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MYTH AND MEANING AND THE TUKOLOR LOOM

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Most previous studies of loom technology have either focused on the classification of loom types or on their origins. By contrast, this article investigates the indigenous meanings and significance of the structure of the loom used by Tukolor weavers of Senegal. Resisting changes to its structure, the weavers hold conceptions of the loom as a personal and ritual space, and it is shown how these concepts of the loom and its associated rituals embody aspects of a secret body of weavers' lore. Tukolor weavers conceive of the loom not merely as a technical device for producing cloth; it can also be considered to be a metaphor of their weaving ideology. This conception of the loom militates against any modification or change in it, since it embodies in its layout the essence of weaving lore.

Studies of African weaving have by and large concentrated on two main themes when it comes to loom technology: the classification of loom types and technologies employed; and the question of their origins, particularly that of the narrow-strip loom of west Africa.¹ Work carried out on African textiles in recent years, however, has emphasised the symbolism and meaning of cloth designs and the like. Yet writers on African weaving appear to have neglected a parallel aspect of loom construction, that is the indigenous meaning and significance of a particular technology employed by specific groups of traditional weavers. In this article, therefore, I wish to move from questions of loom origins and of technological description and classification to explore the theme of meaning among the Tukolor weavers of Senegal.

Many Tukolor weavers now live and work in or around the country's modern capital city. In the streets of Dakar, weavers can be seen plying their craft in the shadows of modern high-rise office blocks on looms which are simple and crude constructions; and such a juxtaposition of traditional technology and modern industrial development appears bizarre. It is one of my aims here to show that this resistance to fundamental change in loom technology is linked to the weavers' ideas about the loom itself, and more generally to the conception they hold of their craft as a whole. With this approach in mind it may be possible to see a flaw in individual and governmental efforts aimed at modernising traditional weaving methods. In treating the craft solely at the level of productive efficiency in disregard of the ideas held by the weavers themselves, development projects are not assured the success and co-operation that otherwise might be the case. (See Gasc 1965; *Mémoire au gouvernement* . . . 1962; Murray 1943; Onses 1968.)

Man (N.S.) 22, 256–66

The Tukolor loom and other weaving methods

There are three major groups of weavers in Senegal from the Tukolor, the Serer and the Manjaka tribes.² The weavers of each tribe have their own particular loom design, each distinct from the other and emphasising the diverse traditions in the craft. In addition, the weaving styles of each group vary considerably, and it can be suggested that these different styles express something of the history of the peoples who practise them.

The Manjaka weavers from Guinea Bissau and the southern part of Senegal have, from some time after the mid-fifteenth century, come under Portuguese influence, more so than any other weavers in the region. The early Portuguese merchants organised an indigenous textile trade in which cloth was an exchange-commodity for slaves and other goods (see Carreira 1968). This trade was centred on the Cape Verde Islands and the main coastal areas, and local weaving, in a particularly favoured position at this time, gained greatly from the Portuguese presence. The capabilities of the loom were modified and a method of weft-faced weaving was encouraged to permit the manufacture of new cloth designs introduced by the Europeans. The Manjaka weavers, along with those on the Cape Verde Islands, were the fortunate beneficiaries of this legacy.³ Modern Manjaka weavers in Senegal have by far the most sophisticated method of weaving, a style which surpasses many other mainland weavers. Their cloth is highly decorated with motifs, figures and geometrical designs; and their loom is most distinctive, for it is elongated length-ways and thus allows room for another weaver to operate the many secondary heddles which lift the warp threads in order to incorporate weft-floats. It is these floats that produce a motif on the cloth.

