

The Gift of Spider Woman

Judith A. Franke, Director, Dickson Mounds Museum

Most of the world's cultures create objects through the weaving together of fibers. They make clothing, containers, tools, furnishings, and bedding using materials from the plants and animals in the world around them.

In most cultures, women do the weaving, and the association of weaving with women is so common throughout the world that Euro-Americans still refer to the maternal side of the family as the "distaff side," an allusion to the spindle used to spin thread.

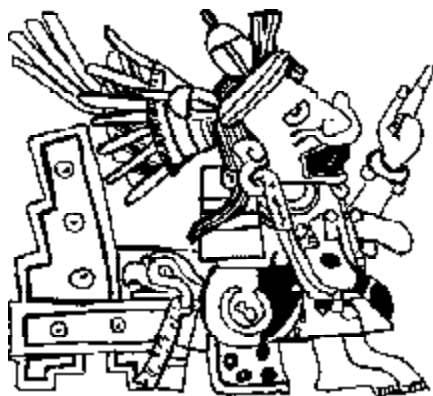
The spider has an obvious association with weaving because it is one of the most notable weavers in nature. Many American Indian tribes connected the spider with weaving and, by association, with women and a creator goddess. While legends and beliefs about weaving and spiders vary from tribe to tribe, certain themes and concepts run throughout the traditions and appear in places far distant from one another.

The Indians of central South America believe that Spider was the first weaver, and while we know of no beliefs about Spider Woman among the Andean cultures, we know that the spider was an important symbol to them as early as 2,000 years ago. It is found among the giant desert floor drawings of that time and, with a human face, in a series of ornaments on an elaborate gold necklace.

Textiles and their manufacture were extremely important in the Andean peoples' view of their universe. In one version of their creation, two sons of the god/creator bring everything into the world. The name of one son (Imaymana)



Among the ancient Maya of Mesoamerica, Ix Chel (Lady Rainbow) was a goddess of weaving, medicine, and childbirth. She was associated with the moon, the snake, and the rabbit. Drawing based on image in the Codex Madrid.

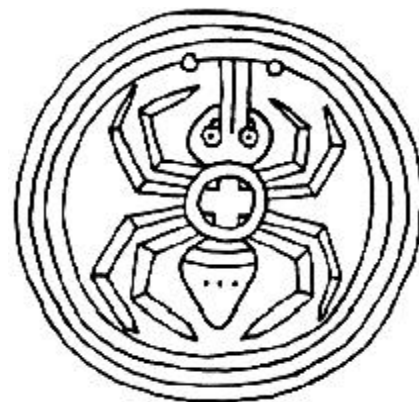


Tlazolteotl, a goddess known to the Aztec of ancient Mexico as the "Great Spinner and Weaver," was associated with the moon, fertility, healing, and witchcraft. She is depicted holding spindles, with spindle whorls in her hair and cotton draped from her ears. Spindles are still worn today in the hair of women in weaving communities in Oaxaca. Drawing based on image in the Codex Borgia.

refers to all things in nature. The name of the other (Tocapu) refers to weaving. This suggests that Andean peoples thought of weaving and the natural world as two halves of the whole of creation.

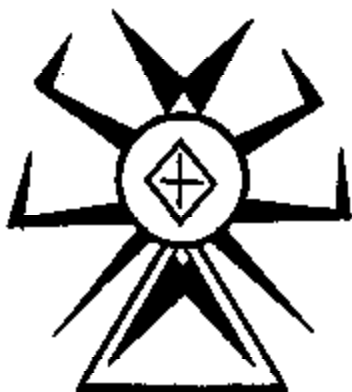
The ancient Maya used stones called 'spiders' to map out the four cardinal directions required for some ceremonies. The spider, with its four groups of two legs each, forms a cross of sorts. The Mayan association of the spider with this directional concept is reminiscent of the association of the cross symbol with fire, centrality, and the four directions by the contemporaneous Indian cultures of the American Southeast.

The Mississippian culture of the American Southeast and Midwest depicted a spider motif on a number of engraved marine-shell gorgets, usually with a cross on its back. The spider motif was one of the few Mississippian symbols specifically associated with women. Eight hundred years later, spiders occur in the mythology and iconography of Southeastern tribes such as the Cherokee, Osage, and Creek. Among the Osage, Spider was the symbol of an Earth clan. Certain women



Spider motif engraved on marine shell gorget, ca. A.D. 1300, Fulton County, Illinois. Dickson Mounds Museum.

