schuster.
  2. A.K. Coomaraswamy, "The Iconography of Durer's 'Knots' and 'Leonardo's 'Concatenation,'" op. cit., pp. 109-128.

He [Leonardo] spent much time in making a regular design of a series of knots so that the cord may be traced from one end to the other, the whole filling a round space.<sup>1</sup>

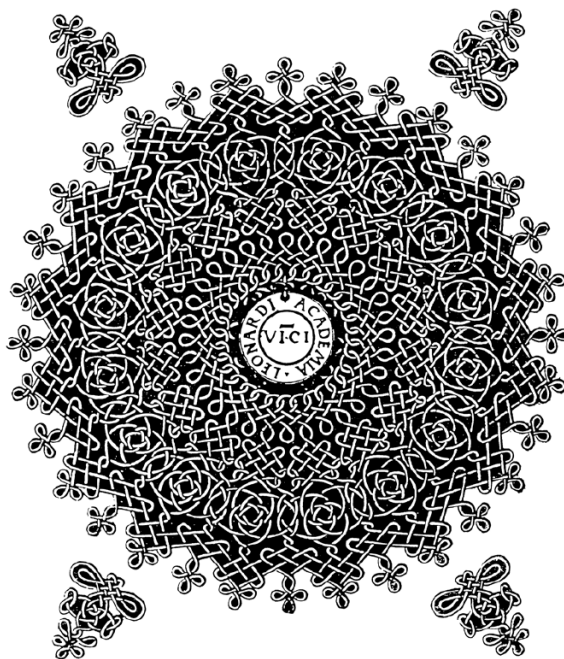


Figure 45: Leonardo's "Concatenation".

Coomaraswamy noted the similarity between Leonardo's "Concatenation," as it is named, and the cosmic diagram known as a *mandala*.

The significance of Leonardo's "decorative puzzle" — which from an Oriental viewpoint must be called a *mandala* — will only be realized if it is regarded as the plane projection of a construction upon which we are looking down from above.<sup>2</sup>

The dark ground represents the earth, which is associated metaphysically with the substantial, potential aspects of manifestation. The white line is the Spirit, the essential, active aspect of manifestation whose source is the summit or center (Heaven). The four corner ornaments are the cardinal directions and reflect the seasons (time), and the older conception of a quartered universe held together by the Spirit. The whole construction is summarized best in the words of Dante (*Paradiso* XXIX.31-6) to whom the meaning of these esoteric symbols was familiar.

Co-created was order and inwrought with the substances; and those were the summit in the universe wherein pure act was produced: Pure potentiality held the lowest place; and in the midst potentiality with act strung such a withy as shall never be unwound.<sup>3</sup>

Did Leonardo understand the symbolic meaning of his own work or was he merely copying an older design?

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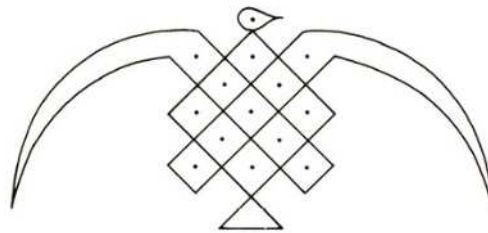
1. Coomaraswamy, *ibid.*, p. 109.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 113.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 114. The metaphor of the "withy," is taken from wickerwork and basketry, a connection to the name "Da Vinci." For the esoteric underpinnings of the *Divine Comedy*, see René Guénon, *The Esoterism of Dante*.

Leonardo's *Concatenation* is a geometrical realization of this "universal form." He must have known Dante, and could have taken from him the suggestion for this cryptogram. But there is every reason to believe that Leonardo, like so many other Renaissance scholars, was versed in the Neo-Platonic esoteric tradition, and that he may have been an initiate, familiar with the "mysteries" of the crafts. It is much more likely, then, that Dante and Leonardo both are making use of the old and traditional symbolism of weaving and embroidery.<sup>1</sup>

The American art historian, Carl Schuster, was interested in continuous-line drawing and collected examples from many cultures (Figure 46). To construct such a drawing, an artist usually begins with a framework of dots and draws an unbroken line through or around them to form a figure or pattern. The essential element, as we noted, is the unbroken nature of the line.



