

THE INDIGENOUS QUETZALCOATL: WATER, PLUME AND SYMBOL

Jane Duran, PhD.

Lecturer

Department of Black Studies

University of California

Santa Barbara, CA 93106-3150

Abstract

The concept of the plumed serpent and its importance as a cultural construct for the region that is today México is examined with an eye toward comparison with similar objects of veneration in Hindu India. The work of Baldwin, Sejourne, and Zimmer is alluded to, and a detailing of aspects of both serpent and raptor veneration is given.

Résumé

Le concept du serpent à plumes ainsi que son importance en tant que construit culturel pour le territoire aujourd'hui connu sous le nom du Mexique est examiné de manière comparative avec des objets de vénération similaires en Inde hindi. Les travaux de Baldwin, Sejourne et Zimmer sont mobilisés et une description détaillée des aspects tant de la vénération du serpent que du rapace est offerte.

Recent aesthetic and art historical writing on stonework from indigenous cultures emphasizes the extent to which the work is driven by mythographical concerns. Although early efforts at addressing the work of non-European cultures were themselves often cast in extremely Eurocentric modes, more recent scholarship attempts to address the iconography of such cultures in terms of the belief systems of those involved.¹ Still more noteworthy is the fact that many Indigenous cultures, and the greater cultures of Asia and Latin America, have similar motifs in exemplary parts of their carvings and sculpture, but comparison of these motifs involves sensitivity both to style and site.

The writings on the Indigenous cultures of México and their importance often mention motifs of serpents or serpent-like beings (Quetzalcoatl being a primary example), but this region is by no means the only one in which such designs are paramount. India, especially the Dravidian south, has a number of such figures as important parts of its artistic and architectural heritage. The detailed work of constructing comparisons would seem to be important here, but difficult as well. What is of special note is the fact that, in a number of cultures, serpents symbolize a sort of divine wisdom, and they are often associated with water. Thus the naga of India—a staple of such prominent stonework sites as Mahabalipuram along India's Eastern coast—is a divinity, a creature possessed of remarkable knowledge.² The plumed serpent of the Mexican Indigenous cultures shares some characteristics, but is significantly different in many respects. It will be the argument

of this paper that a comparison between these two motifs is more than warranted, and tells us much about the cultures in question.

In her important work Burning Water: Myth and Religion in Ancient Mexico, Laurette Sejourne is at pains to emphasize the historical origin of Quetzalcoatl as a figure from the Toltec past appropriated by the Aztecs.³ The general overview of Quetzalcoatl depicted him as one who brought learning and the arts to Mesoamerica. Sejourne writes:

But whence did this statesman derive the power
which enabled him to amalgamate and transfigure
the cultural elements he had inherited from archaic
times into so dynamically homogenous a system?
He must evidently have been possessed of some quite
exceptional interior strength, and all that is known
about him corroborates this view.⁴

For the Aztecs, the myth of the noble statesman of former times becomes a sort of divine being, and one who is unusually in touch with spirituality. Thus, from the start, there is something of the “air” about this divinity, which sets it apart from others. Despite all of the historical documentation regarding the obeisance that Montezuma seemed to show to the Spaniards from the outset, and even though in appropriating the Quetzalcoatl myth from the Toltecs the Aztecs appeared to do it great violence, enough remains of the original story so that we have a good conception of how visual depictions came to incorporate the notion of the plumed serpent.⁵

By contrast, the concept of the serpent or serpent-like being as demiurge is rampant in Hinduism, and the term used to refer to these beings in Hindu worship in general is naga, with some accorded the status of nagaraja. Loosely based on the appearance of the ubiquitous serpents or cobras of the region, these divinities are associated with knowledge, arcana and the general atmosphere of water. Stone reliefs are replete with their images, and some—including the well-known relief at Mahabalipuram in the Indian South—feature them as a prominent part of the display. Indeed, in the Dravidian South some temples are devoted to real, living serpents, but this is simply another aspect of the worship. In addition to their symbolic import, the stonework involving nagas is noted by most art historians for its fluidity. At Mahabalipuram, where the site has a dominant naga figure, the sinuosity of the nagas speaks, as Heinrich Zimmer asserts, of “devout rapture and pious bliss.” He goes on to claim that the point of the sculpting is to demonstrate that the universe “is alive.”⁶ Perhaps one of the most alembicated portrayals of the role of the naga is found in this depiction of Vishnu and his serpent:

