

## DRAGONS: MYTH AND THE COSMIC POWERS

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### Abstract

This essay investigates the significance of dragon mythology in early civilizations. Three mythical dragons are be considered, *Zhulong*, *Apep* and *Makara*. These examples show that the symbol of the dragon represents a triune principle of generativity, vitality and knowledge.

### INTRODUCTION

In the beginning there was chaos. Most of the earliest mythologies that can be reconstructed make such a claim. Later came the age of gods which accompanied high civilization. However between the age of chaos and the age of gods, is the age of dragons. The symbolism of the dragon during this period is the subject of this short treatise. Dragons are dual beings on the threshold between the world and the netherworld, between the primordial and the generational. To illustrate this, three mythical dragons will be considered, *Zhulong*, *Apep* and *Makara*, although dragons are found in every culture, including aboriginal Australian folklore and Meso-American mythology. A key to understanding the universal spread of dragons is to see how they embody the triune principle of generativity, vitality and knowledge, which the Vedas synthesize as *kundalini*, a type of awareness that can be aroused by yoga. Scholars from Plato to Jung have believed that dragons function as connectors between necessary knowledge and the awesomely mysterious.

### ZHULONG

Michael Carr has analyzed over a hundred terms for dragons in

Chinese literature. Of these, several clearly have cosmological references. Ten that are associated with water and weather include:

- *Shenlong* the “god dragon” or “spirit dragon”; a thunder god that controls the weather.
- *Dilong*, “earth dragon”; controller of rivers and seas; first mentioned in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE.
- *Yinglong*, “responding dragon”; winged dragon associated with rains and floods. This dragon helped King Yu to control the mythic great deluge; from literature of the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE.
- *Jiaolong*, “crocodile dragon”; leader of all aquatic animals; first mentioned in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE in literature common among the coastal people and the Tan.
- *Paulong*, “coiled dragon”; lake dragon that has not ascended to heaven. It was first written about in terms of a dragon design used at the time, the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE.
- *Feilong*, “flying dragon”; a winged dragon that rides on clouds and mists. The term was used to refer to a man of great character in literature from the 5<sup>th</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BCE.
- *Longwang*, “dragon kings”; divine rulers of the Four Seas.
- *Zhulong*, “torch dragon” who created night and day by opening and closing its eyes and created the seasonal winds by breathing.

*Zhulong* is one of the most prominent of Chinese dragons, and demonstrably one of the most ancient in the world. It is also one of the most useful to illustrate the evolution of religious ideology. In classic Chinese literature *Zhulong* is a personification of a set of natural occurrences, the creation of night and day and the seasonal winds, which were monsoonal.

The deity of Mount Bell is named Torch Shade. When this deity’s eyes look out there is daylight, and when he shuts his eyes there is night. When he blows it is winter, and when he calls out it is summer. He neither drinks, nor

eats, nor breathes. If this god does breathe, there are gales. His body is a thousand leagues long. Torch Shade is east of the country of Nolegcalf. He has a human face and a snake's body, and he is scarlet in colour. The god lives on the lower slopes of Mount Bell. [Shanhaijing]

Most of what can be said with confidence about *Zhulong* can be traced back to this recapitulation of the *Classic of the Mountains and the Seas* from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, “The Classic of Regions Beyond the Seas: the North”, section 8. Carr quotes Kwang-chih Chang that according to the Eastern Zhou “Transformation Thesis” natural elements transform out of body parts of mythical creatures. Scholars of mythology are familiar with the concept that mythological creatures were used to explain the origin of phenomena. This concept has come under scrutiny recently, but it was evident in Shanhaijing.

However, the appellation of “Torch Shade” or “torch dragon” came from a source that did not mention *Zhulong* by name. DongfangShuo, Daoist advisor to the Emperor Wu of Han (156-87 BCE), describes a *qinglong* “azure dragon” with a *zhu* “torch”.

