

A MYTHOLOGICAL METAMORPHOSIS: SNAKE OR EEL?*

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One of the interesting mythological motives shared by West and East Polynesia is the reptilian hero whose role and behaviour in mythical stories is conditioned by its physics and the reactions triggered in the human mind. Some of these features are replicated by the mythical eel even in West Polynesia where both species are known to live.

Put very briefly, the semantics of snake/eel is debated in two overlapping triangles; (A) the first one consisting of *snake/eel* – *Hina* – *Maui*, and (B) the second one including *snake/eel* – *Hina* – and *coconut palm*.

In their book, V. Vondráček and F. Holub characterize the snake as one of the stimuli capable of triggering in our minds a specific fear that may border on or degenerate into phobia. Many snakes threaten human life by biting or crushing. Quite a few snakes are, however, harmless and yet most people do not enjoy their presence or appearance. Occasionally they run from such snakes or even from slow-worms and rain-worms. Snakes seem to astound people with their technique of movement and are perceived as peculiar or extraordinary (Vondráček – Holub 1968: 301-302).

The snake is present in most mythological systems of the world, very often as a symbol of the earth, femininity and fertility or of masculinity, rain and water. Especially in Hindu mythology they are linked with wells, lakes and rivers. Maybe this symbolic polysemy includes to some extent the hybridization of the chthonic and uranic principles. In Indo-European mythology as well as in the Judeo-Christian tradition the chief motif associated with the snake is its antagonism with the supreme deity and in Bible it represents the devil. In archaic Indo-European myths, the snake is slain (Gamkrelidze – Ivanov 2, 1984: 527ff.) by the supreme god. The victor over the snake acquires the support of a female deity.

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Pierre Maranda tries to compare the semantic spectrum of the snake in European region with that in Melanesia and concludes that in Europe the snake belongs to the paradigmatic set of 'repulsive' or 'evil' (and let us add 'sinful' as well) phenomena while in Melanesia it figures as an element of the paradigmatic set of 'primeval fecundity' (Maranda 1972: 14). It seems, however, that in Polynesia we find both.

The snake may hide behind the image of the mythological dragon known throughout the world, which is obviously the result of hybridization of the saurian (representing the earth or the lower world) and the avian (representing the sky as the upper world) principles. In addition, the rainbow viewed as a snake seems to function as another link between the upper and lower worlds. This is confirmed by the Indonesian expressions *ular danu* (literally "snake of lake") and *ular minum* (literally "drinking snake") (Korigodskiy 2 1990: 450-451). In Australia the rainbow snake is one of the key gods (cf. Mudrooroo 1994: 141, 2, 3, 4, 16, 19, 20, 24, 87 /*Jarapiri*/, 94, 105, 109, 128, 173, 177). The rainbow snake drinking sky water and threatening the inhabitants of the lower world is a widespread image in the whole of Southeast, East and South Asia (Tokarev 1, 1980: 469); it is exemplified by the aforementioned Indonesian metaphor of the rainbow as *ular minum*, that is, drinking snake; remarkably enough, the same image is known in distant cultures, cf. the Slovak expression *Dúha vodu pije* "Rainbow is drinking water". Thus the potential semantic content of 'snake' cannot be reduced to a simple binary opposition, although this holds for the confrontation of Melanesian and European semantics. Let us briefly pay attention to related Polynesian facts. The eel is superficially very similar to snake and the same is true of its technique of movement, and both living creatures co-exist in some regions of the world, especially in Oceania. It is therefore far from surprising that some reptilian characteristics may be ascribed to the eel.

The semantic content of the snake is derived from a set of conventionalized natural features of this reptile. In Polynesia, snakes do not live east of Samoa where they are called *ngata* (just as in Tonga, East Futuna, Niue, Mae or Fiji). Antonio Damasio mentions a remarkable psychological reaction of humans to the snakes and especially to their specific writhing movements; it is a reaction belonging to the category of primary emotions that are inborn or instinctive, and inherited from our animal ancestors (quoted after Damasio 1994: 119; and Wilson 1998: 129). Emotions appeared in the course of our evolution as a reaction and/or evaluation of the relevance of the occurrence of some phenomena and physical states for our existence. Put very briefly, our reaction to the appearance of a snake is remarkably homogeneous. This involuntary reaction includes fright caused obviously by the genetically encoded experience of our prehuman ancestors with snakes. The physical properties of the snake find some reflection upon the psychological and semantic level. In view of some incontestable physical resemblances shared by the snake and the eel, their mythological similarity is not surprising.