This giant, 'Lord of Maya', and the cosmic ocean
on which he is recumbent, are dual manifestations of
a single essence; for the ocean, as well as the human
form, is Vishnu. Furthermore, since in Hindu mythology
the symbol for water is the serpent (naga), Vishnu is
represented, normally, as reposing on the coils of a
prodigious snake, his favorite symbolic animal, the serpent
Ananta, 'Endless'. So that, not only the gigantic

anthropomorphic form and the boundless elemental but the reptile too is Vishnu. It is on a serpent ocean of his own immortal substance that the Cosmic Man passes the universal night.⁷

Although she is writing about Mesoamerica, it is noteworthy that Sejourne says, of images and their importance, that “archaic figures are simple images of actual things.”⁸ What she means, of course, is that some of the power of these things is invested in the figures. Thus, it is clear that the serpent is of extraordinary importance in most of the cultures of India and, indeed, globally.

One might inquire, then, what the joined notions of plumage and serpent features would mean in depictions of a deity or demiurge. If it is obvious that the serpent is related to water, one of the primordial elements of the cosmos, plumage is clearly related to air. But how did this combination come to manifest itself in the portrayals of Quetzalcoatl? A partial answer to the question may lie in the depiction of still another related, but distinct, Mexican trope, that which is found on the Mexican flag. In the telling of the tale by the Aztec people as to how they found their land in the basin of what is today Mexico City amid their wanderings, one version has it that a human counterpart to one of their demiurges saw a cactus with an eagle perched on it devouring a serpent. Almost all commentators agree that the notion that that which flies and soars would devour the power of the water and of things earthly is a valuable interpretation, and, indeed, this particular line of thought is again one that would occur in a number of cultural manifestations.⁹ But suppose it is clear that the serpent motif is a common one, and that we can cite a wide variety of cultural tropes that employ it. In that case, it is also obvious that there is no particular common parallel to the Quetzalcoatl motif, so that it, in its evocative power, stands alone.

Sejourne points out that much of the myth of Quetzalcoatl, as a princely figure of the Toltecs, aims in the direction of tying him to the notion of the divine, so that the configuration of feather and serpent about which we have been conceptualizing makes some sense. As she writes:

As we have seen, the spiritual message of Quetzalcoatl deals with the resolution of the painful problem of human duality.... So it speaks of a vision of the world of Unity in which the human soul at last enjoys the divine presence. It is clearly this same Unity which is represented in solar discs in which a circle...of feathers usually surrounds the symbol of the heavenly body.¹⁰

Although images of Quetzalcoatl vary greatly, at least a few of them depict a serpent with feathers—an unusual looking creature that is not immediately recognizable, unless one is familiar with the mythological rationale that underlies its appearance. Since so much of what we have as associative constructs for both the air and the water speaks to other notions and to other forms of mythography, the juxtaposition of the attributes of a creature of the water with those of a creature of the air creates an overpowering aura with respect to the visual appearance of the animal. It is for these reasons that anything having to do with Quetzalcoatl, his origins as a Toltec divinity, and his later transformation into an Aztec demiurge, are of the utmost importance for the mestizo

culture of México. Because México is itself a hybrid nation, derived from indigenous and Iberian roots, what it chooses as its emblematic figure is crucial.

