

KAJ BIRKET-SMITH

STUDIES IN  
CIRCUMPACIFIC CULTURE  
RELATIONS

IV. The Double-Headed Serpent

Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab  
Historisk-filosofiske Meddelelser 47, 1



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# I

## INTRODUCTION

In many parts of the world snakes play important rôles in religion and mythology. Rather widespread is the idea of snakes with a head at either end, not to be confused, of course, with the multi-headed *nâgâ* serpent of Hindu-Buddhist mythology, nor with the feathered and horned snakes in American Indian religions.

The basis for the belief in the existence of double-headed snakes is probably in many cases the tropical and sub-tropical *Amphisbaenians*, recent saurians with very short, clumsy tails that by superficial observance may easily be mistaken for heads.

## II

### THE DOUBLE-HEADED SERPENT IN AMERICA

In a paper, read at the Americanist Congress in The Hague, 1924, Fritz Röck, speaking on ancient Mexican culture connections with Central and South America<sup>1</sup>, embarked on the idea of the double-headed serpent. After having mentioned the horned snake from the Seneca and a few other tribes in the Great Lakes area of North America, where it is believed to cause deluge, he discussed the notion of double-headed serpents among some North Pacific Indians, in Mexico, Chiriquí, Ecuador, in the old cultures of San Agustín, Chavín, Pachacamac, Tiahuanaco and Calchaquí, adding the Witoto, Oyampí, Yuracare, Mosekene and Araucanians.

Unfortunately, Röck's account seems to be rather uncritical, and it would carry us too far away from our subject, if we were to enter into details. It may be mentioned, however, that the double-headed serpent is not depicted in the art of Ecuador, Chiriquí, San Agustín, Chavín, nor in that of Tiahuanaco and Calchaquí<sup>2</sup>.

Röck arrived at the following conclusion: "Es lass sich also an Hand der Leitform der beidendköpfigen Schlange und mit ihr in Verbindung stehenden mythischen und religiösen Vorstellungen und ihrer Darstellung in der Kunst alte Kulturbeziehungen innerhalb Amerika feststellen, welche nur durch die Prärie- und die Asiouxs-Stämme unterbrochen, von British Kolumbien und der Nordwestküste Nordamerikas durch Mittelamerika hindurch zu den Araukanern Chiles erstrecken"<sup>3</sup>.

A few years after Röck, MacLeod took up the question of the double-headed serpent in America saying: "As regards myth, Röck's monograph on the myth and design of the double-headed snake is of significance. The myth is found on the northwest coast

<sup>1</sup> Röck 1924, 200 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Kroeber in Steward (ed.) 1946-59; V 411 ff. Means 1931; 117 ff. Wendell Bennett *ibidem*; II 74 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Röck 1924; 211.

of North America, from and including the Tsimshian, southward among the coast tribes to and including the Makah of Washington. We do not meet it again until we reach northern Mexico where it is found among the Huichol, and further south it appears among the Mayas and the Mayan Huastecs...''<sup>1</sup>.

Among the Northwest American culture elements, supposed to be of Central American origin, MacLeod included "mother sibs", weaving and cremation. MacLeod's account of the spread of Central American culture elements ends with a prudent question: "Did any southwestern elements of significance or in any volume pass beyond and direct up to the Alaskan coast? Or did all that reached the coast pass over the now Shoshonean interior and to the Columbia or Frazer Rivers, thence to the coast and thence north to Alaska and south to northern California? Future research will solve the problem"<sup>2</sup>. As for matrilineal sibs, weaving and cremation I hope that it may suffice to refer to my previous remarks on these subjects<sup>3</sup>.

Among the *Tsimshian*, however, it is expressly stated that there is no society using a dancing club like a double-headed serpent, as among the Kwakiutl<sup>4</sup>. The *Kwakiutl* understand the double-headed serpent to be a sib assistant and a spirit canoe<sup>5</sup>. It plays an important rôle in Kwakiutl mythology, though exaggerated by Locher<sup>6</sup>. Initiates to the Cannibal Society are said to obtain supernatural powers by being rubbed with blood of the double-headed serpent<sup>7</sup>. The *Nootka* speak of both double-headed and feathered snakes<sup>8</sup>, the latter being simultaneously lightning. Among the *Bellacoola* the double-headed salmon and serpent are crests<sup>9</sup>. The double-headed serpent appears in dancing performances among the Coast Salishan *Comox*<sup>10</sup>. It is not, however, connected with secret societies among the Quinaielt<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> MacLeod 1929; 421.