*Figure 46: Sand drawing of bird, Angola.*

The methods of construction used in the New Hebrides are common to the tradition wherever it is found (Figure 47). First a patch of sand or earth is made level and smooth, or an area with volcanic dust may be used. Sometimes ashes are spread on the earth to provide a clean drawing surface. Next, the artist draws a framework consisting of lines set at right angles and crossing one another, or a series of small circles arranged in a regular pattern. This preliminary layout serves as a guide for constructing the drawing. The artist then smoothly traces the curves, circles, and ellipses around or through the guides until the figure is completed.

In theory, the whole should be done in a single, continuous line which ends where it began; the finger should never be lifted from the ground, nor should any part of the line be traversed twice. In a very great many of the drawings, this is actually achieved.<sup>2</sup>

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1. A.K. Coomaraswamy, "The Iconography of Durer's 'Knots' and 'Leonardo's 'Concatenation,'" op. cit., p. 114.  
2. Deacon, "Geometrical Designs from Malekula and other Islands of the New Hebrides," p. 133.

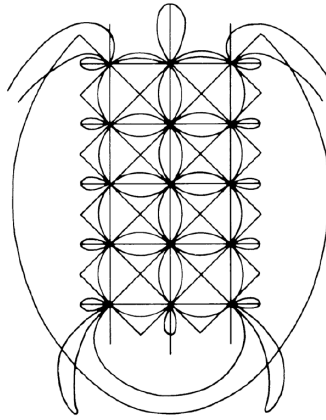


Figure 47: Mallekulan sand-drawing of a turtle.

## String Figures

String figures are another form of continuous-line and they resemble continuous-line drawings in their manner of construction (Figure 48). Instead of guiding dots drawn on the ground, the finger joints (or other body parts) serve as the guides around which the string passes. The essential point is that the guiding dots used to construct continuous-line drawings were also once understood as body joints. Joint marks are the link between the various versions of the *sutratman*. The line is the Spirit connecting the joints and reanimating the being. At root, there is a connection between joints and knots, which are essential to the fiber arts, and which are conceived as externalized joints.

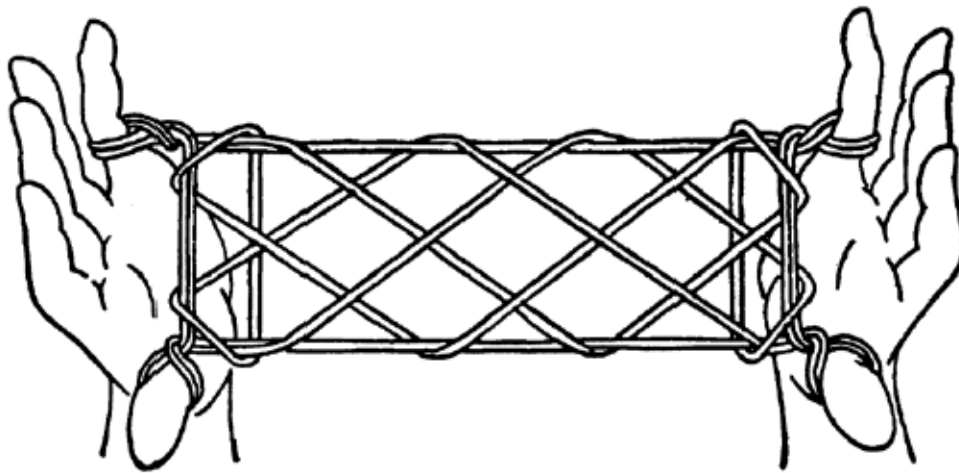


Figure 48: Cat's cradle.

There is more to this story than can be covered here, including the relationship of the continuous-line to esoteric rituals intended to ensure rebirth, such as the labyrinth. The equivalency of knots, joints and ancestors is covered in my book, *The Thread-Spirit*.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Joint marking is also discussed in another paper, "Birth from the Knee," available on Academia.edu.



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