

# MYTHOLOGICAL SYMBOLISM OF COSMIC CONSCIOUSNESS

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## Abstract

In the ancient Sumerian, Vedic and Hebrew traditions the role of the entwined serpent as a mythical symbolism is very common. In this short article, it is proposed to provide the background in which these traditions took root and analyse the common theme implied which has a deeper significance. In conclusion the highly esoteric dimension of these myths and their hidden message is derived.

## Introduction

The subject of serpent symbolism is very vast and it is proposed only to touch upon a narrow spiritual dimension of these myths in various traditions in this article namely; an element of cosmic consciousness. Snakes - androgynous nature having unified masculine and feminine aspects. "Snakes move like water and have an internal fire as demonstrated by their lightening strike and fiery tongue movements. They also reflect the celestial cycles of the moon and the ability to shed their skin and emerge reborn. As such they are symbols of the divine feminine, movement through seasons of the soul and a means to work towards spiritual wisdom. Their sensitivity to vibration makes them a good symbol of the electromagnetic spectrum from cosmic rays to subsonic frequencies - the symphony of music found throughout Nature that unifies us with the Universe." <sup>1</sup>

As the title of the paper reads, it is to the transcendence of consciousness to a higher plane that was conveyed in many myths, where the serpent symbolism was used in narrations that we will concentrate. We will deconstruct the various myths and the context in which they were written or told to wean out this esoteric content.

## Sumerian Mythology

In this section we will examine the serpent symbolism in the various traditions of the world. In the Sumerian tradition, the deity Ningishzida was a guardian of the door to the underworld who has a horned snake as his symbol. He appears to have been associated with trees, fertility, and snakes. Thorkild Jacobsen, a renowned historian specializing in Assyriology and Sumerian literature, wrote that the roots of the tree draw nourishment from deep underground and have the appearance of entwining snakes.

"It is probably the earliest recorded usage of serpent symbolism in sacred worship or ritual. In the Louvre, there is a famous green steatite vase carved for king Gudea of Lagash (dated variously 2200-2025 BCE), dedicated by its inscription: "To the god Ningiszida, his god Gudea, Ensi (governor) of Lagash, for the prolongation of his life, has dedicated this"." <sup>2</sup>

In classical Sumerian mythology, translated from the cuneiform clay tablets and authenticated by various scholarly sources, the 'The Sumerian Mythology' by Samuel Noah Kramer <sup>3</sup> stands as primary reference. In the chapter on 'Myths of Origins' one among the chief characters is the serpent that lives in the roots of the *huluppu*-tree which was planted in the heavenly garden by Inanna, queen of heaven. When ultimately the tree is cut down by Gilgamesh, the great Sumerian hero, the forerunner of the Greek Heracles, the snake goes down to the nether world.

The *huluppu*-tree appears to be the original source of the tree of life in Kabbala and the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden in the Genesis text of the Bible.

The serpent symbolism is the representation of gross consciousness which is always rooted to the manifest creation or the lowest level of consciousness in the *Machut* in the Tree of Life in Kabbala. The Sumerian myth goes on to tell how the drum that was made from the trunk of the *huluppu*-tree and the drum sticks made from its upper branches and given to Gilgamesh for his valour fall down into the nether world. The reason they fell is due to the cry of young maidens. This is a beautiful symbolism which has not been fully understood and needs a multicultural dimension to wean out the deep meaning. The drum in eastern mysticism (drum of Nataraja) is always associated with cosmic vibration and it represents the highest level of consciousness. Though Gilgamesh, who represents all humanity like Manu in Vedic myths, is endowed with this higher consciousness, he fails to preserve it and at the distraction of the wail of young maidens, symbolizing the worldly trappings, he loses it to the possession of the base level or gross consciousness.

### Judeo-Christian scriptures

There are three critical attributes to serpent symbolism that become relevant in the Books of Moses. While there is heavy leaning towards Sumerian and Assyrian mythology, the writings of Moses are heavily loaded with a higher knowledge.

The first representation is very similar to the Sumerian myth and denotes the descent of higher spirit consciousness to a senses dominated bodily consciousness through the action of ego.

In the Hebrew Bible (the Tanakh) of Judaism, the speaking Serpent (*nachash*) in the Garden of Eden brought forbidden knowledge, but was not identified with Satan in the Book of Genesis. Nor is there any indication there in Genesis that the Serpent was a deity in his own right, aside from the fact that the Pentateuch is not otherwise rife with talking animals. And every word the Serpent spoke was in fact true. His information may be illicit, but it is not inaccurate. "Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field which the Lord God has made," ... Genesis 3:1.

The Serpent in this episode is connected with a higher level of wisdom, as represented by the serpent entwined in the tree of Knowledge, is used by a created consciousness to equate itself with the creator consciousness ("For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." ..... Genesis 3:5) and finding out that every creation is inadequately endowed to realize the Absolute only through sense oriented consciousness. This is brought out in the narration as realizing their nakedness through a sense dominated awareness and being cast out from their original primal consciousness to a purely senses oriented consciousness . ("So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken." ... Genesis 3:23). The serpent (wisdom) being condemned to an existence in the earthly or materialistic plane ("You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life" ... Genesis 3:14)

The second representation is the employment and role of hidden wisdom in the plan of Yahweh. The rod that Moses held turned into a serpent. When he threw it to the ground, at God's command, it took its serpent form. If the identity was not clear enough, when Moses picked up the serpent, it was transformed to a rod once more.

