

# Symbols across Cultures: Serpent in East and West

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**Abstract:**

*The serpent is a religious symbol with numerous and varied meanings. This article is broadly approaching the symbolism of the serpent in two distant geographical and religious areas (East and West), referring especially at different meanings of the serpent in few selected sources. According to the Bible and Judeo-Christian tradition, the serpent is the symbol of the principle of evil. In Hinduism and Buddhism are present both negative and positive meanings of the serpent. In the context of globalization, the circulation of this symbol from East to West can generate misunderstandings.*

**Keywords:** *serpent, Bible, Hinduism, Buddhism, nāga, globalization*

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Since prehistoric times, the serpent is a religious symbol with numerous and varied meanings: because it periodically sheds its skin it was associated with death and rebirth and with sun worship; the fact that it is earthbound made it a chthonic deity, enemy of the sun-god; its poisonous bite associated it with death, but also with the gods of healing; its resemblance to a phallus made it object of fertility rites; it took part in cosmogony, as a good force or as a personification of Satan; it is a symbol of good fortune or of death; it knows the world mysteries and it is a symbol of sapience and prudence (Hall 1996: 43; Lurker 2005: 8457; Cirlot 1971: 285).

As Manfred Lurker notes (2005: 8456), snakes'

enigmatic and ambivalent nature has led human beings to contradictory assessments of them: on the one hand, they are thought of as evil and as a cause of death; on the other, they are believed to embody beneficial and even divine powers. As a result, in some religions they may be both accursed and worshiped.

The Aborigines of Australia, the Sumerians and Akkadians, the Egyptians, the devotees of Asklepios, Etruscans and Romans, the Celts,

the Hindus and many others worshipped or still worship the serpent as a beneficent or as a godly symbol. On the contrary, in today's Judaism, Christianity and Islam "the symbol of the serpent devolved until it became a synonym for Satan" (Charlesworth 2010).

Hereinafter is broadly approached the symbolism of the serpent in two distant geographical (East and West) and religious (Judaism and Christianity vs. Hinduism and Buddhism) areas, referring especially at the presence and different meanings of the serpent in few selected sources.

### **1. The bad and the good serpent: the Judeo-Christian symbolism of the serpent**

The Hebrew generic term for snake is *naḥash*. According to *Encyclopaedia Judaica*,

both in the Bible and generally in rabbinical literature it is mentioned with ignominy as harmful. It already appears at the dawn of history in the Bible as the enemy of man, enticing Eve (Feliks 2007: 695-696)

and it will appear at the end of history as "the great dragon [...] called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world" and who will be finally cast out (Rev 12: 9). Between Genesis and Revelation, both in the Old and in the New Testament, serpent is generally portrayed – with some exceptions – in the same key: evil, poisonous, horrid etc.

The most notorious biblical text referring to the serpent is chapter 3 of Genesis. On *prima facie* in Genesis it is the origin of evil. It is not one of God's creations because it is not mentioned in Genesis 1-2 and because it is too evil. Satan is the serpent who tempts Eve by tricking her and it is responsible for sin and all the subsequent evils in the world (see Ps 58: 4–5; Pr 23: 31-32; Am 5: 19; 9: 3). It lies, opposing to God Who speaks the truth. The serpent begins the process that results in the humans' loss of innocence, happiness, and life. Starting from the text of Genesis 3, the diatribe might continue (see further Charlesworth 2010; Lurker 2005: 8458).

It is not our purpose here to analyse how the biblical serpent reached to be the "no. 1 public enemy", but we are only mentioning that this interpretation of Genesis 3 might contain some misconceptions. *Naḥash* is a "beast of the field"; it transformed into serpent after God

cursed it. The woman has not yet been named “Eve” and *naḥash* does not tempt, but asks woman a question (Charlesworth 2010).

This negative perception extended over the entire Holy Bible. Albeit there are few positive references to the serpent, the serpent as a symbol or guise of evil reaches to dominate and also in both the Old and in the New Testaments various types of serpents serve as labels for those who do evil (Ps 139: 4; Is 27: 1; 34: 14–15; 59: 5; Mt 3: 7; 23: 33; Mk 16: 18; Lk 3: 7; 10: 19; Acts 28: 3; Rom 3: 13; 1Cor 10: 9; 2Cor 11: 3; Jam 3: 7-8, etc.) (Charlesworth 2010).