“I made a journey to the north pole and came to a mountain planted with fire, which neither the sun nor the moon ever illuminates, but which is lighted to its uttermost bounds by a blue dragon by means of a torch which it holds in its jaws.” [DongfangShuo]

Obviously, *Zhulong* predates the dragons of the classical era in which it was being written about. First, the “torch dragon” is described as being essentially a serpent in form, rather than being a composite creature. Second, the dragon is associated with aspects of nature that precede human presence. Its “functions” have to do with essentials, things which in Jewish scripture are called separation of light and darkness, and the movement of *ruach* (breath) over the waters. In other words, the very beginning of things, insofar as people of the earliest millennia BCE could conceptualize how things began.

There were “dragons” in the Chinese consciousness of things as far back as the Neolithic era. Dragon images have been found in excavations of Xinglongwa culture from the Inner Mongolia-Liaoning border area dating back to 6200-5400 BCE. At that time the dragon was appar-

ently thought of as a predecessor of the pig. The carvings found show a pig-like image with a snake-like rear end curved around in a circle. Pig bones have been found in Xinglongwa gravesites, indicating that pigs held a special or sacred status. Although, there is no further evidence to indicate how the “pig dragon” (as anthropologists have named this type of figurine) functioned in the narratives of the people or in their veneration, it can be confidently said that there were dragons in archaic China, insofar as dragons were composites of animals including a reptile and were venerated. [See: “Pig Dragons” and “Hongshan Culture”].

## **APEP**

*Apep* is named in classical Egyptian lore from the 8th Dynasty onward (a short dynasty of less than twenty years ending in 2160 BCE). Significantly, he is the deification of darkness and chaos, called *izft*. Therefore, *Apep* or *Apophis* is the opponent of light and *Ma'at*, order/truth [see: “Apep”].

Every day *Apep* tried to swallow the sun. Inasmuch as the sun was the very principle of life, the voracious appetite of the demonic beast was a threat to be taken with utmost seriousness. *Apep* was pictured by the Egyptians of the later dynasties as a snake and sometimes a dragon, but even before he was named there was mention of this nemesis of the sun god going back many centuries. Probably the earliest representation was on a c-ware bowl now in Cairo from the time of Naqada I (ca. 4000 BCE).

After the mythic shift at the beginning of the agricultural era, the god Set began to be considered as the embodiment of evil and took over all the characteristics of *Apep*. *Apep*'s identity was eventually entirely subsumed by that of Set.

Anthropologists have evidence that two important cultic entities existed in Neolithic Egypt: worship of the sun and cults of snakes, particularly cobras. Again, since this was a time before writing, there is no hard evidence about how these cultic practices were carried out, or how they were supported by narratives. It is in looking back on those dim and distant times that mention of *Apep* and his role are recorded.

The oldest stories say that he lurked just below the horizon either trying to devour the sun on his way back into the sky or as the sun was just going down for his nightly journey through *Duat*, the underworld.

However, in the later coffin texts of the VII to X dynasties, Aphophis is encountered in the seventh of the twelve phases of night. During the sixth hour of the night in the passage through the underworld Ra begins to be regenerated. He is encircled by the protective *mehen* serpent. With that protection, with the magical assistance of Isis, and with the help of Set, Ra prevails in his battle with Aphophis and the journey into the new day accelerates.

Before Ra, the sun god was always female. During those earliest eras she was identified as a number of deities: *Wadjet*, *Sekhmet*, *Hathor*, *Nut*, *Bast*, *Bat* and *Menhit*. It was during that earliest era that the realm of the primordial waters and the chaos beyond were presided over by the mighty snake Apep.

## MAKARA

In the Vedas Varuna is the god of sky, water and the celestial ocean. The crocodile Makara is his mount. Makara is a Sanskrit word meaning “sea dragon” or “water monster” [Monier-Williams, p. 771]. In sculpture Makara is depicted as sometimes a crocodile, sometimes a hybrid being with a fish head and elephant’s snout [see: reliefs in Wat Suthat, Bangkok]. But the form and character of Makara are more complicated than that.

