

Perhaps That's Just the Way It Is

The square knot is a binding knot used to connect two ropes of equal width.

This is how I got to know and treasure it in my ten years working on a rescue team for Technisches Hilfswerk. Captain John Smith might well have added around 1627 that the square knot, if applied incorrectly, can easily loosen, and become a “grief knot.” He called it a “reef knot.” One of the special characteristics of the square knot is that it can be so easily loosened, and a seaman can make use of this when “reefing” a sail by tying off the excess cloth with a reef knot.

Nautical knots often have this dual function of being both powerful form-locked or friction-fit connections and at the same time easy to undo: when taking a boat through a lock, I use a special knot called a slipknot. The form of the nautical knot thus depends primarily on its function. Everything is reduced to the last detail of complete functionality. This is reminiscent of the famous design principle “form follows function,” which can be traced back to the architects Louis Sullivan and Henri Labrouste and is often associated with the Bauhaus. As artist and seaman Clifford Ashley wrote in his 1944 encyclopedia on the subject of knotting, knots have strikingly little sense of patriotism.¹ But sailors are not the only ones to make use of knots.

In Frankfurt during the mid-1990s, I saw a poster picturing a Chinese knot, and it captured my fascination. When in 1999 on the invitation of Lydia Chen I spent a year learning the Chinese art of knotting (Chinese: 中國结 Zhōngguó jié) at Taipei's Chinese Knotting Promotion Center, I recognized that the greatest difficulty consists not in making the knots, but adjusting them and getting them to take the right form. In this process, one is always in danger of losing the form. This is not about tying two ends to one another—the knots are usually tied with a single color cord, they are fixed, complex, symmetrical and three dimensional, and have entirely other tasks than nautical knots. They serve as symbols and as decoration. When entering one of Taipei's numerous taxis, you are most likely to find a Chinese knot hanging from the rearview

mirror. In its composition, the “double coin knot” goes back to two overlapping Chinese coins; until today, these knots can be found at entrances to shops and other businesses to attract riches. One of the basic knots, the *pan chang*, is even one of the eight Buddhist symbols of luck. So it is not surprising that this knot served as a design foundation for the logo for Beijing’s application to host the 2008 Olympic Games. As we know, it did bring luck.

After learning the knots played a role in the emergence and development of Chinese writing, I met—now back in Berlin—the Bolivian scholar Carmen Beatriz Loza and with her the *quipus*. A *quipu* is a knot object consisting of colorful threads of both animal and vegetable origins. The colors, the way in which the threads are linked together, the placement and the spin of the knot and the space between the knots, all these specific aspects are characteristics and aids for storing and transferring encoded information and format a kind of data bank. It remains a controversy whether they contain numerical information, represent a mnemotechnique, or if were equivalent to a system of writing.

In 2002, I traveled during the course of my research to the site of the discovery of *quipus* of a shepherd to Cha’lla, a small town on the Isla del Sol in Lake Titicaca. The only account of these knots remaining today is an 1894 hand drawing by German archaeologist Max Uhle. *Quipus* are usually linked to the Inca Empire (1450–1532), but one was found beneath a step at an excavation in Caral, Peru that is 5,000 years old. Until then, nobody had thought that this form of “knot language” could be so old. All the greater was my surprise when I met Elvira Espejo Ayka, an artist with an Aymara background, in La Paz. She brought a self-made “war quipu” to our meeting, and showed me that the tradition of knot makers and interpreters (Quechua: *kipu kamayuq*) continues into the present.

The fact that the coded content could easily be of a martial nature set me on the tracks of the knot blowers. The fourth verse of Sura 113 of the Koran, “Al-Falaq” (The Dawn) warns of the “evil of those who blow on knots,” a magical practice already widespread in pre-Islamic times and where the starting point

lies in breath as the site of the soul and the origin of speech.² The women made knots in a cord and whispered threats and curses at it. Some of these knot blowers are even known to us by name from the sources, for example the daughters of a certain Labid, the man who with the help of his daughters enchants the prophet Mohammed and thus supposedly triggered the revelations of Suras 113 and 114. They tied 11 knots in a cord, and hid it. The cord was then found, and one after another all the knots were undone by reciting the strophes of the two suras.³

In this context, Islam expert Annemarie Schimmel asked whether the Gordian knot was of the kind that women wove and blew curses into. In Gordion, she began to suspect that the art of tying dooming knots was not dismissed from the world by the blow of Alexander's sword.⁴ So I went to Gordion in 2007, now Yassihüyük, around 100 kilometers southwest of Ankara, to face the knot or problem. At issue here is the supernatural and connotative function of the knot in the sense of something being difficult or "knotty."