As mentioned before, there are some positive mentions of the serpent in the Bible. The first one is from Numbers 21: 6-9:

So the Lord sent venomous serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the children of Israel died. Then the people came to Moses, and were saying: «We sinned, for we spoke against the Lord and against you; therefore, pray to the Lord, and let Him take away the serpent from us». So Moses prayed for the people. Then the Lord said to Moses, «Make a serpent for yourself and put it on a signal pole; and it shall be, if a serpent should bite someone, when the one bitten looks at it, he shall live». So Moses made a copper serpent [...].

The name of this beneficent copper serpent was Nehushtan (*naḥash* = serpentine shape; *nehoshet* = copper) and it seems that the people of Israel conserved it in the Temple court of Jerusalem until the reign of Hezekiah, who “broke in pieces the bronze serpent Moses had made, because up to those days, the sons of Israel had burned incense to it. They called it Nehushtan.” (4Kg 18: 4). Probably it was considered to have the power of curing sickness and associated with fertility. Anyway, its presence was illegitimate according to Deuteronomy (Sperling 2007: 64).

At John 3: 14-15 we read: “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.” This is a clear reference to the Numbers 21: 6-9 and the use of the image of the serpent in this context means that in the time of Jesus the serpent symbolism in the Judaic world was not entirely negative. As James H. Charlesworth mentions, “The possibility that the Fourth Evangelist is drawing some analogy between the serpent and Jesus is unthinkable if the serpent symbolizes evil” (Charlesworth 2010).

Another example of the positive use of the serpent is at Matthew: “Behold, I send you as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as

serpents and harmless as doves” (10: 16). Here it is brought forth the serpent as a symbol of wisdom. Jesus is not pointing to a deceptive serpent, “but to the shrewdly alert serpent” (Charlesworth 2010). In the note at this text, the Orthodox Study Bible mentions: “Jesus instructs the disciples to be wise as serpents so that they might not be unnecessarily wounded and that they might take all advantage in the spread of the gospel.” (*Orthodox Study Bible* 2008: 1285). Although Jesus’ words can be interpreted in different ways, association with the “evil” serpent is quite problematic in this context (as it is in the text of John). Somehow, the answer can be found in the practice of the Church. Representations of the serpents on the croziers of Orthodox Christian Bishops symbolize the prudence in guiding the faithful (Lurker 2005: 8457), thus keeping “alive” a secondary but important symbolism of the serpent as wisdom.

James H. Charlesworth considers that “The disparaging symbolic meaning of the serpent that begins to appear in the fifth century in some Christian regions is read back into the Genesis story, recasting and misrepresenting one of the main characters. This penchant not only fails to let the images be seen, it is also tantamount to refashioning them.” (Charlesworth 2010). This assertion is quite debatable. For example, the association of serpent with Satan, deception and the fall of man is not a 5<sup>th</sup> century Christian construct, but it was explicitly mentioned by Apostle Paul: “But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ” (1Cor 11: 3), as part of the Christian adoption of the Old Testament (see Evans 2003: 59). The fade into the background of the serpent as symbol of wisdom – also recognised as such even by Jesus –, might be a legitimate Christian reaction to the gnostic interpretations of the role of the serpent in the fall of man.

Anyway, the serpent is represented in the scene of the fall in Roman catacomb painting, in 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D., much earlier than the 5<sup>th</sup> century. The scene of the Fall of Man is the most popular in which the serpent is present, in both Eastern and Western iconography. Other representations of the serpent are at the foot of the cross in the icon of Crucifixion, under the foot of Virgin Mary (see Gn 3: 15), in the chalice of St John the Evangelist, in the hands of St Spyridon, in a loaf of bread of St Benedict,

these last three in icons of the miracles performed by these saints (Hall 1996: 46; Hall 1974: 285).