<sup>2</sup> MacLeod 1929; 435.

<sup>3</sup> Birket-Smith 1971; 12 f. Birket-Smith 1973; 41 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Garfield 1939; 295.

<sup>5</sup> Boas 1897; 371. Boas 1935; 295.

<sup>6</sup> Locher 1932. Müller 1955; 11.

<sup>7</sup> Beasley 1903; 520.

<sup>8</sup> Drucker 1951; 53.

<sup>9</sup> McIlwraith 1948; I 79.

<sup>10</sup> Barnett 1955; 296.

<sup>11</sup> Olson 1936; 67.

Of the *Shuswap* in British Columbia it is told: The story of the existence of a kind of rattle-snake with a head at each end is common. To see such a snake is very unlucky and portends the death of some dear friend<sup>1</sup>.

Possibly the double-headed serpent is known also by the *Umatilla* in Oregon<sup>2</sup>.

Proceeding now from the American Northwest as far south as northern Mexico we are told of the *Huichol* that they admit the existence of double-headed serpents "zwischen deren offenen Rachen die Sonne hindurch muss, wenn sie im Westen versinkt"<sup>3</sup>. It is there a frequently occurring textile design<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore it is mentioned from the *Maya* ruins in Yucatán<sup>5</sup>. However, there may here be a confusion with the feathered serpent, Kukulcan or Quetzalcoatl, a god who was introduced by Mexican invaders<sup>6</sup>.

Still farther south both feathered and double-headed snakes occur on the painted Nicoya pottery in *Costa Rica*<sup>7</sup>, which was likewise influenced by Mexican intruders.

It has been suggested that American pictures of double-headed serpents in stone, pottery, etc., may be related to ancient Chinese notions<sup>8</sup>. Even though the former, as previously mentioned, are extremely problematic, there may be reason for turning to conditions west of the Pacific.

<sup>1</sup> Dawson 1892; 39.

<sup>2</sup> Ray 1942; 255.

<sup>3</sup> Seler 1908; III 387.

<sup>4</sup> Lumholtz 1906; 36.

<sup>5</sup> Seler 1908; 679, 712 ff.

<sup>6</sup> Thompson 1956; 28, 208, 117 ff.

<sup>7</sup> Strong in Steward (ed.) 1946-59; IV 126.

<sup>8</sup> Hentze 1966; 259.



III  
DOUBLE-HEADED SERPENTS WEST OF  
THE PACIFIC

1. Melanesia

Hans Ritter has given an account of the snake in Melanesian religion and totemism, mentioning it from *Geelvink Bay*, the *Kiwai* at the Fly River mouth, the *D'Entrecasteaux* and *Louisiade Islands*, *New Britain*, *Tabar Island*, *Buin*, southern *Bougainville*, *Owa Raha*, etc.<sup>1</sup>. Only a few additions seem appropriate. Double-headed and multicoloured serpents occur in the male cult of the Mountain *Arapesh*<sup>2</sup>. The *Kiwai* have notions of a snake-like monster with a mouth and ten pairs of arms at both ends<sup>3</sup>. The *Trobriand Islanders* speak of flying canoes reminiscent of somewhat similar ideas on the American northwest coast<sup>4</sup>. The double-headed serpent occurs in the mythology of the *Baining*, who arrange snake dances connected with fertility and the death cult<sup>5</sup>. It is found among the *Rambutjo* of the Central Solomons, too<sup>6</sup>. On the *Admiralty Islands* the double-headed serpent is a forest spirit, but speaking of the *Sentani Lake Papuans* Wirz asserts that it has no connection with esoteric cults in northern New Guinea<sup>7</sup>. On *San Cristobal* a winged snake is considered centre of the cosmos<sup>8</sup>. At *Blanche Bay*, New Britain, the population has an idea of giant snakes with human heads, but not two-headed<sup>9</sup>. On the *Admiralty Islands* the double-headed serpent is thought to be a forest spirit<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Ritter 1945; 8 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Mead 1938-47; I 72.