The Tukolor loom, like the Serer loom, is in marked contrast to the Manjaka loom, and bears witness to a different tradition, though some borrowing between these groups of weavers has taken place. The Tukolor loom is a much more squat affair, operated by a single weaver. Being generally warp-faced, their cloth is more simple and the design comes from stripes incorporated into the warp when it is laid. Each pick inserts only one or two weft threads into the cloth, whereas the Manjaka method inserts up to four, five or even six. The Serer and Tukolor looms are virtually identical, with the one exception of the smaller-sized pulley-wheel in the former case. The Serer loom also tends to be sunk further into the ground than the Tukolor type, the weaver hollowing out a space under the loom to allow for the vertical movement of the pedals. It would be no exaggeration to say that these two looms are related in construction; indeed, oral tradition has it that the Serer originated in Fuuta Toro, the Tukolor homeland, a region in the Senegal river basin.⁴

Conservatism and innovation

In 1926 C. Monteil noted:

... le métier à tisser n'a pas davantage varié, il est demeuré le même, malgré tout ce que d'innombrables Soudanais ont pu voir et apprendre dans leur voyages en Orient et en Occident. C'est là un exemple de la persistance de la coutume indigène, lorsqu'elle est si bien adaptée aux

gens et au milieu qu'elle paraît indestructible. Le parti tout à fait remarquable, que les artisans et artistes indigènes savent tirer de la toile en bande, suffit du reste à justifier la survivance de ce genre de tissu, si éloigné de nos conceptions européennes (1926: 595).

Even more so today under the present-day influences of modern technology and development, it might be supposed that Tukolor weavers have yielded to modifications or innovations in loom design. It is surprising, however, that there have been very few changes in its construction, and those changes which have taken place are superficial. There are no radical modifications in design but merely a substitution of parts, old materials for new. The use of metal reeds, bought from industrial textile mills in Dakar, factory cast-offs cut up for use on the traditional narrow-strip loom, is now widespread not only in the towns but also in the villages. The metal reed has replaced one which was made from stalks and reeds collected locally, and this innovation fits into the same housing used for the previous one. The change is widespread, but its acceptance is not universal. Some older weavers believe that the metal reed is 'bad', adversely affecting the magical qualities of cloth. Nonetheless, the popularity of this new type of reed lies in expediency, for they produce a firmer and more regular cloth, and are time-saving in that they cause fewer thread breakages compared with the traditional reed.

Other substitutions of new for old materials may be seen also; for instance, car valves have replaced wooden pulley axles in many cases, pieces from over-head electric pylons are used as pulley-wheels, and bicycle or pram wheels are adapted to make bobbin-winding equipment. Whatever the innovation, the number and function of loom parts remains the same. An incident I witnessed illustrates the resistance many weavers have to altering the loom construction. A young weaver, working under a *jarno* or master weaver, thought it a good idea to add two pieces of cord to retain his foot pedals in place. His teacher came out later that morning to inspect the youth's work and noticed these two additions to the loom. The youth was immediately ordered to remove them, for he was no longer weaving on the loom passed on by the weavers' mythical ancestor, Juntel Jabali.

In the oral literature of the weavers, Juntel Jabali, himself half-man, half-spirit, is said to have taken the loom from spirits weaving in the bush and brought the craft to man. The loom was thus acquired by the social category of *mabube* weavers from the spirits via their semi-divine ancestor and its form was given at this time; in another myth it is told how the names of each loom part were passed on to Beram, Juntel's son, in a dream.⁵

Goody (1982) describes numerous technical innovations adopted by Daboya weavers, and these are very similar to those taken up by Tukolor *mabube* weavers. Like Gonja weavers, Tukolor craftsmen are not blind to innovations in techniques and processes which make weaving more efficient. For example, virtually all Tukolor weavers today use industrially-spun thread, as well as nylon cords to make heddles and candle-wax to grease warp threads (cf. Goody 1982: 79–84). Goody's statement that 'The recent history of the Daboya textile industry is thus one of continuous adaptation to changes in market conditions and new materials and technology' (1982: 81) can find an echo in the history of

Tukolor weaving organisation (see Dilley 1986 for an analysis of aspects of relatively recent socio-economic change in the craft).

Most of the technical innovations mentioned above affect either processes that occur outside the loom itself or techniques that are adopted without any modification to the loom frame. Were weavers to abandon the use of the narrow-strip loom altogether in preference to a European broad loom (as was mooted in Government offices in Dakar) then such a radical shift would undoubtedly have far-reaching implications for modes of weaving organisation and the relations of production, as is suggested by Goody (1982: 82). As one weaver commented to me, if weavers were to adopt such a technology they would become more like factory operatives than *mabûbe* craftsmen.

