

The Symbolism of Weaving

. . . In Eastern doctrines, traditional books are frequently referred to by terms which in their literal sense are connected with weaving. Thus, in Sanskrit, *sūtra* properly means “thread”:¹ a book may be formed by a connection of *sūtras*, as a fabric is formed by a tissue of threads; *tantra* also has the meaning of “thread” and that of “fabric”, and denotes more particularly the “warp” of a fabric.² Similarly in Chinese *king* is the “warp” of a material, and *wei* is its “weft”; the first of these two words denotes at the same time a fundamental book, and the second denotes the commentaries on it.³ This distinction between the “warp” and the “weft”, in the corpus of traditional scriptures, corresponds to the distinction drawn in Hindu terminology between *Shruti*, which is the fruit of direct inspiration, and *Smriti*, which is the product of reflection upon the contents of *Shruti*.⁴

If the meaning of this symbolism is to be clearly grasped, it should first be observed that the warp, formed as it is by threads stretched upon the loom, represents the immutable, principal ele-

¹ This word is identical with the Latin *sutura*, the same root, with the meaning of “to sew”, being found in both languages. It is at least curious to note that the Arabic word *sūrat*, which denotes chapters of the Koran, is composed of exactly the same elements as the Sanskrit *sūtra*; this word has in addition the kindred sense of “row” or “line”, and its derivation is unknown.

² The root *tan* of this word expresses in the first place the idea of extension.

³ The use of knotted cords, which took the place of writing in China at a very distant period, is also attached to the weaving symbolism; these cords were of the same kind as those used by the ancient Peruvians and called by them *quipos*. Though it has sometimes been maintained that these were merely for counting, it seems clear that they also expressed far more complex ideas, especially since we are told that they formed the “annals of the empire”, and since the Peruvians never had any other mode of writing, whereas they possessed a highly perfected and refined language. This kind of ideography was made possible by multiple combinations in which the use of threads of different colors played an important part.

⁴ See *Man and His Becoming*, chap. 1 and also *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power*, chap. 8.

ments, whereas the threads of the weft, which pass between those of the warp by the to-and-fro movement of the shuttle, represent the variable and contingent elements, in other words the applications of the principle to this or that set of particular conditions. Again, if one thread of the warp and one of the weft are considered, it will at once be seen that their meeting forms the cross, of which they are respectively the vertical line and the horizontal; and every stitch in the fabric, being thus the meeting-point of two mutually perpendicular threads, is thereby the center of such a cross. Now, following . . . the general symbolism of the cross, the vertical line represents that which joins together all the degrees of Existence by connecting their corresponding points to one another, whereas the horizontal line represents the development of one of these states or degrees. Thus the horizontal direction may be taken as depicting, for example, the human state, and the vertical direction that which is transcendent in relation to that state. This transcendence clearly belongs to *Shruti*, which is essentially “non-human”, where *Smriti* involves applications to the human order and is produced by the exercise of the specifically human faculties.

At this point another observation may be made which will bring out still more clearly the concordance of different symbolisms which are more closely connected than might be supposed; this concerns the aspect of the cross in which it symbolizes the union of complements. In this aspect, as we have seen, the vertical line represents the active or masculine principle (*Purusha*), and the horizontal one the passive or feminine principle (*Prakriti*), all manifestation being produced by the “actionless” influence of the first upon the second. Now, in another context, *Shruti* is likened to direct light, depicted by the sun, and *Smriti* to reflected⁵ light, depicted by the moon; but, at the same time, the sun and moon, in nearly all traditions, also respectively symbolize the masculine and feminine principles in universal manifestation.

The weaving symbolism is not applied merely to traditional scriptures; it 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. Thus, in the *Upanishads*, the supreme *Brahma* is called “That upon which the

⁵ The double meaning of the word “reflection” is worthy of note.

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worlds are woven, as warp and weft”, or by other similar formulas;⁶ here again, warp and weft naturally have the respective meanings just defined. Again, according to the Taoist doctrine, all beings are subject to the continual alternation of the two states of life and death (condensation and dissipation, vicissitudes of *yang* and *yin*);⁷ and the commentators call this alternation “the to-and-fro motion of the shuttle upon the cosmic loom”.⁸ Actually, these two applications of one and the same symbolism are even more closely akin, since in certain traditions the Universe itself is sometimes symbolized by a book; in this connection, one need only recall the *Liber Mundi* of the Brotherhood of the Rose-Cross, and also the well-known Apocalyptic symbol of the *Liber Vitae*.⁹ From this standpoint again, the threads of the warp, by which the corresponding points in all states are connected, form the sacred book which is the prototype (or rather, archetype) of all traditional scriptures, and of which these scriptures are merely expressions in human language.¹⁰ The threads of the weft, each of which is

⁶ *Mundaka Upanishad* II.2.5; *Brihad-Āranyaka Upanishad* III.8.7-8. The Buddhist monk Kumarajīva translated into Chinese a Sanskrit work entitled *The Net of Brahma* (*Fan-wang-king*), according to which the worlds are arranged like the meshes of a net.

⁷ *Tao Te Ching*, chap. 16.