The Proto-Polynesian word for snake (*ngata*) has been preserved in West Polynesia and in East Polynesia as well but its original meaning briefly defined

as a reptile without legs has undergone semantic modification in the East. Thus in Maori *ngata* means “*snail, snug, leech*” (Williams 1957: 231), in *Hawaiian* “*sea – creature, a land shell*” or even “*cracked and peeling*” which may be a memory of snakes as peeling their skin (Pukui – Elbert 1957: 239), *Mangarevan* *ngatatata* means “*to crawl, to run*” (Tregear 1891: 280), *Rarotongan* *ngata* “*an edible sea-slug*”, (Buse – Tarino 1995: 109), maybe also *Tuamotuan* *ngata* “*a stem, stalk, vine*” (Stimson – Marshall 1964: 93). However, the potential for such a semantic shift has been present in the more westerly languages, for example in Lau, cf. *ngwaa* (from *ngata*) “*maggot, worm, snake*”.

The snake is the central character of a Samoan tale told by Ia'e in *Satupa'itea* and written down by Richard Moyle who published its original text followed by his English translation under the title *O le Gata* “The Snake” (Moyle 1981: 182-195). Mele, the eldest of the three daughters of poor parents, agrees with her father's suggestion to offer herself and marry a rich snake living in the forest. The snake could take a human shape and Sina married him. Her two elder sisters were jealous, stole her child and killed Sina. The snake, her husband, found their lost daughter and returned home to his parents. Typical motifs are both shock and aversion brought about by the reptilian body shape, the sexual relationship of the snake with Sina, bathing pool, and death of one of the partners (here of Sina). They tend to recur in the mythology of other Polynesian peoples. In the volume *Tala o le Vavau. The Myths, Legends and Customs of Old Samoa* another story concerning Sina is published (Tala o le Vavau 1987: 17-19, 105-108). Its subject is the origin of the coconut palm from the dead eel's head. The story is reminiscent of the snake's motif since it has to do with a love affair between an animal and a girl where both fear and emotional involvement as well as a spring or pool of water and the death of the suitor are present. Slightly different versions of this story occur in East Polynesia. However, it has been recorded in Tonga and published by Edward Winslow Gifford: The chiefess Kaloafu and the chief Teuhie adopted an eel procreated by Tufu and Kale and the adoptive parents were disappointed to have found out that the child is an eel not a god as they had been informed. People from Samoa came, lifted the eel from Hina's pool, cut it to pieces and ate it. From the dead eel's head a coconut palm grew (Gifford 1924: 181-182). Tupou Posesi Fanua has published a volume of Tongan folk tales including a story of the origin of the coconut *Tala Tupu'a 'o e Niu* (Tupou Posesi Fanua 1975: 25-26) in which Hina meets her lover at a bathing pool and her lover turns out to be an eel. The eel is killed by her father, but a coconut tree grows from the dead eel's head. In *Tikopia* (within the Outlier Polynesia) the Ariki Tafua told Raymond Firth his version of the spirit *Tangata-katoa* as the eel-god Tuna and the latter's liaison with Tafua's daughter was undesirable (Park 1973: 159).

As reported by Carl von den Steinen, the word *nata* (cognate of Proto-Polynesian *ngata*) has been preserved in Marquesan mythology even if it has been semantically modified; *Nata* is simply the name of the mythological eel in this Marquesan myth. *Vahi-Ua's* pregnant wife bore an eel. His mother threw him away but he was saved by his grandmother *Hata'akoka*. Later he tried to

seduce his two sisters. Subsequently he announced his arrival to his mother (in a dream); people held him for a dolphin and killed him. From the lower half of his body a handsome boy arose called Nata. As his mother could not find adequate food for an eel, he returned back to the island of Uapou and decided to take revenge on the girls who rejected him. However, after he had been tattooed, Nata appeared as a supernaturally handsome youth and the girls fell in love with him. At Taiohae Nata raped his friend's wife. And thus his sexual behaviour does not have to do with fecundity only but even more with licentiousness. The snake is absent from the Marquesas and the word itself shifted to mean "eel" (von den Steinen 1933: 29-30). And yet, in the story Nata has preserved some features typical for snakes: he hides in a bush, climbs upon a tree and repeatedly changes his skin (ibid.: 30). This Marquesan myth is a typical example of the overlapping of two related images.