What I am concerned with in this article, then, are the pressures on weavers to adopt different techniques of weaving which still utilise but yet modify the narrow-strip loom frame. An example of how this type of innovation was proposed and then rejected has already been illustrated above. A more important aspect of adopting new techniques centres on developing new cloth designs. Numerous 'modern' patterns have been created, many of which are obviously derived from the urban environment in which weavers now work. For example, some cloths patterned with three or four parallel warpways stripes have been named 'Autoroute'. More specifically, Tukolor weavers are coming into greater contact in urban areas with Manjaka weavers who produce weft-faced designs. Due to the popularity of these designs weavers of other ethnic groups have tried to imitate them with weft-float figures and motifs, though not too successfully. To produce such designs, the Tukolor weaver has to modify his loom slightly by adding a new cross-member to which he attaches a set of secondary 'heddles' to lift the warp threads and to incorporate the weft floats. Tukolor weaving does not readily adapt itself to weft-faced patterning, for the cloth is usually patterned in the warp. A few Tukolor *maccûbe* or bondsmen weavers have tried this new technique, however (see Dilley 1986 on aspects of the distinction between these two groups of Tukolor weavers); yet it is an innovation that *mabûbe* weavers spurn since it involves modifying their looms.

The *mabûbe* weavers' conservatism and their resistance to any adaptation or modification of their loom has little to do with notions of productive efficiency, I would suggest, but is related, in this specific case, to a set of cultural beliefs which supply meaning and significance to the loom. Their tenacity as regards loom construction is connected with a body of ideas—*mabûbe* weavers' lore or *gandal mabûbe*—associated with the weavers' craft.⁶ After a description of the construction of the loom I hope to show how this lore is embodied in the very framework of the equipment they use.

Dimensions and construction of the Tukolor loom

The Tukolor loom, like most west African looms, is a flimsy and crude construction made from materials the weaver has taken from the bush or has found abandoned in the city street. The framework of the loom is built of cast-off pieces of wood or of branches roughly hewn and shaped from a tree.

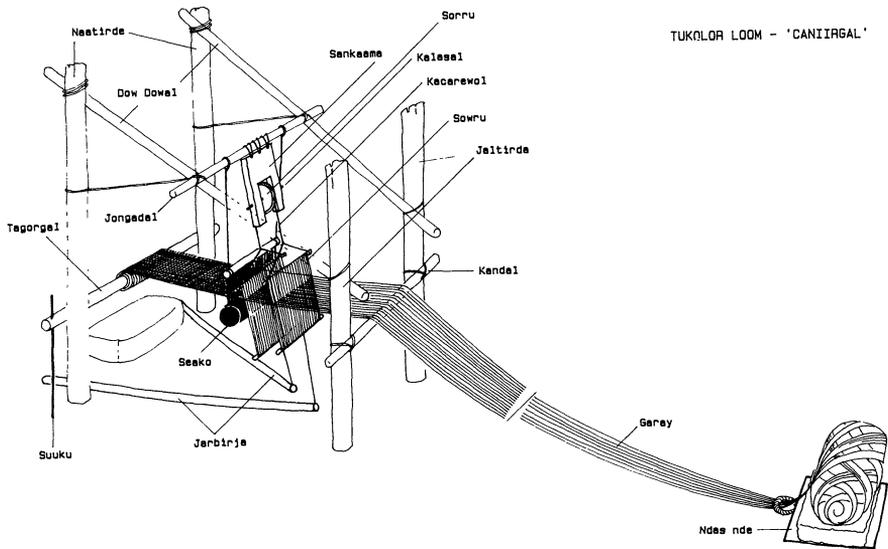


Figure 1.

The posts and cross-members of the frame are bound together with anything which will suffice to secure these pieces—a length of string, left-over yarn, a torn-off strip of cloth. On closer inspection one finds that the working parts of the loom are put together with considerable expertise. The cloth beater is a complex piece composed of many parts, intricately assembled, lashed and slotted together by the weaver himself. The pulley-block and wheel, along with the smoothly-worked shuttle are the products of a local woodcarver.

