

Snakes, People, and Spirits, Volume One

Snakes, People, and Spirits, Volume One:

*Traditional Eastern Africa
in its Broader Context*

By

Robert Hazel

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INTRODUCTION

The usual term for ophidians is “snake.” Borrowed from a non-Germanic source, either French or Latin, the word “serpent” tends to be used for more fearsome ophidian species such as highly venomous or very large snakes (Mundkur 1983: 2). As Bodson (1989: 525) points out, “the snake still generates reactions of a basically negative character among Europeans and other Westerners. Even in the case of an inoffensive grass-snake or of a simple slow worm, ‘a good snake is a dead snake’.” Morris et al. (1965: 27) emphasise more generally “the potency of the snake as a basic image.” Willis (1990a: 250) underscores the variety of “symbolic meanings” associated with snakes worldwide and throughout history. In his reckoning, “no other animal is so rich in meaning for the whole human species.” Many other writers have made a similar point, including the following:

— Deane (1833: 35)

The serpent is the symbol which most generally enters into the mythology of the world.

— Gerhard (1847)¹

No animal symbol has such importance and such diverse, even contradictory, meanings than the serpent.

— Robertson-Smith (1889: 122 fn.)

The snake is an object of superstitions in all countries.

— Hambly (1931: 69)

There is no other animal which combines so wide a distribution with so many peculiarities, which must be very mysterious to minds not furnished with scientific explanation.

— Lazenby (1947: 248)

The snake played an important role in ancient life, art, and religion.

— Mehra (1956: 132)

No species of animal has impressed mankind to the same extent as the snake apparently has.

¹ Gerhard was a German specialist of ancient Greek religion and mythology. Excerpt translated and quoted by Charlesworth (2010: 352).

- Éliade (1964: 147)²
Ophidian symbolism is disconcerting. However, all of its features revolve around a single notion: it is immortal because it regenerates itself; therefore, it stands for a power that bestows fertility, knowledge (prophecy), and even immortality.
- Parrinder (1967: 22)
The snake has had a fascination for men in every land; it is mysterious, fearful, and immortal.
- Pope (1969: 204)
Serpent worship has existed so long and over so much of the earth that the snake must be rated as the most revered of creatures.
- Chandra Sinha (1975: 15)
No animal is so important and so widely spread as the serpent, which is either religiously worshiped or feared all over the world, except in certain cold countries where it is not found.
- Pont-Humbert (1995: 378)
The snake stands among all animals as the one whose symbolic profile displays the more striking contrasts.
- Cazenave (1996: 622)
The symbolic character of the snake is extremely ambiguous and often contradictory. It is so rich in meanings of all sorts that a full account cannot be attempted in a restricted number of pages.
- Wilson (1996: 8)
In all cultures, the serpents are prone to be mystically transfigured.
- Becker (2000: 263)
Among most peoples, the serpent plays an extraordinarily important and extremely diverse role as a symbolic animal.
- Ferré (2003: 104)
It is without doubt the animal most frequently involved in myths and whose symbolic attributes are the richest.
- Retief et al. (2005: 189)
Since time immemorial the snake, probably more than any other animal, has been associated with religion and magical powers.
- Charlesworth (p. 37, 221)
Serpent symbolism pervades human culture. (...) There is no basis to doubt that the snake, above all animals, has provided the human with the most varied and complex symbology.

The image of the snake has been scrutinised by most encyclopaedists while a few writers have devoted a whole book to the topic: Deane

² Almost all quotations in French (as in this case), German, or Italian have been translated by the author. A few publications in English have been consulted in their French translation.

(1833), Morris et al. (1965), Pope (1969), Joines (1974), Chandra Sinha (1975), Mundkur (1983), Wilson (2001), and more recently Charlesworth (2010). Some of these publications have a general scope; others, notably those of Wilson, Joines, and Charlesworth deal with ophidian symbolism in the ancient Middle East and/or the Bible.

No major work on African snake symbolism has ever been published. D. Wagner's thesis, entitled *Die Schlange in Kult, Mythos und Vorstellung der Nordostafrikanischen Stämme* (München, 1970), remains unpublished. The author became aware of it while he was completing the present publication's conclusions. Entitled *Quand le python se déroule*, Roumeguère-Eberhardt's book (1988) is an autobiography. Aside from a few articles dealing with snake bites, the publications focussing on ophidian symbolism or attempting to draw the cultural profile of snakes in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa or in the Horn of Africa are not that many: Roscoe (1909a), Hambly (1931), Portères (1949), Schnell (1949), Clamens (1952), Segy (1954), Eberhardt (1958), Hauenstein (1960, 1978), Villiers (1963), Pâques (1964), Merlo and Vidaud (1966a, 1966b), Willis (1974, one chapter; 1990a), Perret and Denais (1983), Shanklin (1990), Tubiana (1990), Wieck (1990), Jacobson-Widding (1992), Moges (1997), and Bustorf (2010). Some of these publications are short notes. A few of them focus on the python. Also worthy of mention is Weissenborn's two-part paper (1906) on "animal-worship in Africa," which devotes fifteen pages to snakes (p. 173-81; 269-76). Probst-Biraben's short articles (1932, 1933, 1947), all of which relate to Muslim Northern Africa, are also to be noted. The author was unable to lay his hands on an unpublished note on the Fulani of West Africa, written in 1928 by G. Vieillard and entitled "Le génie insatiable. Le serpent inventeur du fer et de l'arc-en-ciel." Needless to say, a large number of ethnographical or ethnological publications focussing on Sub-Saharan Africa refer to ophidians in more or less significant ways.