It would not be so urgent to come to grips with the concept of Quetzalcoatl as a trope were it not for the fact that, for decades, the government of México has used legends and stories of the conquista and the periods surrounding it to mythologize the rise of the mestizaje and promote the construct of the Mexican nation as a whole. A state that was born from the, in many cases, forced sexual relations of Iberians and indigenous women, México has always grappled with its identity. Indeed, well-known works by internationally renowned authors have focused on this issue, and the concept that there is a core to things Mexican that feels, in some sense, profoundly bereft.¹¹

Thus, the myth of Quetzalcoatl as the plumed serpent serves multiple purposes. Referring to the origins of the myth reminds the listener that the roots of México are Indigenous—a fact of which some either are unaware, or which they choose to push to one side. But again, as we have seen, another take on this story (without alluding to the appearance of Quetzalcoatl) also focuses on an issue crucial to those Mexicans of Iberian ancestry, the fact that many groups other than the Aztecs cooperated with the invading Spaniards, at least partly because, as Sejourne argues, their cultures had been appropriated for Aztec use. The importance of becoming clear on this issue is highlighted by the recurrence in the culture of the figure of Malinche, who still embodies the notion of treachery, despite the fact that all available evidence places Malinche in the center of the story we have just been telling—Doña Marina, as she is sometimes called, was simply a young girl conversant in a number of Indian tongues. She had already become the property, so to speak, of others before the arrival of the Spaniards—once again, as is the case with the material surrounding Quetzalcoatl, she becomes the property of the Aztecs and then, in this case, the property of the Spaniards, but this has little to do with who she actually is.

Writing in Legends of the Plumed Serpent, Neil Baldwin has this to say about the gradual process of appropriation of the Quetzalcoatl story that led to the actual stone images of a feather-covered serpent:

[In the various codices] Quetzalcoatl in all his aspects is a noticeable visual personality throughout: as a culture bearer uniting the arts of song and painting, and as a craftsman “casting things as if they were gold”...dressed in full regalia...on his back an array of “flaring red macaw feathers”...¹²

Where material of special interest to those who would make comparisons between the stone sculptures of South Asia and those of Mesocamerica comes in is in the multiple depictions of Quetzalcoatl that emphasize his serpent-like characteristics (not all depictions do). It is here that the force of the serpent figure is most clearly seen, and it is also remarkable that, in this context, there is a real and striking similarity to some of the naga figures of India. Baldwin, for example, begins to hint at this when he notes that, as Ehecatl, “Plumed Serpent...[could take a form such that] his body might be helical, a snake contorted upon itself.”¹³ Although much of what depicts Quetzalcoatl is not in a form that is as recognizable by description as the viewer might like, the catalogue of a recent museum exhibition provides evidence for multiple interpretations regarding the international interest in the merger of serpent and air

mythology.¹⁴ Shown at an exhibition of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the object titled “Feathered Serpent with the Year 1 Reed” depicts a basalt freestanding sculpture from the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries, preceding the arrival of the Spaniards.¹⁵ This particular item shows a coiled serpent, recognizable in an attitude that is somewhat similar to that found in the art of India, but with the remarkable addition of the fact that the serpent is shown as a feathered being, in the way in which a bird would be feathered. This one object alone is striking for its depiction of something that combines characteristics of a number of mythographical elements.

The force of Quetzalcoatl as both an object of veneration and a general trope of the culture is captured by David Carrasco when he writes, concerning the conquest:

In the Aztec memory of this early symbolic contact, Moctezuma had his interpretive way when Cortés put on the mask of Quetzalcoatl and dressed as the god.¹⁶

In other words, Quetzalcoatl retained a potent force that even the paraphernalia associated with him went a long way toward achieving power. On the one hand, it would be easy to interpret these moves as having primarily to do with the legends of the Toltecs—Baldwin, Carrasco and others are at pains to make it clear that the original Quetzalcoatl figure, the legendary Toltec, held sway over the moral imagination even when usurped by the Aztecs.¹⁷ But it is also safe to say, as would be told of mythological figures from virtually any tradition, that much of the force of the figure has to do with the elements of physicality, or plainly, of animal spirit, induced in the figure, and it is here that the Quetzalcoatl myth is of greatest interest.