Each weaver constructs his own loom according to his own body proportions. He starts a new loom by placing the cloth beam (*tagorgal*) on the ground and sits upon it with his legs outstretched at right-angles to the beam. (See fig. 1 for a diagram of the Tukolor loom.) Two marks are made on the ground, one at either side of the weaver within a few inches of the end of the cloth beam. Two more marks are made at a leg's length away from the cloth beam such that the configuration is as shown in fig. 2.

The four marks on the ground are the places where each of the frame-posts is to be located. These last two marks are located in the following way: the weaver, who is sitting on the cloth beam with his legs pointing out at right-angles to it, places his heels together and turns each foot with the toes outwards so that the outer-side of the foot is on the ground. At the end of each foot the weaver makes a mark on the ground.

The four marks left on the ground are checked for accuracy and symmetry by measuring diagonally across the quadrangle. These four marks represent the places for the four upright posts of the main loom structure. The holes for these posts are dug in a particular order. From the weaver's sitting position they are: first, the far-right post; second, the near-left; third, the far-left; finally, the near-right. When the weaver sinks the upright posts into the ground after digging these holes, he plants a few millet seeds under two of them—the

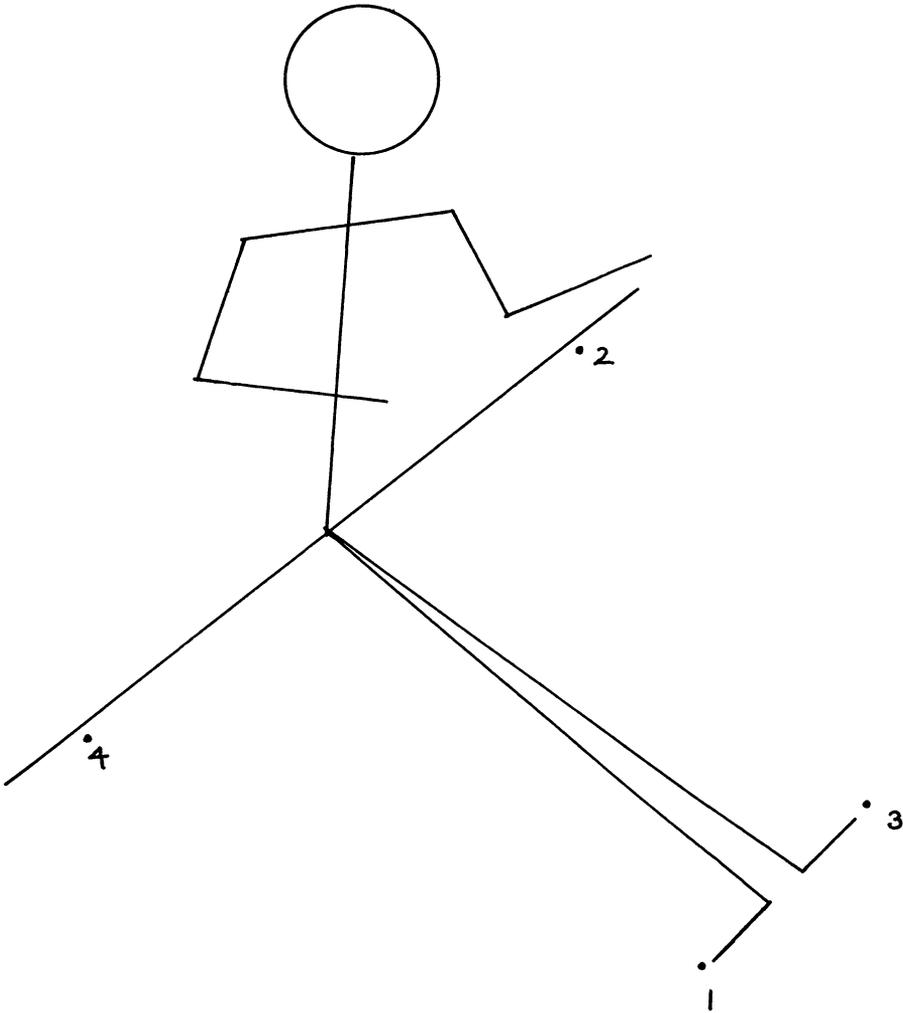


Figure 2.

far-right and the near-left posts, numbers 1 and 2 on fig. 2. The placing of these seeds is a form of ritual protection for the loom as well as a symbolic act concerning the germination and growth of the weaver's skill while he works on the loom. It is said by informants that just as millet germinates and grows, so the weaver believes that the use of these seeds will ensure his own progress in the craft. The places where these seeds are planted have significance, however, for these two posts are associated with spirits. I do not wish to go into too much detail here; I will merely add for the moment that the planting of these seeds can be seen as a propitiation of the spirits (*seydaneje*) associated with the craft.

