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“The Eye of the Needle”: *The Rhythms of the Sacred: time of the monk, time of the tourist on the global scene*, Abbazia di Farfa, Farfa, 24 March, 2007, Farfa, 2007 (in Press).

Throughout the Middle Ages monks studied a cumulative corpus of knowledge by copying manuscripts, and making commentaries. These activities assumed that the roots of Christianity lay in the Greco-Roman and Judaeo-Christian tradition, i.e. in Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic in the Near East. From at least the time of Isidore of Seville there were attempts at etymological treatment of words. The past centuries have seen many refinements to philology in general and to etymology as a specific discipline. The past half century has added two new dimensions to this process. First, scholars such as Kahir¹ have drawn attention to the history of letters of the alphabet as building blocks of meaning. Second, they have pointed to intimate links between the Judeo-Christian tradition in the Near East and traditions in India. This implies that monks and scholars of the future are faced with a new set of challenges: to understand traditions that go back long before the birth of Christ and entail the Far East as well as the Near East.

To illustrate these challenges we shall focus on a few letters of the alphabet. In both the Far East, the Middle East and in Europe, the seven days of the week are linked with the twelve months and twelve signs of the zodiac. There is reason to believe that the days and months are also linked with the alphabet. The letter A links with Agni (sacrificial fire represented as a ram); B with Budha (Mercury); C with Chandra (Moon); D with Daksha Prajapati (the Creator); and E with Ena (Capricorn linked with Saturn) and also entailed three lines (cf the trigrams in China) that corresponded to energy in the three worlds. F was a weakened version of same. G was Guru (Jupiter).

In early Chinese cosmology, the week began with Thursday (linked in the West with Jupiter and in the East with both Guru = Jupiter and Za = Ziva = Shiva = Sius = Zeus). At some point, Friday became the first day of the week. Accordingly G represents the seventh day of the week and the seventh letter of the alphabet. In India, the first day of the week became Saturday (linked with Eta = Saturn). Accordingly the Greek letter Zeta is the sixth letter of the alphabet, but has a value of seven as seventh day in an earlier system. Zeta is written as a Z in English.

The English letter G serves as an all encompassing summary of the space linking heaven and earth. The corresponding Greek, Zeta, as letter Z, has a twofold function. First, it links the three worlds of a) heaven (Thursday = Jupiter and Friday = Shukra = Venus = Hera); b) the intermediate world (Saturday = Saturn and Sunday = Surya = Sun). and c) earth (Monday = Moon = Chandra; Tuesday = Daksha and Dharma = Mars and Wednesday = Budha = Mercury). Second, it summarizes the sequences of the days of the week.

In isolation this might seem a co-incidence. In practice, it reflects a larger picture. Two weeks is 14 days. In English, the 14th letter of the alphabet is N, which is effectively a Z written sideways. In Greek, the 14th letter of the alphabet is Xi. This letter is written in a number of ways. In one of its early forms, it was written as two Zs positioned one above the other. Hence, the Greek letter Xi effectively shows the three worlds of heaven, intermediate space and earth as three horizontal lines and two diagonals whereby heaven and earth are linked. In

other versions Xi is simply written as three parallel, horizontal lines, again showing the three worlds.

This configuration recalls the trigrams of three lines of the Chinese *I Ching*. Indeed, the Chinese system also has an underlying assumption of three worlds. For instance, the Chinese ideogram for king (Ou) entails three horizontal, parallel lines joined by a central parallel line. The Chinese ideogram for mountain (San), entails three vertical lines joined by an underlying horizontal line. Together, these create the word: Mountain king (San ou), which becomes a wordplay with the word for Monkey King (Sannou).² There are further wordplays between Saru as monkey; Saru as expeller; Saru (Sanskrit) as arrow. In the Chinese, Japanese and Indian systems the monkey thus becomes much more than a simple animal. The monkey becomes a key intermediary between the three worlds and effectively functions as a simian version of Mercury as messenger of the gods.

This idea of the three worlds as three horizontal lines is further developed in the 15th letter of the Phoenician alphabet: Samekh. Here the three horizontals are linked by a central vertical line, which has been compared with the Egyptian hieroglyph for Djed. The Phoenician Samekh becomes the Aramaic Samek and the Hebrew Samech, which are also the 15th letter of their respective alphabets. In figurative terms, the Phoenician Samekh is also the equivalent of the Papal Cross in Christianity.

The nineteenth letter of the Hebrew alphabet is Qof, In Aramaic the equivalent is Qop. In Phoenician, the equivalent is Qof. It is variously written as a circle intersected by a vertical line or as an upward vertical that ascends into a kind of knot (cf. the Syriac letter for Samekh). In Phoenician, Qof means Eye of the needle. This is much more than a simple image in passing.