In South East Asia, there is often the presence of Makara at the stairways leading up into the Vihara (main assembly halls) of Buddhist temples. On each side of the stairway is likely to be Makara, a long-tailed, scaly being with an open mouth from which a many-headed Naga is emerging. Sometimes the Naga emerges from a reptilian head (Sheshanaag) and sometimes from an elephantine head (Makara), indicating they are the same as far as their role is concerned. The Naga is a reptile variously represented in Buddhist iconography as having one head and sheath like a cobra, or a 9-headed being that is more clearly dragonesque. The Naga is featured in the Buddhist canonical legends of the life of the Lord Buddha as the creature who protected Gautama as he was in his enlightenment trance. When Mara, the source of evil finally mounted a full-fledged assault by inducing the demons to attack, *Mae Toranee* (Mother Earth) wrung out her recently washed hair to create a flood. The inundation delayed the attack so that the divine forces could counter-attack. To protect the Buddha and save the Dharma the Naga

coiled under the entranced Enlightened One to raise him above the water level, and shielded him with his hood from the torrential rains from above. The figure of a Naga is also found in Hindu sculptures shielding Vishnu in exactly the same way [see: statue in Parsurameshwar Temple, Bhubaneshwar, Orissa, India].

The simplest explanation of the relationship of Makara to the Naga of the legend is that Buddhism emerged from Hinduism (although Buddha emerged as a teacher to counter Brahmanic control over access to basic truth, very much as Jesus apparently did in opposition to those who claimed control over access to esoteric knowledge in his time). The Naga was a liminal being, on the threshold between the entirely mythic or spiritual and the physical/natural world. Prior to the Naga, then, was Makara, who was a servant to various beings in the Hindu anthropomorphic pantheon. One thing is indicated: before Makara was a vehicle or “mount” for the sea god, Varuna, Makara was something else, more primordial but definitely related to cosmic water and primordial seas. In that era Makara had a complex identification with both creative forces and destructive ones.

Probably the key to understanding Makara’s role, is to recall Makara’s relationship to another Vedic image, Sheshanaag (King of the Nagas), who was also an avatar of Narayana, the first being or Supreme God [Srimad Bhagavatam 5.25.1]. Unlike the Greeks and Babylonians, the Hindus did not conceive of the precursors as having been conquered or demoted when the next era/generation came along. But the predecessors were more obscure and primordial. The Vedas tell of Sheshanaag (Ananta Shesha or simply as Shesha) as being a couch (rather than a mount or vehicle) for Vishnu afloat on the cosmic ocean. Sheshanaag has either five or thousands of heads, sometimes crowned. When Sheshanaag uncoils time moves forward and creation begins but when she/he coils back the universe ceases to exist.

What we have available is what has been written and represented in art. In this way we know of Makara who was both a mount or vehicle for the gods, but also a precursor, a being from a previous era. Makara / Sheshanaag in its role as the first being and creator of the universe derives from the pre-Vedic era, but as described in the Vedas to be consistent with a more distinct narrative.

## DRAGON/SERPENT MYTHOLOGICAL SYMBOLISM IN HUMAN CULTURES

First, it can be seen that a prior era is reflected in the development of the dragon concept in all three faith traditions mentioned above. Today dragons are largely fictional, subjects in literature, sometimes even domesticated. Prior to this, dragons were subdued, vanquished by heroes on their quests for something which the dragons were guarding or simply defeated as an obstacle on a journey [see “Jason and the Golden Fleece” in this regard]. At that time, when stories were being told about heroes from an earlier era dispatching monsters, the mythic stories and legends were being interpreted philosophically, indeed cosmologically. Plato, for one, had this to say about Ouroboros, in *Timaeus*, 33:

The living being had no need of eyes because there was nothing outside of him to be seen; nor of ears because there was nothing to be heard; and there was no surrounding atmosphere to be breathed; nor would there have been any use of organs by the help of which he might receive his food or get rid of what he had already digested, since there was nothing which went from him or came into him: for there was nothing beside him. Of design he created thus; his own waste providing his own food, and all that he did or suffered taking place in and by himself. For the Creator conceived that a being which was self-sufficient would be far more excellent than one which lacked anything; and, as he had no need to take anything or defend himself against any one, the Creator did not think it necessary to bestow upon him hands: nor had he any need of feet, nor of the whole apparatus of walking; but the movement suited to his spherical form which was designed by him, being of all the seven that which is most appropriate to mind and intelligence; and he was made to move in the same manner and on the same spot, within his own limits revolving in a circle. All the other six motions were taken away from him, and he was made not to partake of their deviations. And as this circular movement required no feet, the universe was created without legs and without feet. [Plato]

Earlier still, dragons were players in mythic dramas during the time that the classic narratives of the gods were forming the narrative context for vast religious constructs. But before there were writings about dragons there were depictions of dragons.