Once the four posts are in place, it is necessary to attach the upper cross-pieces. The slanting top bars running from the weaver's end to the far posts are called *dow dowals*. They are attached to the two near posts at an arm's length

above the weaver's head measured from his sitting position at the cloth beam. At the far posts, the *dow dowals* are tied at the height of five spans from thumb to index finger from ground level. Along these two slanting cross-pieces, at a distance of a fisted cubit (*draa*) from the weaver's end, is attached the bar supporting the pulley-block (*sankaame*) and the pulley-wheel (*sorru*). The position of this supporting bar from the weaver's sitting position corresponds to the length of his out-stretched arm in front of him at around head height. The supporting bar for the incoming warp (*kandal*) attached to the two far posts, is at the height of three thumb-index finger spans from the ground. The basic framework of the loom is now complete. The position of the cloth beam, the only other major piece of the loom, is maintained solely by the tension of the warp threads, and passes across the lap of the weaver when seated to weave.

Next are added the moving parts of the loom. When making a completely new loom, the weaver introduces the warp threads into the framework and makes the heddles (*sowru*) *in situ*. These are then suspended from the pulley-wheel by two pieces of leather, and at their lower end they are attached to two pedals operated by the feet (*jarbirje*). The threads are then passed around the cloth beam and the weaver is ready to begin weaving. All these moving parts of the loom are removed at night: the woven cloth wound around the cloth beam is undone, the spindle securing the pulley-wheel is removed, the pedals and the beater (*seeko*) detached, and the warp re-wound on the warp-roll when the weaver finishes work for the day.

A weaver considers these moving parts personal to himself alone, for they are carried with him to and from the loom each day. The framework, however, is not solely his domain, since it is thought to be haunted by spirits at night. Indeed, weavers will rarely work after sunset, and even those working in tourist markets with electric lighting in their workshops cease after dark, for it is then that the spirits emerge to repossess the loom. Thus, a weaver shares the loom frame with the spirits; the loom is their nocturnal playground. It is apparent, then, that the loom frame, impersonal in some respects, is nonetheless a very personal reflection of each individual weaver's bodily proportions. It is the meeting place of man and spirit, the one occupies it by day, the other by night. It might be suggested, therefore, that the framework of the loom represents the wider realm of weaving lore wherein the weaver imposes his own presence and creates his own domain. Yet, that which is considered most personal to the weaver—namely the moving parts of the loom—plays no part in this discourse and thus needs not reflect anything of the weaver himself in its construction or layout.

The loom as ritual space

In my earlier discussion of some of the Tukolor conceptions of the loom and of various aspects of weaving, the notion that weaving is associated with spiritual forces is apparent. Weavers consider themselves and are considered by other non-weavers to be experts in magic, for weaving is conceived essentially as a magical act; and indeed, this conception of the craft is reflected in the very construction of the loom itself.

Tukolor concepts of weaving and of the loom relate to the origins of the craft contained in their oral literature. The weavers' mythical ancestor Juntel Jabali, who took the craft from spirits weaving in the bush, was mentioned earlier. When he confronted the spirits, it is said that they took flight, running through the loom and leaving by the space between the far set of loom-posts. The name of this set of posts is *jaltirde*, meaning 'exit', and refers to the place from which the spirits fled from the loom. The near set of posts is called *naatirde*, 'the entrance', and is the place at which Juntel entered the loom. In a similar manner to Juntel, a weaver enters the loom each morning by these two near posts, and as he does so he utters spells and incantations to protect himself from the spirits believed to occupy the loom-frame at night. He thus causes the spirits to flee the loom by 'the exit' each morning as he prepares to work, and so re-enacts the story of the mythical ancestor every day.

