

The Boat and the Helmsman

by

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Several surahs of the Koran contain verses which proclaim the boat as “a sign for those who believe”. This means that the boat, in both its form and function symbolizes a spiritual truth, or more exactly more than one spiritual truth since symbols are, by their very definition, capable of several levels of interpretation. The boat consists of two fundamental components: the mast and the hull. The sails are functional extensions of the mast; the keel and rudder are functional extensions of the hull. The vertical mast has the same meaning as the tree (it is often in fact made from a tree trunk) since it indicates an axial centre and ‘links’ heaven to the surface of the ‘lower’ waters. The hull conforms in its shape to the horizontal surface of the waters, while at the same time being a refuge and containing a ‘centre’ at the point where it supports the foot of the mast. The form of the boat resembles the first pair of letters of the Arabic alphabet: the *alif* (ا) corresponds to the mast and the *ba* (ب) corresponds to the hull. The mast clearly symbolizes the essential, masculine pole of existence, whereas the hull symbolizes the substantial, maternal pole of existence. In the human microcosm the mast corresponds to the spirit and the hull corresponds to the soul. The mast step that supports the foot of the mast therefore corresponds to the heart, the point of contact between the soul and the transcendent spirit.

From a slightly different point of view, taking the wooden structure of the boat into account, the mast is a single, undifferentiated tree, whereas the hull is made of a multitude of different parts, each derived from parts of single trees. The mast thus expresses uniqueness, where the hull expresses integrity and harmony in its construction. The finest hulls, those of the Vikings for example, have a simple, exciting beauty resulting from the curving lines of the planking.

The functional symbolism of the boat can be related either to the boat as the ark of salvation, recalling the ark of Noah, or to the boat as a ‘vehicle’ of spiritual action, recalling the chariot of Arjuna in the *Bhagavadgītā*.¹ In the first case the boat symbolizes the protective function of Tradition which ensures for the voyagers proximity to the spiritual centre, a refuge from the vicissitudes of existence and help from the ‘winds’ of heaven. Exoterically, the boat is an

1. One should not forget that Krishna (the Self) was present in the chariot of Arjuna. Likewise, Jesus often boarded a boat: “and when he got into the boat his disciples followed him” (St. Matthew 8:23). Jesus walked upon the surface of the waters and was able to command the winds and the sea. The Logos is the source of all the symbolism mentioned in this article.

orthodox religion. Esoterically, the boat is an intact and genuine initiatory organization; the helmsman being the spiritual master. In the second case the various parts of the boat are seen as ‘projections’ of the nature and faculties of the individual. Sailing involves two basic modes: a passive mode when the boat ‘runs’ downwind and an active mode when the boat sails ‘closehauled’, as close as possible towards the source of the wind. In addition, there are intermediate modes, called “reaching”, when the wind blows laterally across the hull. When a boat runs before the wind, sailing is relatively easy and is relaxing for the helmsman. In life it reminds one of those times when the natural flow of events helps to move us in a direction that leads easily to the realization of our intention. More often than not, however, the helmsman must sail his boat either across the wind or as directly as possible towards it. These sailing directions involve greater skill, concentration and energy. There is a close parallel between sailing to windward and climbing a mountain. In both cases effort is involved and in both cases it is often impossible to move in a direct line towards the desired goal. Mountain climbing usually involves a number of relatively short routes, each independent, but when added together having as their overall objective the attainment of the summit. The same is true of windward sailing, in that a number of ‘tacks’ are required, each having the underlying intention of moving upwind towards a chosen landfall.

When a boat is sailing to windward it becomes a locus for the interaction of two elements and two forces. The two elements are air and water. Air moving across the leading edge of the sail results in a force like that which acts upon a bird’s wing. The action of this force, transmitted down the mast, through the hull and to the keel, produces a reactive force in the water. The resolution of these two forces causes the forward movement of the boat through the water. The coming together and the ‘marriage’ of these two forces is felt by the helmsman in the pressure of the wind on his skin, the motion of the boat in the water and the forces he senses through the sails and the tiller. The skillful helmsman understands the forces and by controlling their interaction he navigates the fastest and straightest passage through the water on his intended course.² Translated into the terms of the spiritual life, helmsmanship becomes the continual invocation of the spiritual force and the complementary response of nature through the soul. These act within the context of the intention formulated by the will. The windward direction of the boat, like the upward direction of a mountain path, is an ‘ascent’. Likewise, effective spiritual work results in an ascent to a higher spiritual state, along an ‘ascending path’ (*as-sirāt al-mustaqīm*).

The close analogy between sailing and the spiritual life makes one suspect that sailing could, in a traditional culture, have the status of an initiatory craft. This is further indicated by the variety of ‘residual’, magical superstitions that surround sailing. For example, sailors whistle to invoke the wind, but whistling is forbidden during a storm. It is also interesting to note that boats

2. Amongst the peripheral beings of creation these forces relate to the intelligence experienced in the birds and the fish.

are 'baptized' just before launching: they are given a name and a 'sacrificial' libation is made against the bows; also a blessing is called down upon them.

To conclude, let us recall something about sailing that anyone who has left the shore in a small boat must know. Sailing is purifying and is also to some extent frightening. Even under favorable conditions one is aware of the immense power of the wind and of the sea. By raising the sails and launching a boat upon the sea one places oneself in the hands of God; one trusts in His Mercy while remembering the Immensity of His Power. This, too, has a significance for the spiritual life.

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

For no creature, howsoever rational and intellectual, is lighted of itself but is lighted by participation of eternal truth.

St. Augustine.