They were called dragons by those writing later. It is unsure what they were called by the people of pre-historic and Neolithic cultures, but then they were represented as distinctly “other”. It is not so much what they were, but what they were not, that was apparently being expressed in the carvings and engravings of these hybrid beings composed of diverse parts. These parts consisted of what had been feared and venerated as having to do with cosmic functions.

Later as fearsome dragons began to be rendered friendly or at least useful, suggests that nature was no longer dreaded to the extent it was for our Neolithic ancestors. But it still remains in the collective unconscious, as Carl Jung described it.

In fact, the primordial snake coiled in recurring circles was an important archetype for Jung (1964). He thought the archetype related to a number of human issues, including birth, death, rebirth, immortality, life, water and cosmic fluid. Like Plato, Jung referred to Ouroboros, the cosmic snake that encircles everything, eats its tail to nourish itself eternally, and thereby is the generative principle, symbolized by the phallic tail inserted into its mouth, thereby initiating eternal regeneration. *Ouroboros* was conceptualized as the prime mandala. Jung explained that the mandala is a “psychological expression of the personality and the self”. Jung’s study of his patients’ abilities to reproduce mandalas they had never seen was a breakthrough to his discovery of the “collective unconscious”.

If there is to be a similar breakthrough for us into a new cosmological consciousness, it may come from such symbolism. Humankind seems to have wandered away from its connection with the cosmos, progressively anthropomorphizing that which is really inexplicably profound. The ouroboros leitmotif is implicit in many cosmologies containing dragon/serpent beings. Interestingly, dragon/serpent beings are invariably associated with cosmic circularity and creative vitality. Circularity implies constant movement; this movement of energy within nature is expressed in Australian Aboriginal dances which mimic the Dreaming ancestors. This is exemplified by the pan symbol of Australian Aboriginal myths – the rainbow serpent. Among North Queensland Aboriginal cultures, the rainbow serpent is referred to as *Yaminda*, and reveals itself in



the rainbow. As the rainbow, *Yaminda's* body connects heaven and earth, and embodies the circular nature of life cycles. Among the Yanyuwa, their dances express the interconnectedness between earth and air, and between motion and power (Bird Rose 2005). To dance, therefore, is to embody the generative and iterative patterns of existence, like the rainbow serpent. This cyclic movement of nature is also implicit in Kung San cosmology, expressed as G/aoan – a being constituting the circular processes and patterns of life (Keeney 2005:78).

### THE TRIUNE PRINCIPLE

As in other dragon/serpent mythopoeia found throughout the world, *Zhulong*, *Apep* and *Makara* embody the triune principle of generativity/vitality/knowledge. For the ancient Greeks this triune principle is characterized by the myth of the Garden of the Hesperides, having been created by the goddess Hera. The garden comprised either a single tree or grove which grew golden apples which gave immortality to the eater. However, coiled around the tree was the hundred headed dragon, *Ladon* (Greek: Λαδωνος). *Ladon* never slept and kept constant vigil. Consistent with the Ladonic myth is the widely known Genesis myth of the Garden of Eden, which contains a sacred tree whose fruit imparts knowledge of good and evil to the eater. What kind of knowledge is referred to here? Knowledge of duality. Eden may represent in Eliade's term a state of *illud tempus*, an eternal realm of unity and non-differentiation (Eliade 1959). The serpent guides the primordial human couple to eat the forbidden fruit, and by doing so, duality (a necessary condition) is created in the world (Leach 1969). With duality reproduction and death also become possible (Leach 1969).