⁸ Chang-Hung Yang also compares this alternation to breathing, the active inspiration corresponding to life and the passive expiration to death, the end of the one being moreover the beginning of the other. The same commentator also makes use of the lunar rotation as a term of comparison, the full moon signifying life and the new moon death, with two intermediate periods of waxing and waning. As regards breathing, what is said here refers to the two phrases of existence of a being as if he himself were the breather; in the universal order, on the other hand, out-breathing corresponds to the development of manifestation, and in-breathing to the return to the non-manifested. . . ; according as things are considered in respect of manifestation or in respect of the Principle, one must not forget to apply the “inverse sense” in analogy.

⁹ . . . In certain representations the book sealed with seven seals, with the lamb lying upon it, is placed, like the “Tree of Life”, at the common source of the four rivers of Paradise. We also remarked upon the relationship between the symbolism of the tree and that of the book: the leaves of the tree and the characters in the book alike represent all the beings in the Universe (the “ten thousand beings” of the Far-Eastern tradition).

¹⁰ This is expressly affirmed of the *Veda* and the Koran; the idea of the “Eternal Gospel” also shows that this same conception is not wholly foreign to Christianity.

the development of events in a certain state, form the commentary, in the sense that they give the applications relating to the different states; all events, envisaged in the simultaneity of the “timeless”, are thus inscribed in the Book, of which each represents as it were one character, being also identified with one stitch in the fabric. On this symbolism of the book, the following passage from Muḥyi ’d-Dīn ibn al-‘Arabī may also be quoted: “The Universe is a vast book; the characters of this book are all written, in principle, with the same ink and transcribed on to the eternal Tablet by the Divine Pen; all are transcribed simultaneously and inseparably; for that reason the essential phenomena hidden in the ‘secret of secrets’ were given the name of ‘transcendent letters’. And these same transcendent letters, that is to say all creatures, after having been virtually condensed in the divine Omniscience, were carried down on the divine Breath to the lower lines, and composed and formed the manifested Universe.”¹¹

Another form of the symbolism of weaving, also found in the Hindu tradition, is the image of the spider weaving its web; this image is even more exact, since the spider spins the thread out of its own substance.¹² By reason of the web’s circular shape, which may be considered as the plane section of the cosmogonic spheroid, that is, of the non-closed sphere. . . , the warp is here represented by the threads radiating from the center, and the weft by the threads arranged in concentric circles.¹³ To return from this to the ordinary representation of weaving, it is only necessary to consider the center as being indefinitely remote, so that the radii become parallel in the vertical direction, while the concentric circles become straight lines perpendicular to these radii, that is, horizontal lines.

To sum up, the warp may be said to represent the principles that bind together all the worlds or all the states, each of its threads forming the connection between corresponding points in these different states, whereas the weft represents the chains of events that are produced in

¹¹ *Al-Futūhāt al-Makkiyah*. One might compare the part likewise played by letters in the cosmogonic doctrine of the *Sepher Yetsirah*.

¹² Commentary of Shankarāchārya on the *Brahma-Sūtras* II.1.25.

¹³ The spider, at the center of its web, corresponds to the sun surrounded by its rays; it can thus be taken as a figure of the “Heart of the World”.

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each of the worlds, each thread being thus the development of events in a given world. From another point of view it may be said that the manifestation of a being in a certain state of existence, like any other event, is determined by the meeting of a thread of the warp with a thread of the weft. Each thread of the warp is then a being envisaged in its essential nature, which insofar as it is a direct projection of the principal "Self" provides the connecting link between all its states, and maintains its unity through their indefinite multiplicity. In this case, the thread of the weft which this thread of the warp meets at a given point corresponds to a definite state of existence, and the intersection of the two threads determines the relation of the being, as regards its manifestation in that state, with the cosmic environment in which it is thus situated. The individual nature of a human being, for instance, is the resultant of the meeting of these two threads; in other words, it will always be necessary to distinguish in him two kinds of elements which will have to be referred to the vertical and the horizontal directions respectively: the first are the elements that properly belong to the being in question, whereas the second proceed from the environmental conditions.

By a different but equivalent symbolism, the threads of which the "world fabric" is formed are also termed the "hair of Shiva"; they might be metaphorically described as the "lines of force" of the manifested Universe, and the directions of space represent them in the corporeal order. It will readily be seen in how many different ways all these considerations are capable of being applied; but the sole purpose of this chapter was to indicate the essential meaning of the symbolism of weaving, which apparently is very little known in the West.¹⁴

¹⁴ Nevertheless, traces of a symbolism of the same kind are to be found in Greco-Roman antiquity, notably in the myth of the Fates; but this really seems to relate rather to the threads of the weft alone, and its "fateful" character may in fact be explained by the absence of the notion of the warp, that is, by the fact that the being is envisaged solely in its individual state, without any conscious intervention (for that being) of its transcendent personal principle. This interpretation is further justified by the way in which Plato regards the vertical axis in the myth of Er the Armenian (*Republic*, Book X): according to him, in fact, the luminous axis of the world is the "spindle of Necessity"; it is an axis of diamond, surrounded by a number of concentric sheaths, of different dimensions and colors, which correspond to the different planetary spheres; the Fate Clotho makes it turn with her right hand, hence from right to left, which is also the most usual and normal direction of rotation of the *swastika*. Apropos of this

“diamond axis”, the Tibetan symbol of the *vajra*, a name which means both “thunderbolt” and “diamond”, is also related to the “World Axis”.