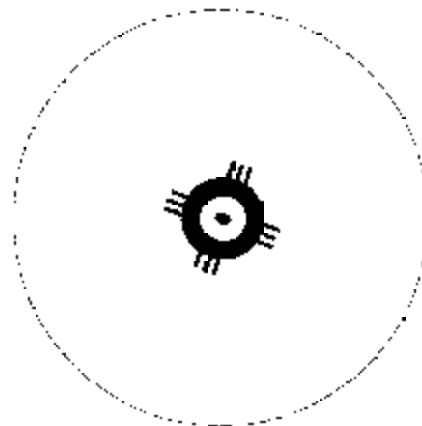
were honored by having the spider symbol tattooed on the back of both hands. The stylized spider motif of the tattoo has a cross at its center. The Muskogee Creek Indians today believe that a spider in the house means good health and good fortune. The Cherokee credit Grandmother Spider with weaving a basket in which she brought both light and fire to the world.



Osage tattoo, ca. A.D. 1900. The Osage viewed the world of the living as a snare or trap, associated with the spider's web and the surface of the earth. The spider is therefore symbolic of the holding or continuing of this life, which is released at death. The Osage custom of tattooing spiders on women's hands continued until about A.D. 1900, and by 1960 there was only one surviving woman to have been tattooed in this ceremony.

Spider Woman was a very important spirit being in the American Southwest, and the Pueblo Indians have a wealth of stories about her. According to their traditions, the Sun and Spider Woman (the Earth Goddess) willed all of the aspects of the world into being. Traditionally, Spider Woman taught the Hopi how to spin and weave cotton. In many stories, old Spider Woman assists twin heroes in their adventures, makes medicine and magic, and gives advice. She is an underground spirit being of great power who is friendly to man. She provides corn and sometimes rain.

Spider motifs appeared on Pueblo pottery at least a thousand years ago. One pottery bowl that dates to the 1300s has a spider painted on the inside and a cross-and-circle on the base of the exterior. Of special interest is the break in the painted line that encircles the



Painted motifs on pottery bowl from Homol'ovi, ca. A.D. 1300. Left: Interior. Right: Exterior. The cross and circle found along with the spider on this bowl is reminiscent of the association between the spider and the cross and circle on artifacts from the American Southeast and Midwest that date to the same time period.

spider. This seems to be a very early example of the symbolic 'pathway' frequently left in the design of textiles and baskets in more recent times as a means for the spider to enter and leave.

The Pomo and Hupa Indians of California believe that a break left in the motif is a pathway that allows Spider Grandmother to enter and inspect the finished basket, then leave. The Navajo leave this spirit line in the motifs of both basketry and textiles.

The Navajo believe that Spider Woman taught them to weave on a loom made by her husband, Spider Man. This loom symbolized life-giving water. Its top bar was Father Sky and its bottom bar Mother Earth. The two side

poles were rain and moisture. Spider Woman weaves lightning, clouds, rainbows, and sunrays into her fabric. When a Navajo girl is born, a spider web is rubbed on her hand and arm so that she will become a good weaver.

Spider Woman is also a weaver in the beliefs of the Tlingit of North America's Northwest Coast. In a story of the Achumawi of Northern California, when Spider Woman and her sons stopped the rain and brought back the sun, they were rewarded with the rainbow that glistens in their web.

To the Pawnee, Spider Woman is Mother Moon. She originally supplied seeds of edible plants and made the bison available to hunters. Through the powers that come to her from the moon, she frequently transforms herself into a deer. The Kiowa credit Grandmother Spider with putting the sun in place and creating food plants.

When one looks at the legends that relate to Spider Woman from the Americas as a whole, one sees that although beliefs differ from tribe to tribe, a relatively coherent image of Spider Woman emerges. She is generally a premier goddess of earth and sky—a creator being and a consort of the sun. She connects the earth and sky and creates fire and food plants. She is associated by some Indian cultures with the moon, the rainbow, the four directions, weaving, or the deer. She can make magic and transform herself. She is wise, and she helps those in need. 🕸



Wedding basket (lower) with spirit pathway, Navajo-style, made by Paiute, 1880–1900. Collection of the Illinois State Museum. Donated by Thomas Condell.