Among Vedic cultures, the generativity/vitality/knowledge principle reached a sophisticated synthesis in the belief of *kundalini* – a primeval energy/ power (*shakti*) contained at the base of the spine, characterized by a coiled serpent. In Hinduism, *kundalini* is usually awakened via intense and protracted meditation practices. Once awakened, *kundalini* rises up the spinal column (*sushumna*), rousing the seven energy centres (*chakram*) (each *chakra* is associated with psycho-physical energies and inclinations). Having reached the *sahasrara* (the crown chakra depicted as a thousand petalled lotus), transcendental knowledge of non-duality is attained (Bandyopadhyay 1987:78-79; Bose and Haldar 1992: Krishna

1992). In Hindu Tantra *sahasrara* is known as the “Ultimate Ground of Being”, constituting a transcendental erotic union between *purusha* (Divine being) and *prakriti* (material universe) (Bandyopadhyay 1987:76). Serpent symbolism and *uniomystica* was also evident in some Dionysian rituals in which a golden snake was used by initiates during their mystical marriage with the divine (Campbell 1991:184). In contrast, Yahweh had commended Moses to make an image of a fiery serpent snake (called the *nehushtan* by generations of Hebrews), in order to heal those individuals who had been bitten by ‘fiery serpents’ in retribution for their sins against Yahweh (Campbell 1976:153).

It may be suggested that dragon/serpent *mythopoeia personify mysterium tremendum*- the power to fascinate and to be in awe (Otto 1958). Here, the awesome majesty of Indo-Chinese the dragon/serpent is linked to cosmic time as in the case of *Makara*. As noted earlier, *Makara* shares a correspondence with the pan-Hindu *Sheshanaag* – the cosmic serpent who also acts as savior to the universe.

Campbell (1991) contends that the dragon represents the antilogies of human experience, between human corporeality and the desire to transcend the body’s confines. Furthermore, in Native American traditions, the serpent represents the bounded human condition whereas the eagle represents spiritual flight; when serpent and eagle merge they become a winged dragon (Campbell 1991). An important aspect of dragon/serpent mythopoeia is their association with the chthonic powers. In many cultures, the chthonic powers are linked to the wilderness, caves and the underworld – places which exist at the edge of human civilization. It is not surprising in many traditional cultures male initiates must leave the security of their village and go into the wilderness, a journey fraught with various dangers. However, it is at the social margins where the vital powers are most prominent. As Jackson (1998:46), states: “Vitality always exists beyond. At the edge”.

The association between the chthonic powers and the winged serpent is exemplified *Quetzalcoatl*, a principal deity of meso-american cultures. Like the rainbow serpent of the Australian Aboriginal people, for the Aztecs, *Quetzalcoatl* was connected to regeneration, fecundity, and the bringer of human civilization. In order to recreate humankind, *Quetzalcoatl* must venture into *Mictlan* (the Aztec underworld) and is assisted by the fertility goddess *Cihuacoatl*. The latter deity mixes bones with the blood of *Quetzalcoatl* to form human beings (Miller and Taube 1993).

An interesting theme connected with the serpent/chthonic interplay is the hallucinogenic brew called *ayahuasca* among Amerindian cultures and Brazilian neo-religious cults. *Ayahuasca* is made from two plants: *Banisteriopsiscaapi* and *Psychotriavidis* (Shannon 2003:3). *Ayahuasca* has been used for centuries by Amerindian shamans as a way of entering the supernatural realms. Once ingested the brew has a profound psychoactive effect. It is common for participants to have visions of various animals, especially snakes and jaguars (Shanon 2002). Harner (1973) reports *ayahuasca* vision taken by Chaves (1958:134), who studied the Siona of Colombia:

When the drinker of yage' is a novice, he sees serpents, tigers, and other nonsense. These snakes represent the vines of the yage; at times many snakes are seen in one bunch and one cannot escape from them. For this reason, he who conquers yage also conquers nature and all the dangers which attack men.

Snakes also appear in *ayahuasca* accounts among the Desana of Eastern Columbia (Koch-Grunberg 1909; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971) and the Iquito of North-Eastern Peru (Tessman 1930). According to Harner (1973):

Conibo-Shipibo Indians of the Ucayali River region in eastern Fern commonly see giant anacondas, poisonous snakes, and jaguars, and, less frequently, other animals. The novice shaman, taking the drink, believes he acquires giant snakes which are to be his personal demons to be used in defending himself against other shamans in supernatural battles.