In the Arabic tradition of astronomy, the Pole star was linked with the idea of a needle and a spindle.³ Hence, the line joining the earth with the North Pole Star, which was often shown as a world tree in India, was also seen as a giant needle with its eye of the needle at the star, Polaris. Traditionally, there was also a constellation Camelopardalis, which combined the characteristics of a camel and a leopard. In this context the *New Testament* saying about the difficulties of a camel passing through the eye of a needle takes on a further layer of meaning.

If we go further east, we find that, in Japan, the eye of the needle is linked with Ju as in Ju jitsu and has been linked with the Christian *Crux Decussata*.

The Roman numeral X is ten (*decem*). The Chinese and Japanese character for ten also happens to be a cross:.. The origin of this character is usually, yet erroneously, explained as two lines crossing to symbolise the four main directions, which in turn expressed the concept of completeness and by association all the fingers, i.e. ten. However, this seems a confused version of its actual origin. It derives from a depiction of a sewing needle with thread passing through the eye, and was used as a substitute for the more complex character....meaning 'hands together', i.e. ten fingers. (See also Fingers Crossed.)⁴

In India, it is also linked with mudras, sacred gestures of the hands and with prayers. In Sanskrit, images of sewing and weaving play a central role in creation stories. One of the root word for sewing is *suci*, which has been linked with the word Sutra. Suci (SuchI) is also one of the 3 sons of Agni is the solar flare and Havyavahana, the fire of the gods. Another root

word for sewing is *Siv*, which is the basis of the Hindu god, Siva. There is a notion of creation in the manner of a spider weaving its web. Life is a web of that is partly illusion (*vana*) and the goal is to escape from the web (*nir-vana*). In the West also, there is the metaphor of life as a web (*rete*) and the goal of attaining virtue (*areté*), which is also an escape from a web (*a – reté*). So images of a web are intimately linked with both the creation of the world, entry into life and ultimately one's escape from the mortal coil. In this context, we see that the eye of the needle, mentioned in the *New Testament*, has much deeper roots than an unlikely metaphor of a camel trying to pass through a tiny aperture. The eye of the needle has astronomical connotations and recalls and re-enacts symbolically the activities of sewing and weaving, whereby the world was created. It is linked with the central elements of cosmology and bridges between the three worlds, symbolized by key letters of the alphabet.

This notion of bridges between the three worlds took on a series of other forms. In Sanskrit, a *Thirta* is literally a crossing or a bridge. In physical form, it is a holy place, typically along the side of a river, at which persons can bathe. Metaphorically it is a place where they can cross the river which is also a crossing into the other world. Crossing a physical river on earth was associated with crossing the eternal river of the Milky Way in the sky. Similarly, the confluence of the two strands of the Milky Way in the heavens was linked with the confluence of the Ganges and the Yamuna on earth, which explains why the city of Allahabad has become a key centre for the great Khumba Mela festival which brings together 70 million persons every 12 years – one cycle of Guru's (Jupiter's) passage through the twelve signs of the zodiac.

In the Hindu tradition, Vishnu typically makes three steps to move from earth to heaven, thus bridging the three worlds indicated by letters such as N and Z. In ancient India, three cities were associated with these three steps linking the three worlds: Shukla, Gaya and Mecca. These three cities are associated with three goddesses Gayatri, Sarasvati and Savitri (cf. the three fates) who bind the three times three sacred threads in the sacred thread ceremony (*Upanayana*) of the three twice-born classes.

The three cities of Vishnu's footprints are particularly striking, because it confirms that some 2,500 years before the Prophet Mohammed and the origins of Islam, India had included Mecca as a holy place in their steps towards the heavens. The Arabic term for Mekka is Makkah al-Mukarramah. The ancient Sanskrit term for Mekka is also Makkah. Physical imprints of a footprint of Vishnu at these holy places remain.⁵ Footprints of Brahma, Christ, Mohammed and other major religious figures are found in the holiest places of the great religions. The same Vishnu also made steps using three stars in the constellation of Aquila. Similar steps using stars are found with Brahma. And the same principle is found also in China with the Divine Weaving Princess.

The Phoenician letter Qoph, which means eye of the needle also means monkey. As noted earlier, in the East, monkeys play a key role in linking the three worlds of earth, atmosphere and heaven. In the great epic, the *Ramayana*, monkeys play a central role. Hence we find that Hanuman, the monkey, who plays a key role in linking the three worlds, is also active in creating a bridge to link Sri Lanka with India, that also entails a sacred mountain called Sri Pada, again linked with the idea of a footprint, this time of Buddha. In Tamil, the same mountain is called Svargarohanam (The Ascent to Heaven); in Arabic it is called Al Rohoun; in Portuguese, Pico di Adam and in English, Adam's Peak. Stories of needles and monkeys thus link letters of the Phoenician alphabet with one of the two epics of the Indian tradition;

with one of the most sacred mountains of Buddhism, that is also sacred to the Islamic and Christian traditions for its links back to Adam, the first man of the *Old Testament*.