To recapitulate, elements of the air—as represented by raptors, or some sorts of birds in flight—and elements of water, as represented by serpents, coiled figures or some other sorts of creatures, have mythological importance and resonance in almost all cultures. The Garuda figure, associated with Vishnu and prominent in Nepal, among other places, might be thought to be a part of the South Asian tradition that has to do with airy elements. But what the Quetzalcoatl myth achieves, at one composition, so to speak, is a merging of these two elements in such a way that the resulting construct is quite striking. It is particularly true of some of the stonework—as mentioned in the figure from the museum catalog cited above—that the coiling of the serpent (the same coiling that is used to great effect in the reliefs at Mahabalipuram in Southern India) strikes the viewer with its force, and that the energy of the figure is more or less visually transmitted in this manner. For the figure described above, where the feathering is a part of the work as shown and is quite noticeable in the carving, the effect is redoubled, and there is much to think about with respect to these tropes throughout global cultures.

The Quetzalcoatl myth may have had a unifying force in the time of the Spanish conquest, or even later, but other sorts of myths in other parts of the South American continent or in Asia have a potency that is not necessarily political. Heinrich Zimmer and other authors have noted that the veneration of the nagas or nagarajas in India is of paramount importance throughout the subcontinent. Even such well-known authorities as Benjamin Rowland have said much the same. In the next section, we will examine the figure of the naga as found in South Asia.

The ubiquity of the naga figures throughout all aspects of the cultures of Hindu India is immediately apparent to a visitor or even a casual student. If the naga stands for a certain sort of

arcane knowledge and a mastery of the watery realm, it is also clear that the possessor of such knowledge may become the object of devotion for a believing Hindu.

The special status of a coiling serpent—and here we see the intersection with the sort of depiction of Quetzalcoatl to which we have alluded—is made manifest in this important passage from Zimmer:

In the...relief, the Descent of the Ganges is represented according to a convention which art-historians currently call “continuous narrative.”... A giant serpent king, covered by the torrent, is moving upward, his powerful serpent body undulating with slow movements...he greets the water, rejoicing with rapt devotion.... Overlooking minute traits and details, this work of art aims to convey attitudes....¹⁸

In other words, for at least some of the art of India, the power of the serpent figure has to do not only with what it represents, but the fact that it can be seen as engaging in Bhakti, the devotional aspect of Hinduism, is crucially important throughout this set of cultures in the subcontinent. Associated not only with Vishnu but in general with multiple aspects of the natural, the naga, nagaraja, and nagini (the latter is the female aspect of the former) are found in all parts of India and are also related to the ubiquitous nagawallahs who greet tourists on the street with their basketed cobras. Rowland notes this when he parenthetically states that there is a “fine panel of a Nagaraja and his queen” outside one of the well-known caves at Ajanta.¹⁹

The force of the serpent’s potency is manifested most compellingly by Zimmer when he asserts that “nagas are genii superior to man.”²⁰ Although it has been little remarked upon by commentators, the figures that we have of Quetzalcoatl that show the coils of a serpent are similar, at least in their curvilinearity and general construction, to some of what is found in India. In both cases, what one wants to say is that a certain sort of potential is signaled in the figure. In addition to the potency of the figure itself, any sort of juxtaposition between serpent imagery and that of the raptor or eagle does, of course, forward all of the characteristics that we have already enumerated. Because this kind of mythography is so common cross-culturally, Zimmer devotes an entire subsection of one chapter to it in his work. He notes, of the various powers attributed to both sorts of entities:

The eagle represents this higher, spiritual principle released from the bondage of matter and soaring into the translucent ether, mounting to its kin, the stars, and even to the supreme divine being about them. On the other hand, the serpent is life-force in the sphere of life-matter. The snake is supposed to be of tenacious vitality; it rejuvenates itself by sloughing off its skin.²¹

Thus, the importance of Quetzalcoatl is that—especially in the portrayals that make the combination obvious—the figure has aspects of both symbols at once. There could be few

mythological combinations that would contain more such compelling dyadic elements of reverence than this figure.