Statements from Quijos shamans undergoing *ayahuasca* induced visions view themselves as having the power to journey to and from the underworld and to be able to bewitch others Oberem (1958:80). Among these Quijos shamans snakes and jaguars are also most commonly reported in their visions (Harner 1973).

The correspondence between the vital quality of the underworld and the mythic dragon/serpent hero is emulated in the Vedic myth where the creator god *Brahma* asks *Sheshanaag* to journey to *Patala* (the seven

divisions of the netherworld) (Werner 1997:37) in order to stabilize the earth. *Sheshanaag* uses his hood to support the earth. In this way, the netherworld becomes the home of *Sheshanaag*. Unsurprisingly, some of the mythological inhabitants of *Patala* are *nagas*.

Similarly, *Apep* lived in the underworld and was the causer of earthquakes, storms and evil. *Apep*, like *Sheshanaag* also presided over the primordial waters and chaos, was associated with the primordial. *Apep* was believed to devour human souls within the underworld (Pinch 1994:35). His significance lay in his interminable battle with *Ra* representing order. According to Pinch (1994:35), *Apep* was viewed by Egyptians as a giant crocodile who lurked under the waters of the Nile, ready to devour unsuspecting river-goers. Here, the connection between *Apep* and Nile crocodiles which are often massive, is a relevant image of the indeterminacy of life. Consequently, both Egyptian priests and lay people created many spells, charms, amulets and other prophylactics in order to protect themselves against *Apep* (Pinch 1994:87). Alternately, *Apep* was also associated with the maternal umbilical cord (an allusion to a snake) which necessitated its cutting with a special knife after childbirth (Pinch 1994:153). *Apep*'s association with childbirth may be suggestive of high mortality rates of neonates, an endemic feature of classical civilizations. The rubric of this practice may derive from the story of the god Horus who defeated snakes sent against him during his youth (Pinch 1994:27). The possible Greek variation of this myth is when the demi-god Heracles choked the two serpents sent by the Goddess Hera to kill him and his twin brother Iphicles when only neonates. In any case, Egyptian snakes were sometimes regarded as embodiments of the restive dead and of the forces of chaos (Pinch 1994:137).

In contrast to *Apep*, but similar to *Sheshanaag* and *Makara*, the Chinese dragon is considered as the embodiment of *yang* – power and fullness, associated with rain and thunder and celestial clouds. The Chinese dragon's association with water is not coincidental since many parts of ancient China had considerable river systems and lakes, ideal for agriculture and fishing. The Chinese dragon was symbolized by water, in contrast to the tiger which is associated with mountains. (deVisser 1913:41). Entering China, Indian Buddhism created a distinction between good and evil dragons, the latter dwelling in mountains while the good dragons were linked to water. This distinction was influenced by the Indian *naga* myths, where Nanda, the naga king was called *Nant'o* by the Chinese, and was chief of the eight dragon kings (Roberts 2010:34)

Comparable with other dragon/serpent mythologies, Chinese myths tell of dragons having been born in caves, such as the yellow and blue dragons (both derivatives of gold). The correspondence between the dragon and gold probably became the basis of Chinese alchemy (Roberts 2010:38).

## CONCLUSION

The mythic themes underlying dragon/serpent symbolism found in many cultures provide a vehicle for understanding mythopoeic imagination. From an anthropological point of view dragon/serpent myths point to the core themes of life, death, regeneration, power, and the need for existential retrieval. Moreover, the universality of the dragon/serpent symbolism points to both Jung's and Campbell's notion of archetypes which are ubiquitous to the human unconscious (Jung 1964; Campbell 2002). For Levi-Strauss (1962), mythology reveals the dichotomous nature of the human mind. Hence, in dragon/serpent symbolism we often find various oppositional categories; life/death; human-world/underworld; power/crisis; death/regeneration. Beyond the structural attributions of dragon/serpent symbolism, is revealed the kaleidoscopic nature of human mythopoeisis. While the dragon/serpent is often associated with power/energy, as typified in nature, its ultimate source of energy/power points to a mystery (Campbell 1991), hence, the oft repeated dragon/serpent association with chthonic world (an allusion to the eternal void), the origin of existence and source of the inner realms of power.

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