Such unexpected links between East and West entail not only our religious traditions but also secular traditions with respect to mythology. For our purposes a single example will suffice. In the West, we are often taught that Dionysius (Bacchus) invented wine, although the *Old Testament* credits Noah with the introduction of wine. In India, there is a goddess of wine, Madira, who is said to have been present at the time of creation. This wine is linked with Soma, a magical drink, which corresponds to the elixir of immortality (*amrita*). It is a central element of sacrifices, which also involve a bread, that is also a mystical word for food, called “Anna” in Sanskrit. Thus, offerings of bread and wine, which we associate with Christianity also have roots in ancient Indian traditions that go back to the Rig Veda (possibly as old as 4000 B.C.).⁶

The Indian word for cornucopia is Purna. Anna combined with Purna is Annapurna, one of the greatest mountains near Pokhara in Nepal. Annapurna has a sister called: “Sister Goddess of the Earth who Gives Food or Bestower of Plentiful Food, Immovable Goddess-Protector of Bulls, Mother Goddess of the World,” or Miyo Langsalma, a mountain which we remember rather prosaically as Mount Everest. Miyo is one of five sisters along with Tashi Tseringma (Long Life); Tekar Dosangma (Luck); Chopen Dinsangma (Wealth) and Thingri Shelsangma (Psychic Powers). In the West, these five sisters become Demeter, Daphne, Tyche, Artemis, and Hecate. These connections between basic concepts, five goddesses and some of the highest mountains of the world are very significant because they confirm that these roots entail not only India but also Nepal, Tibet, the Pamir region to the North, and hence also China. Too often we forget that Buddha was born in Nepal.

The first letter of the English alphabet is A. The first sound of Sanskrit is A and the primeval first god is linked with A as in Agni. This primeval force is symbolized by a flame that is upward in the morning (as in Λ or A); sideways meeting an upward line at noon (as in I + < or K) and downward at night (as in V). Combined this threefold expression of the primeval force becomes AKA, a Sanskrit word for the number 1 (cf. eka in Sanskrit and Greek).

English alphabet has 26 letters which divides into two sections of 13 (as in the 13 months of the lunar year) A-M and N-Z. In the Indian tradition, combinations of the letters A+ M produce MAMA, the nutritive principle, depicted as a threefold energy, that inspires imagery such as the triskell, trisle, and trinacria in the West.⁷ It also produces Aima, the Hebrew word for Mother. The first letters of the two sections of the English alphabet produces the name of the second primeval god, AN, which is also the prefix for negation in both Sanskrit and Greek. Hence ANAM, means “without name” and is one of the characteristics of the Supreme Being at the first level of development. AN leads to ANA as in breathing and also to ANU as in the Babylonian god. AN + NA leads as we have seen to ANNA, mystic food which is linked with sacred wine in India.

In India, there seven stages of creation. The first three are pre-physical and entail: 1) Anam (the nameless); 2) Agam (the Inaccessible); 3) Alaksha (the Incomprehensible), 4) Aum (Vibration); 5) Kal (Time); 6) Desh (Space), and 7) Patra or Anu (Atomic Form).⁸ Stage four, AUM, Vibration, becomes the Greek *Logos*. The three basic sounds of A, U and M become A as in creator (Brahma); U as in preserver (Vishnu) and M as in destroyer (Shiva). When transposed to English these three Sanskrit sounds are shifted: A of the creator remains A; the central U of the preserver becomes English, M and the final Sanskrit M becomes Z. In

the West this link between Z and end also takes four forms: Z as a substitute for G (as in Latin) to reflect the end of the week. Z as a version of Xi (as in Greek) to reflect the end of the second week; Z as a version of N (i.e. N sideways) to mark the end of the first six months.

The matching of the Sanskrit AUM with other alphabets is not a simple equation. For instance, in Greek, the Sanskrit A becomes Greek Alpha; the Sanskrit U becomes the Greek Xi and the Sanskrit M becomes the Omega. This link between AUM and Alpha and Omega again has deeper links. In India, Rahu called Serpens Caput is depicted as an Alpha in the form of an inverted Omega and marks the end of the year. Ketu, called Serpens Cauda in West is depicted as an Omega and marks the beginning of the year.⁹ These lunar nodes that determine the eclipses become symbols for Ninhursag, the Earth Mother in Sumer. So A-U-M and Alpha-Xi-Omega are linked both to the heavens via astronomy and to earth via the Earth Mother (Durga, Demeter etc.) and give deeper meaning to phrases such as the End is the Beginning.