When we return to the original notion of Quetzalcoatl as a divinity of the Toltecs whose origins, at least according to some commentators, are related to those of an actual person of the early part of the post-CE era, we can understand why it might have been thought crucial to provide the figure with an array of characteristics that would indicate its full strength. (To reiterate, the version of Quetzalcoatl most usable for our purposes is known art historically as “Feathered Serpent with the Year 1 Reed”.²²) Someone who exhibits traits of courage, generosity and spirit is an individual who, like figures mentioned by Plato, has risen above most human challenges, thus the desire to incorporate both elements of water and air. The notion of animal embodiments of these traits is, again, cross-cultural—indeed, along with the serpent, the Hindu cultures also have an abundance of material on the elephant.²³

In summarizing the concept of the naga in Hindu cultural artifacts, it is also important to discuss why it is that this animal, and many others, come up as often as they do in the art of India (and, indeed, as we have seen, in the art of Mexico). It might be considered a comparatively minor point that the sheer amount of flora and fauna on the subcontinent provides ample material for illustrative or devotional purposes, but this is not really a minor matter. A number of theorists of human development such as Jared Diamond have written of the difficulty of domesticating animals found in certain areas—the difficulty with many of the mammals of the African continent, for example, is well known. (Multiple attempts at domestication of the zebra have so far failed.) Although the water buffalo and the elephant have been used by human beings in India, many of the other animals remain fearsome and would have been, to hunting and gathering humans, sources of genuine awe and respect. It does not take a great deal of imagination to think that responses to the naga—and the quick death that usually ensued after an encounter—would propel something akin to worship.²⁴ This is, indeed, what happened.

Thus the various naga and nagini figures, particularly in Dravidian India, are simply exemplars of an attitude toward the world that begins in wonder at the force of life and at its strength and ferocity. The naga may be a figure of knowledge, but it is also a figure inspiring fear and reverence since it is obvious that actual nagas do both. It may very well be the case that it could be argued that there is not the same awe attached to serpents in the area that is today Mexico, but rattlesnakes, although not as imposing as cobras, are also deadly. It is for these reasons, we can hypothesize, that the various legends surrounding Quetzalcoatl emphasize his shapeshifting and the importance of powers of the water and the air.

Finally, it is also important to reiterate that the “sighting” legend of the eagle and serpent together on a cactus (as the vision of the locale of the future Tenochtitlan) is another component of this mythological sequence. That this motif is found on the Mexican flag, and reappears in many contexts in Mexican culture, helps to establish that both elements—the celestial and the earthy—have their importance, and the combination of the two is particularly forceful. In this particular emblem, the eagle devours the serpent, but this part of the dyad is replicated, at least to some extent, in Hindu culture through the retelling of battles between Vishnu and serpent kings (this is in addition to the fact that Vishnu is found reposing on the cosmic serpent Shesha). Over and over again, the centrality of these two symbolic elements, the bird of the air and the serpent, is brought home to the viewer of artifacts from these regions.

I have been arguing that there is a degree of significance to the structure of the symbolism in Quetzalcoatl figures that is related to those of other cultures, specifically Hindu India, and that this significance has been somewhat underappreciated. However, much has been written about Quetzalcoatl in terms of the Conquista and the surrounding legends, little of what has been written attempts to tie this mythological figure to other such figures around the world. But there is ample evidence that much of what drives the construction of the symbol here is cross-cultural, and, as we have seen, this degree of cultural matching is important because of what it tells us about human cultures and their veneration of elements of water and air.

As commentators such as Sejourne are at pains to remark, the original Toltec construction of Quetzalcoatl, whether historical or not, is one that valorized the figure because of his princely qualities. Thus, Quetzalcoatl was held to be just, kind, reverential and so forth—qualities that, of course, are associated with figures of the air and, in Greek mythology, are closer to those of the major male deities associated with the arts, such as Apollo. But under the Aztec appropriation, and over a period of time, Quetzalcoatl became simply a figure of power, and that power is demarcated along a number of lines. The somewhat arcane wisdom believed to be possessed by serpent figures across the world is then united in this symbol with the regalia surrounding birds and raptors in general, and the resulting construct is what we know as the “plumed serpent.”