Before a weaver starts work he removes his shoes on entering the loom. This is not done on hygienic grounds since the loom itself is set in sand; so the weaver's feet would not transmit dirt from outside the loom which was not already there. Neither are shoes removed to help the weaver operate the pedals, for I would have found shoes a great relief when weaving as the outsides of the feet are constantly chafing against these rough wooden poles. The removal of shoes before entering the loom is a ritual act performed in order not to pollute the loom before the weaver starts work. He is in a state of ritual purity when he sits at the loom due to the recital of verses and incantations aimed at cleansing and protecting him from malevolent forces. The removal of shoes prevents impurity entering the loom, which would affect the weaver's well-being and might disrupt his work. One weaver likened the removal of his shoes before weaving to a similar act performed by Muslims on entering a mosque. The weaver must be in a state of ritual purity before partaking in either act, weaving or praying. This is not to say, however, that the notion of ritual cleanliness for weaving consists in the same notions relative to Islamic cleanliness.

There is perhaps a further correspondence between weaving and praying. One prays facing towards the east; and similarly, there is a conceptual link between weaving and the east, the direction in which the weaver sits and in which the warp is laid out. 'Weaving is like praying', a weaver once commented. But does this indicate an orientation to the east? More significantly, weavers' songs always start by greeting the four points of the compass, and the first of these to be greeted is the east. If these facts do indicate that weaving is performed to the east, then I must add that not all looms in fact face the east when they are set up. One may, however, qualify this statement by saying that although weaving is not physically performed in that direction, there might well be a conceptual orientation towards the east. If I have been correct so far, let us see what the repercussions of this idea are. Given this proposed conceptual orientation of the loom to the east, the four loom posts can be plotted in the way shown in fig. 3.

The diagram shows the ground plan of the loom, each dot representing one of the loom posts. The weaver on the western side of the loom faces east as he weaves, with his warp threads and roll stretching out in front of him. The numbering of the loom posts indicates the order in which they are laid when

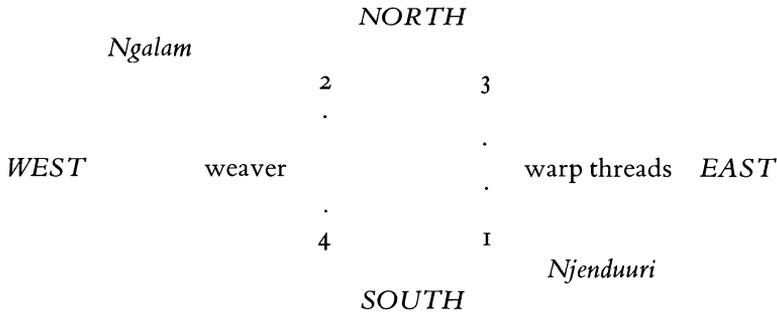


Figure 3.

constructing a new loom; thus the dot numbered 1 is the first hole to be dug. One might say that the first hole is made in the south-east corner of the loom and the second hole in the north-west corner.

These two post-holes are significant for another reason, since it is in these that a few grains of millet are placed during the construction of a new loom. These grains of millet are said by weavers to ensure the growth of the craft, that their craft will prosper while they work on the loom. I have discussed elsewhere (Dilley 1984: 141) the use of a mixture of millet, milk and sugar to propitiate spirits at household shrines, and this act of placing millet seeds under the first two posts may be related to spirits also. The spirits weavers invoke by use of their magical verses and incantations are said to live in two towns, one called Ngalam and the other Njenduuri. These towns are thought to be situated in the north-west and the south-east of the Tukolor homeland, Fuuta Toro; indeed, they are believed to be located in the river that runs through the region from the south-east to the north-west.