Maybe another trace of the ancient snake myth is found in the narrative of Maui's fight with Nana'a who stole Maui's wife Hina-Te-Au-Ihi (von den Steinen 1934: 200). Nana'a is translated as meaning "small lizard, salamander, a species of fish" (Dordillon 1999: 194). Its Maori cognate ngarara usually refers to saurian monsters in myths and legends and elsewhere to a lizard or even to an insect, but in this connection rather to a negatively perceived cause of pain or disease (Williams 1957: 229). In Maori mythology we also encounter Ngarara-Huarau, an enchantress whose lower part was that of a snake or lizard, and Ngararanui, an elder brother of Tutanekei (Tregear 1891: 278). Mangarevan ngarara means gecko, insect, Rarotongan ngaarara is lizard just as Tahitian 'arara while EAS 'arara lies within the realm of insects (ant-lion, cockroach, beetles).

Elsewhere in East Polynesia, Hina has to solve analogous problems with the eel Tuna. In Mangaia, an enormous eel crept up the stream from its natural hiding-place under the rocks, and startled 'Ina (= Hina) by its touch. One of the next days the eel assumed the appearance of a handsome man who said to 'Ina: "I am Tuna, the god and protector of all fresh-water eels" (Gill 1876: 77). The eel later rewarded 'Ina with a generous present. After a mighty rain he lay his head upon the wooden threshold and told 'Ina to cut his head off and bury it. After many years two coconut trees sprung from Tuna's head (ibid. 77-78). This episode chiefly concerns fecundity just as in Melanesia. As a consequence eating eels was taboo for women (ibid. 79). In Tahiti, Hina refused to marry the eel and Maui saved her from him (Henry 1962: 624-627). The triangle Hina - Tuna — Maui has been recorded in Tuamotu as well and the conflict between Maui and Tuna ended with the death of the eel whose head gave birth to the cocoa-nut palm (Caillot 1914: 27). Another sexual version was recorded and translated by J. F. Stimson (Stimson 1934: 28-43).

As mentioned before, the eel (tuna, puhi), is in some respects more similar to the snake than any other creature and the mythical properties of the snake were ascribed to the eel. In Tikopian tuna refers to lake eels but was traditionally personalized as a proper name for the spirit being of whom eel is a manifestation; regarded as generally malevolent and dangerous, especially to women... The eel is strongly avoided even in modern times (Firth 1985: 553). The properties and

behaviour of the tuna in Tikopian mythology are strongly reminiscent of those of the snake.

In Marquesan translations of the Bible by Chaulet and by Le Cléac'h (but not in Bicknell's translation of St. John's Gospel, cf. 3: 14 where the translator has used the loanword *naheta*, per analogiam with Hawaiian *nahesa*, from the Hebrew *nahaša*) we even find *puhi fenua* ("eel of the land") as the equivalent of the snake, for example: *U peau te puhi fenua i te vehine* "The snake said to the woman" (Genesis 3: 1, 2, 4, 5, 13, etc.). The translator of the Bible into Tahitian has decided to use *ophi*, a loanword from Latin (Bibilia Mo'a Ra 1884).

Mangarevan mythical song on the origin of the coconut contains references to the eel (tuna). The coconut grew from the head of Hina's slain eel lover (tuna) who was said to have been a human being, a chief named Tuna-mairoiro (Hiroa 1938: 312). The original myth of the eel as seducer was attached in Mangareva to *pu'i* (from *puhi*), the sea eel and mentioned in a song as *pu'i tagata* "human sea eel" (Hiroa 1938: 315). His human name was Te Marautoro and ravished Meto when she was bathing. Subsequently he was killed.

The image of the eel (tuna) in Maori mythology does not deviate from the above mentioned pattern. Tuna decided to seduce Maui's wife Hina. Maui managed to slay him, cutting off his head and tail and fragmenting the eel's body into small pieces. No coconut palm grows in New Zealand but the pieces of the eel's body changed into living creatures (Reed 1963: 61). It is interesting to note that the Maori regarded sea and freshwater eels as the grandchildren of Te Ihorangi, the personification of rain. The logic behind this is transparent enough; it would suffice to remember the relevance of snakes for rain and for rainbows in many mythological narratives in Southeast Asia and native Australia.

The Marquesan lexical metaphor *puhi fenua* ("the eel of land", i. e., snake) has a remarkable parallel in the Maori expression *ika whenua* ("fish of the land") that refers to the lizard especially in mythology (Tregear 1891: 102).

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