## 2. The Hindu and Buddhist *nāgas*

In contrast to Judeo-Christian symbolism of the serpent, in the two great religions of the East, Hinduism and Buddhism, serpent's ambivalent character is more apparent.

It seems that in India the pre-Arian population from the Indus Valley worshipped the snake (Sk. *nāga* and *yakṣa*). Initially it was unknown to the Arians, but it became part of the Vedic mythology as *devas* (low-level gods). The first mention of the serpent in Arian sacred literature is Vṛitra, the snake (dragon) who kept the waters of the world captive and who ultimately was killed by Indra who:

[...] slew the dragon lying on the mountain [...]

When, Indra, thou hadst slain the dragons' firstborn,

and overcome the charms of the enchanters [...]

Indra with his own great and deadly thunder smote into pieces Vṛitra worst of Vṛitras.

[...] He [Vṛitra], like a mad weak warrior, challenged Indra, the great impetuous many-slaying hero [...]. (*Hymns of the Rigveda* I, 32: 1-15).

According to James Hall, the myth of Indra slaying the serpent-demon “probably refers to the worship of an older, native deity overtaken by the Vedic god” (Hall 1996: 45) [1].

*Mahābhārata*, the gigantic poem that incorporates elements of varying date, mentions snake sagas from different periods. In its earlier parts, *nāgas* appear “in their original serpent character”. *Ādi-parvan*, the opening book of *Mahābhārata*, relates the myth of the origin of *nāgas*, in the context of King Janamejaya's serpent sacrifice (*Mahābhārata* 1.37). They are the sons of Kadrū, a personification of Earth, and the sage Kāśyapa (*Mahābhārata* 1.16, 54, 65). According to this mythology, the *nāgas* are mainly mordacious and venomous and may assume various forms (Vogel 1926: 48-53).

In addition, there are some exceptions. One of them relates to their venomous bite, which is lethal but sometimes it is an antidote. For example, King Nala, being possessed by the evil spirit Kali, is freed by the bite of *nāga* Karkoṭara (*Mahābhārata* 3.66).

The second one is *nāga Śeṣha*. Śeṣha detached himself from his brethren and refuged in penance. Asked by Brahmā why he is seeking refuge in the ascetic life, Śeṣha answered that he is disgusted by his brothers and “I am engaged in ascetic penances, and I will cast off this body of mine, so that I may avoid companionship with them, even in another state of life”. As appreciation for his effort, Brahmā allowed him to choose a boon and Śeṣha choose:

[...] “O divine Grandsire, this is the boon desired by me, that my heart may always delight in virtue and in blessed ascetic penances, O Lord of all!”

Brahman said, “O Śeṣha, I am exceedingly gratified with this thy self-denial and love of peace! But, at my command, let this act be done by thee for the good of my creatures! Bear thou O Śeṣha, properly and well this Earth so unsteady with her mountains and forests, her seas and towns and retreats, so that she may be steady!”

Śeṣha said, “O divine Lord of all creatures, O grantor of boons, O lord of the Earth, lord of every created thing, lord of the universe, I will, even as thou sayest, hold the Earth steady. Therefore, O lord of all creatures, place her on my head!”

Brahman said, “O best of snakes, go underneath the Earth. She will herself give thee a crevice to pass through. And, O Śeṣha, by holding the Earth, thou shalt certainly do what is prized by me very greatly.” (*Mahābhārata* 1.36)

In the mythology of Vishṇu, Śeṣha (or Ananta) is the thousand-headed cobra on which Vishṇu rests between each cosmic age (Hall 1996: 45). This very popular theme of Hindu plastic art represents Vishṇu

reclining on the couch formed by the windings of the *nāga* whose polycephalous hood forms a canopy over the god’s head. Usually the goddess Śrī is seen kneeling at the feet of her lord. The presence of Brahmā on the lotus and of the two demons seems to indicate that the subject which the Indian artists intended to portray in these sculptures is not so much Vishnu’s sleep as Vishnu’s awaking signalized by the birth of the creative force embodied in Brahmā, in other words, the Creation of the Universe. (Vogel 1926: 193)

According to J. Vogel (1926: 192), the idea of the world serpent belongs “to a primitive sphere of thought”, similar to Midgardsormr of Norse mythology.