So it is not surprising that the knot is repeatedly used as an emblem: for example, when John Masters' entitles his novel about the situation in India in 1946 just before the withdrawal of the British after the fictional rail junction Bhowani, or when Burchard Brentje's in 1984 spoke about Afghanistan and the people of the Hindu Kush as the "knot of Asia." *The Kurdic Knot* by Hannes Reichmann and Alexander Foggensteiner in 1988 is about the genocide committed against the Kurds in the shadows of the Iran-Iraq War. In 1992, Christine von Kohl and Wolfgang Libal used the allegory for the Kosovo, calling it the "Gordian knot of the Balkan." And in 2005, Richard C. Bush named a book on the paradoxical relations between Taiwan and China *Untying the Knot: Making Peace in the Taiwan Strait*. And last but not least, in 1953 Ernst Jünger decided against the title "East and West," and entitled his own philosophical history "The Gordian Knot," as he writes in the appendix.⁵

A problem (Greek: πρόβλημα *próblema* "that which is presented [to solve]")

here becomes a knot, and the other way around. Who or what can help with solving the problem? In 1998 the artist Carsten Höller suggests in his “Instructions 5.5” in his *Spiele Buch* to untie the knot with the help of a “knot mother.”⁶ The motif of the assisting mother is already familiar from Johann Melchior Schmidtneri’s oil painting *Maria Knotenlöserin*, that has been located since 1700 at Sankt Peter am Perlach in Augsburg and is also popular in South America. And in China, the rulers during the Chou dynasty (1112–256 v. Chr.) were outfitted with a jade tool called “hsi,” to undo knots, as is revealed by Shuo Wen, one of the oldest Chinese dictionaries. These examples might explain why we feel happy when a knot breaks.

Nautical knots, Chinese art of knot tying, Quipus, knot blowers: there’s “a long story with many knots.” Gabriele Knapstein and René Block—paraphrasing Lewis Carroll⁷—used these words to describe the movement initiated by George Maciunas in the early 1960s and conceived a wandering exhibition of the same name entitled Fluxus in Deutschland 1962–1994: A Long Story with Many Knots, that toured around the world 1995–2008.

Maybe it is just as the Chinese philosopher Lǎozǐ said: good bonds need no knots (*Chinese*: 善結無繩約而不可解).⁸

¹ Clifford W. Ashley, *Ashley Book of Knots* (New York 1993), p. 3

² See Navid Kermani, *Gott ist schön. Das ästhetische Erleben des Koran* (Munich 2000), p. 88f.

³ See Shawkat M. Toorawa, “Seeking Refuge from Evil: The Power and Portent of the Closing Chapters of the Qur’an. In: *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 4/2, 2002, pp. 54ff.

⁴ Annemarie Schimmel, *Morgenland und Abendland* (Munich 2002), p. 156.

⁵ Siehe Ernst Jünger, *Der Gordische Knoten* (Frankfurt/M 1954), p. 148.

⁶ Carsten Höller, *Carsten Höller’s Spiele Buch* (Cologne 1998).

⁷ See Lewis Carroll, *A Tangled Tale*.

⁸ Lǎozǐ: Dàodéjīng, Chap. 27.

The artist Ralf Schmitt (born in 1964) has been knotting his Franz.Ost trilogy since 1999. Parts 1 & 2 were published in the Spanish art magazine Atlántica Internacional Revista de las Artes: "Politics of Dada and Data" (30, 2001, pp. 88-94) and "Docu-Soap" (36, 2003, pp. 90-97.) Currently, the third part is in the making, with the working title "Blowjob." For additional projects, see www.MyVisit.to.

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