To return to the diagram of the loom, the first two posts laid are those in the south-east and north-west corners of the loom. It is under these two posts that millet seeds are placed, and it is in these two directions that the mythical towns inhabited by jinn are located. It seems plausible to suggest, then, that by placing millet under these two particular posts the weaver is making a ritual offering to the spirits of the towns of Ngalam and Njenduuri. And moreover, the fact that he performs this act before any other in the construction of his loom seems to emphasise the idea that these directions are, on the one hand, primary sites for locating his loom in relation to the spirits, and on the other hand, conceptual points of reference for weavers in terms of their beliefs. The plan and construction of the loom seem, therefore, to be a physical representation and expression of a part of the weavers' system of ideas. In addition, if one returns to the weavers' own explanations of the placing of the millet, it is possible to see the sense in it. The millet does indeed help his craft to grow and prosper, for it is a ritual food which propitiates the spirits who animate the craft and from whom it is derived. Moreover, without this ritual food it is difficult to see how the weavers' craft could prosper if they have not ensured the spirits' co-operation and good-will. The spirit world is the source of weaving lore (*gandal*), and through the making of this ritual offering weavers nourish those spirits who give them the power to weave. And since the weavers' knowledge of the craft

depends on the spirits, they are assured of their good-will for the development of their skills and expertise.

For the Tukolor, the loom is not merely a device for producing cloth, a piece of equipment or capital stock. The loom is believed to have originated in the world of spirits; it is a place haunted by spirits who return to it at night; it is a respected ritual space whose very construction embodies something of the essence of weaving lore. The loom could be considered to be a metaphor of weaving ideology.

Conclusion

In this account of the Tukolor loom I have tried to link *mabûbe* weavers' conceptions of their loom frame with their failure to adopt any changes in weaving techniques which would be likely to give rise to modifications in its construction. In many respects, *mabûbe* weavers have taken up very similar types of innovation in weaving activities to those adopted in other parts of west Africa, specifically in Gonja. I have attempted to show, however, that in the specific case of Tukolor *mabûbe* weavers the range of innovation is constrained by a set of ideas and beliefs which hold that the loom frame is a ritual space whose construction is not readily modified or changed, since it embodies in its layout the essence of weaving lore.

NOTES

I should like to express my thanks to the ESRC for the financial support lent to me during my two years of fieldwork in Senegal from 1980–1982. My thanks are also due to Dr A. Lamb who read and commented on this article, and to Hilary and Paul Frisby who provided the artwork. Any errors it may still contain are, however, the responsibility of no-one but the author.

¹ A debate over the question of the origins of west African looms is represented in the literature by the works of Boser-Sarivaxévanis 1972; 1975; 1983 (in which she considers the Tukolor or 'Fulani' loom as a prototype of all west African narrow-strip looms, though her latest piece proposes an alternative type of 'ancestral West African loom' to the former); Monteil 1926 (who claimed the west African loom to be of probable Semitic origin); V. Lamb 1975 and V. & A. Lamb 1975 (who strongly suggest that there must have been external influences in the origins of the narrow-strip loom). The issue of classification and typologies of technologies has also received attention, particularly in the works written by the Lambs, for example, V. Lamb & J. Holmes 1980; V. & A. Lamb 1980; 1981; 1984. The writings of Ling Roth 1918 and Picton & Mack 1979 also deal with this subject. There are a number of different approaches to the question of classification of loom types, but it is not the purpose of this article to discuss them here.

² The Wolof, the main ethnic group in Senegal, do not in fact weave, although they have a prescribed social status for immigrant weavers. The distinguished scholar C. Monteil was misled in concluding that the Wolof weave, and sadly this mistake has been incorporated into the literature, particularly Boser-Sarivaxévanis's 1972 work, p. 54 *et passim*.

³ Boser-Sarivaxévanis purposes the notion of 'l'école capoverdienne' to explain the influence of the Portuguese on local weaving. This school was centred on the Cape Verde Islands. She claims, however, that 'les tisserands Ouolof' owe much to this school and profited most from it. I would suggest that it was the Manjaka weavers who were the major recipients of Portuguese influence on the mainland.

⁴ Tukolor and Serer acknowledge their common weaving and ethnic origins in myth. First, they consider themselves cousins in a joking relationship known as *dendiraabe juŋŋo*; and secondly, Serer

weaving origin myths show links with Tukolor myths of origin. Moreover, both these looms belong to what the Lambs call the 'Fula' or 'Tukolor' type of loom (see 1984 and 1981).

⁵ For more on the nature and content of *gandal*, see Dilley (in press a).

⁶ The significance of dreams for weavers is dealt with in Dilley in press b, in which they are shown to be a medium of inspiration not only for the technical aspects of the craft, but also for obtaining items of weaving lore (*gandal*).

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