<sup>3</sup> Ritter 1945; 14 f. Landtman 1917; 190, 215 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Locher 1932; 107. Citing Fox.

<sup>5</sup> Burger 1913; 63 f. Laufer 1946-49; passim.

<sup>6</sup> Thurnwald 1912; I 374.

<sup>7</sup> Wirz; 344, 1923; 344.

<sup>8</sup> Locher 1932; 107. Citing Fox.

<sup>9</sup> Meier 1908; 1005 ff.

<sup>10</sup> Nevermann 1934; 370.

In great parts of Australia the rainbow is considered a snake<sup>1</sup>. Ritter is probably right in finding connections between the Melanesian ideas and corresponding notions in Indonesia<sup>2</sup>.

## 2. Asia

Snakes are common in Indonesian mythology and are often considered gods' incarnations and soul animals and/or associated with ideas of earth, water, death and fertility<sup>3</sup>. On *Alor* and some other Small Sunda Islands there is a regular snake cult<sup>4</sup>. The rainbow snake is known on Bali and Java on *Bali* with two or three heads (the principal at colours of the rainbow?)<sup>5</sup>, but on Java the multi-headed *nâgâ* does not appear till the 14th century, when East Indian influence was strong<sup>6</sup>. Among the *Toradja* the sight of a double-headed snake is feared as an omen of death<sup>7</sup>. Here the idea of a double-headed snake probably refers to a real animal, i. e. *Cylindrophis rufus*<sup>8</sup>. From the *Ngadju Dayak* Schärer pictures a coffin with carvings of a hornbill and a snake, symbolizing cosmic duality<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, representations of two intertwined snakes occur on *Sumatra*<sup>10</sup>.

On the Asiatic continent notions of the intertwined snakes and the *nâgâ* serpent are found both in *Cambodia* and elsewhere in *Indochina*, too.<sup>11</sup>

In ancient *China* the benevolent rain dragon, *lung*, understood as a serpent with two heads, was known in the so-called Yüeh culture<sup>12</sup>. Excavations at Shih-chai-shan not far from K'un-ming in Yünnan show influences, probably including the rain dragon, i. a. from the Yüeh culture, from the Bronze Age Đông-so'n culture in Tonkin and from the Ch'u Kingdom at the Yang-tzũ, as

<sup>1</sup> Radcliffe-Brown 1926; 19 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Ritter 1945; 16.

<sup>3</sup> Pleyte 1892.

<sup>4</sup> Vatter 1935; 20 ff.

<sup>5</sup> Löwenstein 1961; 30, 32.

<sup>6</sup> Lommel 1939; 159.

<sup>7</sup> Kruyt 1933; 83. Adriani & Kruyt 1950-51; II 433.

<sup>8</sup> Kaudern 1944; 391.

<sup>9</sup> Schärer 1946; pl. xvii. Cf. Stöhr 1959; 36.

<sup>10</sup> Vatter 1935; 125 ff.

<sup>11</sup> Vatter 1945; 135. Lommel 1939; 135.

<sup>12</sup> Eberhard 1942; 410.

well as the early Han period<sup>1</sup>. The two-headed rainbow snake is seen on a relief dating from A.D. 150<sup>2</sup>, while similar creatures are mentioned in the "Yih-ching", a work a few centuries older<sup>3</sup>. In the mythology of *Japan*, dragons were known before Chinese and Buddhist influences<sup>4</sup>, whereas in *Mongolia* the double-headed serpent, a snake with a head at each end, appears among the so-called Ordos bronzes<sup>5</sup>.

This agrees with Lommel's statement that it is also known by nomads farther west<sup>6</sup>.

According to personal information from Professor P. J. Riis, double-headed snakes are known from the Minoan and Iranian Bronze Ages, as well as from later periods in Iran and Syria. In historical Greece and in Hellenistic-Roman contexts they are a common arm-ring design. The animal prototypes, if needed, were probably the Amphisbaenians, *Typhlops flavescens* or *vermicalis* in Southern Europe or a species of *Blanus* in southwestern Asia. Somewhat similar representations as those mentioned occur in the late Danish Bronze Age and even in the Iron Age, the designs no doubt transmitted from the South. In Greek literature two-headed snakes are mentioned by Aischylos and Aristophanes.