These are but passing examples of an immensely complex story.¹⁰ Centuries of research in philology and especially etymology have focussed our attention on the history of words. Our examples suggest that there is an that has been all but forgotten history of letters and sounds which have their own detailed history. In the past, monks studied words and texts in their quest to understand the history of their faith and the mystery of the Word (*logos*) that became flesh. Our simple examples show that the Christian Word (*logos*) has unexpected parallels in the Sanskrit AUM (vibration). In our minds we do not link the traditions of the Hebrews and the Chinese. Yet the ancient magic square of the Lo Shu diagram in China has exactly the same nine numbers as the magic square of the Cabala. There are underlying patterns of sounds and grids of cultures that we have forgotten.

In the past, monks created pre-digital equivalents of networks through their system of scriptoria, which copied manuscripts and distributed them to monasteries throughout Europe. Today, monks have begun putting their sacred texts online.¹¹ Ironically, in the West, this is proceeding along traditional lines via the different orders. Hence the Benedictines collect their texts; the Dominicans their texts; the Jesuits their texts etc. This is part of a world-wide trend to scan texts and put them online and reflects a quest for a Universal Library.¹² Scanning is but a first step. Making them freely available in world wide networks is an important next step. A deeper challenge lies in expanding the vision of present day electronic networks to include not only different orders of the Christian tradition but to link sacred texts of the different great religions of the world. The vision of a Universal Digital Library has inspired the idea of a Universal Dictionary,¹³ provisionally with eight languages. There are over 6.500 languages in the world. Needed is a new approach that will link the letters and roots as well as the words of these traditions in order to arrive at a new understanding of shared meanings as we continue our age-old quest to link the three worlds and move from the word that became flesh, to the spirit that rises above the carnal and reaches for the eternal.

Notes

¹ M. Kahir, *Das verlorene Wort. Mystik & Magie der Sprache*, Bietigheim: Turm Verlag, 1960.

² Monkey Symbolism: <http://www.onmarkproductions.com/html/monkey-koushin-p3.html>

³ Anne Wright, *The Fixed Stars: Polaris*: <http://www.winshop.com.au/annew/Polaris.html>

The Arabs of old regarded Polaris as a hole in the sky in which the Earth's axis found its bearing. The Norsemen saw Polaris as holding the Universe together, Moguls calling it "the Golden Peg". In Damascus it is called Mismar, a "Needle" or "Nail" and Al Kutb al Shamaliyy, "the Northern Axle", or "Spindle", the Pin fixed in the under stone of a mill around which the upper stone turns.

⁴ The Cross -a cross-reference for the emblem of Christianity:

<http://www.seiyaku.com/customs/crosses/index.html#top> under Crux Decussata.

⁵ *Divine Decorations of the Earth*: <http://www.trsiyengar.com/id56.shtml>

Cf. Rana P. B. Singh, *Sacredscape and Manescape: A Study of Gaya India*.

<http://www.colorado.edu/Conferences/pilgrimage/papers/Singh-3.html>

⁶ See the *Cologne Sanskrit Dictionary* under Rg Veda: <http://webapps.uni-koeln.de/tamil/>

⁷ F. Martín Cano, *Culturas de Elam, Afganistán, Kurdistán, Beluchistán, Bangladesh, La India...*: manifestaciones artísticas prehistóricas y de la Edad del Bronce, 2001:

http://es.geocities.com/contraandrocenismo/elam_india.html

⁸ Laurie Pratt, *The Four Yugas*: http://cycle-of-time.net/four_mayas.htm

⁹ Rahu and Ketu—The Invisible Planets: <http://www.sanskrit.org/www/Astronomy/Rahu.html>

¹⁰ A more detailed set of examples is found at the author's website

<http://sumscorp.com/kavai/newmethods/>, which has some 8000+ terms with links.

¹¹ See for instance, Eulogos: <http://www.eulogos.net/> especially the sections on Vaticano and Intratext.

¹² Cf. the author's "Framework for Long-term Digital Preservation from Political and Scientific Viewpoints: Rahmenbedingungen der digitalen Langzeitarchivierung aus politischer und wissenschaftlicher Sicht," *Digitale Langzeitarchivierung. Strategien und Praxis europäischer Kooperation, Deutschen Nationalbibliothek, anlässlich der EU-Ratspräsidentschaft Deutschlands, 20-21. April 2007*, Frankfurt: National Bibliothek, 2007 (In Press).

¹³ Universal Dictionary:

<http://fox.cs.vt.edu/IndoUSdl/Balakrishnan.ppt#887,80>, The Universal Dictionary;

This is part of: N. Balakrishnan, "Million Books to the Web. An Example of Indo-US Collaboration. Lessons Learnt and the Road Ahead", Indo US Workshop on Open Digital Libraries and Interoperability, Washington, 23 June 2003:

<http://fox.cs.vt.edu/IndoUSdl/Balakrishnan.ppt#894,1>, Million Books to the Web An Example of Indo-US Collaboration Lessons Learnt & The Road Ahead