The third one is Vāsuki, who figures second in *Mahābhārata* and in the *Puraṇas*, although he acts as the sovereign ruler of the serpent tribe in the *Ādi-parvan*. While Śeṣha is connected with Vishṇu’s mythology, Vāsuki is associated with Śiva, the serpent-king who is slung round

Śiva's neck (Vogel 1926: 199, 202). Consequently, it is associated with lingam and appears in Naṭarāja image. But this association extends to other deities, too, like Brahmā, Sūrya, Sakti Devi, Kālī (Crooke 1920: 415).

*Mahābhārata* and the Puranic literature mention extensive lists of *nāgas*. In *Ādi-parvan* are enumerated by name seventy-eight *nāgas* (1. 35), underlining that these are only the principal ones and that it is impossible to name them all. The same Great Epic mentions sixty-eight names (*Mahābhārata*, 5. 103). Twenty-nine names are enlisted in *Sabhā-parvan*. Other lists appear in the Purānas. Many of their names indicate colours, qualities, animals, plants and vegetables. In these lists, Śesha (Ananta) figures first, as the sovereign of *nāgas*. In *Bhagavadgītā* (10, 28-29) he is mentioned side by side with Vāsuki, as the first among the snakes. Śesha is associated with the third reincarnation of Vishnu. In the iconography, Śesha supports one of the feet of the boar (Vogel 1926: 190-195).

It seems that the cult of the serpent survived at a local level, related with springs, ponds and generally water. The *nāgas* reside in *caitya* (a tree, a stone altar, a pool or stream etc.), from where they dispense nature's gifts (Bloss 1973: 37). According to Hindu legends, *nāgas* and *nāginis* rule the earth's waters and residing in sacred pools, being represented in relief sculptures since the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D., as half human, half snake, with a cobra hood or canopy. The sculptures placed in the water-tanks or sacred pools in North India illustrate the *nāgas* with the right hand raised as if ready to strike and the left one holding a cup, the symbol of growth and fertility. The female *yakṣis* are portrayed as voluptuous maidens, the large breasts and hips being an important fertility motif in India (Hall 1996: 45; Bloss 1973: 37-40; Bloss 2005: 6394).

The *nāgas* are "territorial deities". Each of them guards a larger or smaller area, controlling prosperity and destruction. This attribute links them with the king, the orderer of the existence in his kingdom. If the king righteously orders his own life and the ones of his subjects then gods will respond by offering to his territory the correct amount of rain, wealth and safety. For this reason, in ancient India *caitya* was a place of royal ordination, suggesting that "the king's authority was guaranteed or enhanced" by these deities (Bloss 1973: 38-39; Bloss 2005: 6394).

Buddhism absorbed these deities into its own pantheon. As Lowell Bloss suggests,

The portrayal of *nāgas* and *yakṣas* in the Theravada canon and in the Buddhist myths and rituals of Southeast Asia suggests the incorporation of the symbolism of kingship into the figure of the Buddha and the taming of the powers of nature through the Buddha's *dharma* (Bloss 2005: 6394).

However, the Buddhist *nāgas* are a little bit different from the Hindu ones. In the same key of emphasizing the fact that the ancient gods were inferior to Buddha, “the dreaded serpent-demons are generally represented as devout worshipers of the Buddha”, as J. Vogel mentions. Initially fierce and rebellious, under the influence of the great Sage of the Śākya they abandon their savage habits and forsake the doing of harm, because “Neither gods nor men nor animals can resist the holy influence of the Blessed One: thus the *nāgas* too, who in reality combine the nature of these three classes of beings, are won by his word” (Vogel 1926: 93).

*Tripitaka* mentions three snake-stories. The first one refers to two spitting flames snakes which fight Buddha. Here snakes have no human quality, neither a name nor the power of speech (Vogel 1926: 93; Irons 2008: 279).