### 3. Conclusions

It appears from the preceding account that on the American Northwest Coast the double-headed serpent is associated with the secret societies among the Kwakiutl, Nootka, Bellacoola and Comox, but not among the Tsimshian and Quinaiekt. This is the case, too, among the Sentani Papuans of New Guinea, but such a negative trait proves nothing of course, nor does the connection of double-headed serpents with the Mountain Arapesh men's cult, which cannot be understood as part of secret society rites, however esoteric the cult may be.

It is highly questionable whether the Kwakiutl view of the double-headed serpent as a spirit canoe and that of the Tro-

<sup>1</sup> Haskins 1963; 32f.

<sup>2</sup> Hentze 1966; 258.

<sup>3</sup> Vatter 1935; 121. De Visser 1913; 35.

<sup>4</sup> De Visser 1913; 135 ff.

<sup>5</sup> Lommel 1939; 84 ff.

<sup>6</sup> Lommel 1939; 84.

briand Islanders as a flying canoe can be considered to be related. At least neither the Admiralty Islanders' idea of the double-headed serpent as a forest spirit nor the many-armed monster of the Kiwai have parallels in northwestern North America.

Both the Shuswap in British Columbia and the Toradja of Celebes consider the sight of a double-headed serpent to be an omen of death. It is not difficult to understand, perhaps, that such an extraordinary sight as a snake apparently having two heads and in addition living in the ground may be taken as a bad omen, but such a single trait is at any rate too slight a foundation for establishing a hypothesis of cultural relations.

As formerly mentioned, Vatter is probably correct in assuming connections between Melanesian and Indonesian ideas concerning snakes. If the rainbow snake is considered two- or three-headed on Bali, that may, as I have previously suggested, be a consequence of the various rainbow colours. The two-headed Chinese dragon, harbinger of rain and fertility, is probably a version of the common rainbow snake.

Hentze finds the conception of the rainbow snake widespread in America. That idea is probably erroneous. The only trait in North American mythology faintly reminiscent of a rainbow snake is the Nootkan association of lightning, which is, of course, usually accompanied by rain, with the feathered serpent. The feathered serpent is, however, the same as the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl, who was identified with the evening star, but not with rain, that belonged to the department of the god Tlaloc<sup>1</sup>.

In fact the rainbow snake seems to be almost unknown in America; it is obviously found only among a few primitive tribes in South America. The Ashluslay in the Gran Chaco and the Guayaquí in eastern Paraguay regard the rainbow as a huge and dangerous serpent, while the Mura near Rio Madeira believe it is a serpent through the mouth of which souls enter heaven<sup>2</sup>.

From what has been said of double-headed serpents near the eastern Mediterranean it appears that the notion of such creatures there reaches back to the Bronze Age. This agrees with the Chou Chinese culture, the age of the Ordos bronzes, as well as that of

<sup>1</sup> Vaillant 1948; 172.

<sup>2</sup> Métraux, Baldus, Nimuendaju in Steward (ed.) 1946-59; I 366, 443. III 265.

the Đông-so'n culture. Possible prototypes of the double-headed serpents in Europe and western Asia are certain amphisbaenians. As previously mentioned, this also applies to the Toradja of Celebes, as well as to the Huichol in Mexico, where amphisbaenians occur in the region of southern Baja, California, in Guerrero and Michoacán<sup>1</sup>, whereas they seem to be quite absent farther north, in Oregon, Washington and in British Columbia.

Bronze was, of course, totally unknown in aboriginal North America. On the other hand, some characteristic elements of north Pacific Indian art show remarkable parallels to Chou Bronze Age art, such as split and nearly disintegrated animals, and the stressing of the eyes, etc.<sup>2</sup>.

Such parallels may possibly suggest historical connections between notions of double-headed serpents in Asia and those of the Kwakiutl and a few other coastal tribes, but certainly not those of the tribes inland.

On the whole we are therefore obliged to admit that the history of double-headed serpents in northwestern America still remains an unsolved problem.

<sup>1</sup> Gans 1967; 77, 89.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Boas 1897b.

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