Here again the symbolism is the use of wisdom gathered from nature, the rod or dead wood representing discarded or deceptively hidden knowledge, to achieve the plan of the divine. An extensive research has provided ample evidence that all the miracles during Exodus, from the plagues to the parting of the Red Sea, were acts of nature triggered by the Santorini volcanic eruption.<sup>4</sup>

Moses again employs the serpent symbolism to denote the deterioration of consciousness of the Israelites during time of hardship and their loss of identity as chosen children of Yahweh and how the

elevated Bronze serpent cleanses the polluting poison of distrust in Yahweh and bring them back to a life of hope and faith in the all pervading spirit.

The Book of Numbers provides an origin for an archaic bronze serpent associated with Moses, with the following narrative: <sup>5</sup>

"And the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died. Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, we have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord, and against thee; pray unto the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us. And Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live. And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived." <sup>6</sup>

The serpent made out of bronze is a powerful symbolism of alchemy. Spiritual traditions rooted in tribal cultures had a powerful influence on transformation of individual consciousness as a path to higher state of living. While the crawling serpent made of flesh and blood represents the human weakness of lack of faith leading to slow poisoning of the mind towards distrust in Yahweh, the alchemical serpent hoisted on the pole represents an elevated state of spiritual consciousness leading to spiritual healing through belief and faith. This is the reason that Jesus says; "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.".... John 3: 14, 15

## Vedic Scriptures

In Vedic philosophy the paradigmatic character of the union of opposites constituted one of the most significant characteristics of Indian religious thought long before it ever became an object of systematic theology.

The *Aitareya Brahmana* states that the serpent *Ahi Budhnya* is invisibly what *Agni*; [the 'furious serpent'] is visibly. In other words, the serpent is a virtuality of fire, whereas darkness is non-manifested light. Again, when the sun rises at dawn, he 'frees himself from night ...just as Ahi frees himself from his skin' <sup>7</sup>. In today's cosmology this has been inferentially derived as the two aspects of reality namely; matter and dark matter / dark energy. As matter and energy are two sides of the same coin, there are only two categories namely; observable energy and inferential energy. The unification of these two is at the fundamental level of consciousness.

In the Hindu sacred books there is a myth that appears frequently, of the gods and demons cooperating under the supervision of the two supreme deities, Vishnu and Shiva, to churn the Milky Ocean for its elixir of immortality. They took the Mountain Mandhara as a churning stick and the divine Serpent Vasuki as a churning rope, and wrapped the serpent around the mountain. Then the gods taking hold of the head end of the snake and the demons the tail, they churned for a thousand years and produced in the end the Butter of Immortality. The symbolism of this myth is as follows:

- The Devas and Asuras represent the positives and negatives respectively of one's personality. The participation of both the Devas and the Asuras signifies that when one is seeking bliss through spiritual practice, one has to integrate and harmonise both the positive and negative aspects and put both the energies to work for the common goal.
- The ocean of milk is the mind or the human consciousness. The mind is like an ocean while the thoughts and emotions are the waves in the ocean.
- Mandhara, the mountain symbolises concentration. The word Mandhara is made up of two words Mana (mind) and Dhara (a single line) which means holding the mind in one line. This is possible only by concentration.

- Mount Mandhara was upheld by Lord Vishnu as a Kurma (tortoise). The tortoise here symbolises the withdrawal of the senses into oneself (just as a tortoise withdraws its head into its shell) as one practices mental concentration and meditation or contemplation.
- Vasuki symbolises desire. Vasuki used in the churning of the ocean denotes that the Devas and the demons held desire (to seek immortality) as a rope and churned the mind with the help of concentration and withdrawal of the senses. Desire, if not controlled will overpower and destroy an individual.<sup>8</sup>

Hence the entire episode is about how one can reach immortality through highly focused desire for elevation of one's consciousness to the absolute.

The Vedic creation story itself is based on a myth. The mythology of the story proceeds as follows. In the beginning there was nothing, but the undifferentiated and unmanifested. Everything was in perfect harmony. Lord Vishnu lay on his serpent, Shesha; his eyes were closed as he rested. When Lord Vishnu opened his eyes, the creation began. A lotus stock emerged from his navel and blossomed into a beautiful lotus. From the lotus was born Brahma. Brahma is the creator, in Hindu mythology. Brahma then proceeded to create the universe. Brahma created the entire universe in a little golden egg called the Hiranyaagarbha (the golden womb). Brahma created the heaven and the earth, the gods and the demons, the gandharvas and the humans, the plants and the animals, the stars and the planets and everything else.

Here again the myth relates to the serpent being the symbol of cosmic consciousness, which is the basic form of the multiverse. The Golden egg is in current cosmology the 'Big Bang' out of which the entire universe was created. It is only through the created or manifested consciousness one is able to perceive 'heaven and the earth, the gods and the demons, the gandharvas and the humans, the plants and the animals, the stars and the planets and everything else'.

## Conclusion

The coiled or entwined serpent as the bed of Vishnu or wisdom serpent in Eden point to primal creative consciousness as today we understand from General Relativity that space was extremely compacted to smaller than the plank's volume ( $4 \times 10^{-105}$  cubic meters) at the origin of Big Bang. Many myths and therein the symbolism of the serpent points to a cosmic consciousness at an esoteric level. Categorization into crawling serpents representing the human sense oriented consciousness and the symbolism of alchemical or the thousand hooded supernatural serpent as symbolism of elevated level of cosmic consciousness is to facilitate comprehension at an exoteric level.

## Reference

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  - <sup>5</sup> Veyne, Paul, 1987. A History of Private Life : 1. From Pagan Rome to Byzantium
  - <sup>6</sup> ... Book of Numbers 21:6-9
  - <sup>7</sup> Robert T. Mason PhD, D.D 1999 -'The Divine Serpent in Myth and Legend'
  - <sup>8</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samudra\\_manthan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samudra_manthan)

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