The second one refers to the most representative Buddhist *nāga*, Muchilinda. This *nāga* king sheltered Buddha for seven days by enveloping Buddha's body seven times with his coils and spreading his hood over Master's head, for

[...] no cold touch the Blessed One, may no heat touch the Blessed One, may no gnats, flies or creeping things, no wind or heat come near the Blessed One (Vogel 1926: 93; Bloss 2005: 6394).

As Lowell Bloss notes,

From the folk point of view, the popular Muchilinda legend reinforces the message of the myths of conversion, asserting the Buddha's superiority over the *nāga* who guards and worships him. As such, the Buddha is seen as a divine orderer or king of a certain region. Especially in the many areas where the *nāga* and the king are linked, the Buddha sitting upon the coils of the *nāga* might easily have been recognized as receiving royal authorization from the folk deity. This was not the temporary authorization received by the human king, but an authorization to control the powers of the inferior *nāga* and, thereby, to guide all the forces and peoples of an entire region (Bloss 1973: 50)



This representation was introduced in Buddhist iconography, with Buddha enthroned on a convoluted snake under a canopy of seven or nine cobras' heads. Although it derives from the Vishṇu iconography, a later legend explained it through a visit that Buddha made to the palace of the snake-king (Hall 1996: 45).

The third story contained in *Vinaya-piṭaka* narrates about the *nāga* who assumed human shape and ordained as a monk. However, Buddha himself expelled him from the monastery when he ferrets out. The idea is that the snake-birth is a consequence of bad karma (Vogel 1926: 94).

As J. Vogel notices,

In none of them the *nāga* is a being dwelling in the waters of the earth or endowed with special power over the waters of the sky. It is certainly curious that the great *Nāga Muchilinda*, instead of withholding the showers of rain which threatened the Buddha with discomfort, has to sit up for a whole week and to use his body as an umbrella. (Vogel 1926: 94)

This observation is very interesting considering that the legends preserved in the writings of the Chinese pilgrims in India mention *nāgas* as water-sprites who dwell in rivers, lakes etc. and control the atmospheric changes. Their power did not manifest through their poisonous bite, but through their power to raise hail-storms, cause floods etc. (Vogel 1926: 94).

### **3. The perils of out-of-context serpent symbolism**

As a first conclusion, it seems that there are important differences between West and East concerning the symbolism of the serpent. In Hinduism and Buddhism the ambivalent symbolism of the serpent is more pregnant than in Judaism and Christianity, where the snake is almost exclusively the symbol of evil.

Secondly, Hindu and Buddhist representations of the serpent relates it with its positive mythology (*Śeṣha*, *Muchilinda*), while in the Christian iconography the snake is represented almost exclusively as a symbol of Satan (in the Fall of Man or at the foot of the cross or of Virgin Mary) or of poison (Catholic representations of St John and St Benedict).

Related to these, a third conclusion can be drawn. In the contemporary globalizing context, together with people, goods and information circulate religious representations, too. It is no more a

curiosity to find even in the Romanian handicraft or New Age shops statuettes of Vishnu resting on Ananta, Nāga Buddha or Śiva Nataraja. All these representations brought out of their religious and cultural context have the capacity to form an erroneous perspective over eastern religions. To be more specific, for the western ignorant fundamentalist milieu, all representations are “read” through the cultural and religious lens. In this context, representations of the serpent are representations of Satan in different postures. Consequently, Vishnu rests on a serpent, than he is Satan’s work. Muchilinda is protecting Buddha because Shakyamuni is doing devil’s work. Etc. The consequences are not hard to guess. To mention only two of them, on the one hand, the Hindus, Buddhists etc. are servants of Satan and on the other this confirms and nourishes the already intolerant attitude towards the non-Christian religions.

**Notes:**

[1] The term *nāga* also names a serpent-worshipping race in ancient India. Referring to C.F. Oldham’s *The Sun and the Serpent* (London, 1905), W. Crooke, in his article “Serpent-worship (Indian)” in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, mentions that “the Asuras and the Sarpas, ‘serpents’, of the Rigveda, the Asuras and Nāgas of the Mahābhārata and Manu, and the Asuras, or demons, of Brāhmanical tradition all represent hostile tribes, who opposed the Aryan invaders, and that the Asuras were Dravidians” (Crooke 1920: 414).

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