

## **CHOTKI -- WHAT THEY ARE AND HOW WE MAKE THEM**

### *A hieromonk of the Patriarchate of Constantinople*

*Chotki* is the name the Slavs give to the knotted cord used to say the Jesus Prayer on. The Greeks call it *komvoskhinion*, which is kind of a long word, and so they are more commonly called *chotki*. A simple English term would be "prayer rope." *Chotki* is a plural word, like the English "beads." We don't say "*Chotki* is ... etc. etc.," but rather "*Chotki* are ...." The word literally means "counters," i.e. things you count with.

There are various forms of *chotki*, and one sees them made of various materials. But the more authentic kind are supposed to be made of black wool. Other colours are sometimes worked into the larger separator-knots and into the cross, but the prayer-cord itself and its knots should be black. Why? Because *chotki*, like the Jesus Prayer itself, are a rather private thing and should be inconspicuous. Black *chotki* against a monk's or nun's habit are hard to see. Wool is preferred to any harder material because *chotki* should be silent. Beads click, and therefore are not used. Again the idea of privacy and inconspicuousness. Another thing against beads is that they may gather and transmit undesirable "vibrations." This applies also to synthetic fibres, which are plastic-based. Therefore we use only pure wool.

We hold the *chotki* in the left hand when we're using them, because the left side of the body is supposed to be the receptive side and also the vulnerable side. *Chotki* are often called the monks' sword, because they ward off the Enemy with them, and he supposedly attacks us from the left. According to tradition, one ought always to have them in hand. If you are working, you wrap them around your wrist. Actually, even this is often not practicable -- in some jobs they would get dirty or damaged, even if wrapped around your wrist. But such is the tradition. Deacons, priests and bishops who are also monks wear them when they officiate at the church services and Liturgy, which makes them kind of conspicuous, I would say. But it is the custom. When a person is tonsured and clothed in the monastic state, the *chotki* are among the various articles of clothing and insignia put on the new monk or nun in the clothing ceremony.

*Chotki* should not be sold. (They often are, in fact, but this is not ideal.) They are supposed to be made specifically for the individual who needs them, and the transaction should have the blessing of the recipient's spiritual father, because the person who makes the *chotki* transfers something of his own spirit to the person who receives them. To put it in North American language, "a spiritual relationship is established." And this is no small thing.

Much of the above lore will sound like hocus-pocus to the sceptical and the rationalist mind. But it is not. Real spiritual discernment is called for in these matters.

About the making of *chotki*: the person making them should be fasting, sexually continent, and *silent*. That means that they are work for the *poustinia* or some private place – not for public or social gatherings. Why? Because the tying of each knot is a holy and rather private act accompanied by a three-fold prayer to the Holy Trinity.

It is a symbolic begetting or birth-giving. The work is held between the knees and brought over the loins and the lap into the left hand. Then comes the first prayer to the Holy Trinity. As you make the first loop over your thumb and lift it over to the space between your fourth and fifth fingers, you are forming the right arm of a cross, and you say: "In the Name of the Father." With the second loop, which is dropped onto the left side of your hand between thumb and first finger, you are making the left arm of the cross, and you say: "And of the Son." When you pass the cord under the strands in the palm of your hand, you are forming the bottom arm of the cross, and you say: "And of the Holy Spirit." When you pass the other cord under the strands over the back of your hand you are forming the top bar of the cross. This completes it and you say: "Amen."

Lifting the knot off your fingers is the "coming-to-birth." As you pull the knot tight, you will see what it is that you have begotten and brought forth over your lap. At first it assumes a protoplasmic form, like the nucleus of a living cell, or of an atom. Its circular shape, with the intricately woven loops in multiples of 4, is an archetypal form, found throughout nature in living and non-living things alike. The circle, or the geometric 4-sided (or 8- or 16- or 32-sided, etc.) figure, or the geometric figure bound within a circle, is a symbol found in all human cultures, ancient and modern. In Christianity, the 4-sided figure is the Cross, and the Fathers long ago sensed its archetypal shape and force. Whether geometric or circular or both, this shape symbolizes the Godhead as It relates, in all three Persons, to Creation. We believe it has a healing power, and we paint it into our icons around Christ whenever He is manifesting His Divinity, and around the Dove, and wherever the Father's power or voice is felt or heard (only the lower half of a circle at the top of the icon – look at the icons of the Transfiguration, or of Pentecost, or of Theophany, for example).

This figure, or *mandala*, as it is technically called, symbolizes the Godhead *only as It relates to Its Creation*, and thus it is also a statement of Creation. The tying of the *chotki* knot therefore is an acting out of creation. It is a sacramental act and a prayer.

When the knot has been pulled tight and slipped home to its final place on the cord, the two loops left in it must then be pulled in. You pick out the loose strands in the knot with a nail, and each time pull the loop through. This must be done three times before the free end of the cord will be loose enough to pull the loop shut: Each time you pull in a loop you invoke the Trinity again. As you pull the first strand, you say: "In the Name of the Father;" at the second strand: "And of the Son;" at the third strand: "And of the Holy Spirit;" and when you pull the free end of the cord to close the loop, you say: "Amen." This is repeated while pulling in the second loop, and the knot is now complete. It has had three blessings as it was made.

Making *chotki* involves a handicraft. But it is more than a handicraft, it is a prayer and a holy thing.

Asking to learn how to make *chotki*, or consenting to teach anyone, must not be done lightly. Here, also, spiritual discernment is called for.

To the secularized, rationalist mind this all sounds fanciful and far-fetched. But it comes out of an ancient and very whole Christian civilization. It is the expression of a religious mentality which sees all Creation and all human activity as sacred, and therefore charged with Divine

energies and meanings. We ourselves are thus charged, and are constantly a part of the vast interplay of forces and free wills which are at work in the universe, under the guidance of Holy Wisdom.

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