Zimmer gives us some conception of the importance of serpents in general as objects of devotion on the subcontinent when he writes:

A primitive serpent-cult was superseded by the worship of an anthropomorphic divine savior. Through the intermediary, Krishna, the special cult of a local demon became merged into the widespread, general cult of Vishnu, the Supreme Being, and thus was linked to a context of superior symbolic import, representing concepts and intuitions of a general validity.²⁵

Here, we have a short sketch of how the powers generally associated with water and the earth later became associated with a variety of beings and how this, in turn, gave rise to the more sophisticated cults of a later time. In México, veneration of a legendary prince gave rise to the notion of a being possessing elements of both the local serpents and raptors, and in time, the notion of this being became so important as to virtually define Aztec culture. In the area of the subcontinent, veneration of nagas continues to this day, particularly in the South, and entire temples are specifically designated for their worship. As “Feathered Serpent with the Year 1 Reed” shows, there are few images more powerful than those that show the coils of the serpent, and this one trope alone is common to the indigenous cultures of the New World and those of the South Asian area.

As North America becomes more cognizant of its multiple heritages—those of the Canadian North, what is now the United States, and those of what is now México—it becomes more urgent to learn about important constructs of the various regions. There is little that is more fundamental to the history of indigenous México than the symbolic aspects of the figure known as Quetzalcoatl.

-
1. For example, work on India as done originally by Benjamin Rowland remains a hallmark, despite Rowland's propensity to analyze in almost completely Eurocentric terms, comparing, for example, 16th c. Indian miniatures to work of the Italian Renaissance. (Benjamin Rowland, The Art and Architecture of India, Baltimore: Penguin, Ltd., 1967.)
 2. Heinrich Zimmer, Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization, New York: Pantheon, 1963, p. 37. Zimmer states bluntly at one point that "the symbol for water" throughout much Hindu work is the serpent.
 3. Laurette Sejourne, Burning Water: Thought and Religion in Ancient Mexico, New York: Grove Press, 1960.
 4. Ibid., p. 26.
 5. Sejourne is one of those who emphasizes Montezuma's apparent relief at the actual arrival of the predicted "deities," ending as it did decades of prophecy. (Ibid., pp. 42-43).
 6. Zimmer, Myths, pp. 117, 119.
 7. Ibid., p. 37.
 8. Ibid., p. 52.
 9. Sejourne, Burning Water, p. 115. See also Neil Baldwin, Legends of the Plumed Serpent, New York: Public Affairs, 1998.
 10. Ibid., pp. 64, 62.
 11. See Octavio Paz, The Labyrinth of Solitude, New York: Grove Press, 1959, for what is probably the best known example of this. Paz notes in the text that Mexicans frequently refer to themselves, colloquially, as "hijos de la chingada"—a courteous translation of this Spanish phrase would be "children of the one who was violated."
 12. Baldwin, Legends, p. 79.
 13. Ibid., p. 87.
 14. Virginia M. Fields, John M.D. Pohl, and Victoria I. Lyall, Children of the Plumed Serpent: the Legacy of Quetzalcoatl in Ancient Mexico, Los Angeles: LACMA Catalogue, 2012.
 15. This item is Plate 218 in the Catalogue, ibid. (In the Exhibition Checklist itself it is listed as Item 187.)
 16. David Carrasco, City of Sacrifice, Boston: Beacon Press, 1999, p. 216.
 17. Sejourne refers to the alteration of the Toltec beliefs by the Aztecs as changing the beliefs into "a weapon of worldly power." (p. 28)
 18. Zimmer, Myths, pp. 117, 119.
 19. Rowland, Art, p. 144.
 20. Zimmer, Myths, p. 63.
 21. Ibid., p. 75.
 22. See fn. 15.
 23. See, especially, ibid., pp. 102-109.
 24. It is also worth noting that this animal makes multiple appearances in Rudyard Kipling's The Jungle Book.
 25. Zimmer, Myths, p. 86.