Parts One and Three of this publication take up the issue of snake symbolism respectively in general and in the African continent as a whole. The author suspected at the outset that much of the African representations about snakes were age-old and related somehow to ancient Egypt and the Middle East. He therefore embarked upon the task of exhibiting the various patterns of ophidian symbolism in ancient Egypt, in the Middle East (mostly Mesopotamia, Palestine, and Arabia), in

ancient Greece, as well as in ancient India. He could hardly avoid studying the status of the snake in Christianity and Islam, given their historical impact, notably on the Horn. Such explorations have resulted in a portion of this publication, i.e. Part II, being more sizeable than originally planned. The readers will discover how illuminating the insights from those sources turn out to be. They will also realise that Sub-Saharan Africa has long been part and parcel of a larger “civilised” world.

The African continent being so multifaceted, covering the whole ground would have proven overwhelming. Part IV (this volume) and Part V (Volume Two) will focus on the regions of Africa that the author knows best: Eastern Africa, including the Horn, as well as some peripheral areas. Few obstacles hampered the migration of individuals and groups across Eastern Africa during the last two or three millennia. Khoisan and Cushitic peoples were soon joined by Nilotes and Bantu-speakers.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, supernatural powers were commonly attributed to snakes which thereby enjoyed a special status in local religions and cultural systems. Ethnologists working in Eastern Africa or in the Horn such as Haberland (1963: 566), Buxton (1973: 294), Fratkin (1974: 28), and Sperber (1975: 9) have respectively underscored the “religious significance” of snakes, their “religious associations,” their “mystical nature,” or their “almost supernatural” essence.³ In various portions of Eastern Africa and the Horn, some individuals or social groupings were intimately connected with snakes, including poisonous ones. People believed that certain individuals were capable of transforming themselves into snakes and that serpents could take a human shape. In the areas on which this study mostly focusses, snakes had a more or less equal footing in the animal world and in the spiritual realm. In some cases, people did not consider certain snakes reptilian at all but viewed them as supernatural entities originating from the netherworld and representing the ancestors, if not divinity itself.

Taking advantage of the resources from university libraries in North America as well as of the growing number of publications partially or fully available on the Web, the author explored the English, German,

³ Haberland referred to the Oromo (southern Ethiopia), Buxton to the Mandari (southern South Sudan), Fratkin to the Samburu (south-western Kenya), and Sperber to the Dorze (south-western Ethiopia). In Haberland’s German phrasing: “Religiöse Bedeutung der Schlangen.” In Sperber’s French phrasing: “Le serpent est conçu comme un être quasi surnaturel (...).”

French, and Italian ethnographic records rather intensively from 2008 to 2017 in search of evidence of snake beliefs and cults, and for mythical or behavioural illustrations of ophidian symbolism. All the evidence bears witness to the power of analogical thinking in shaping culture and in modelling human behaviour in religious life as well as in day-to-day social interaction.

It has not been the author's intention, leaving aside the process of symbolisation, to apply much of a theoretical framework onto the ethnographic record. This study makes its business to explore a large portion of that record, allowing it in some ways to speak for itself. A number of very general, if not universal, themes have been extricated from the diversity of beliefs and representations, for instance the connection of snakes with the ground, the netherworld or water, and the notion of perpetual regeneration. The ethnographic data will in fact be presented along such lines. Some themes were more or less restricted to particular regions, notably the part played by snakes in totemistic Nilotic South Sudan. The author's ambition was to offer readers a bird's-eye view of his subject matter: East African ophidian symbology⁴; and to dwell upon selected issues in order to get a deeper understanding of the inner workings of analogical thinking as applied to ophidians. Some of the issues are treated conveniently by way of boxes. It is hoped that a more or less clear and coherent picture of what snakes stood for in local cultures will emerge.

Ophidian symbolism was clearly as pronounced and far-reaching in Eastern Africa as elsewhere in Africa and perhaps in past civilisations as well. The general conclusion of this book will notably delineate the specificities of East African snake symbolism compared with what applied to ancient Egypt, in the Mediterranean world, and in Middle-Eastern civilisations.

The author's interest in ophidian symbolism goes back to the early 1980s while he was drafting his PhD dissertation on the age systems of Eastern Africa and the Horn. He then apprehended the significance of the snake in the shaping of the identity of elders and priestly figures. The present research has been a fascinating experience for him. Hopefully the

⁴ The notion of "ophidian symbology" refers to the constellation of meanings actually attributed to snakes in a given cultural context. That of "snake symbolism" merely emphasises that snakes are good to think about or that they are a fine raw material for the human imagination.

reader—at times perhaps bewildered by the multiplicity of peoples and representations—will likewise be captivated.

PART I

PROLEGOMENA

Some preliminary steps are called for before taking on our subject: snake symbology in Eastern Africa. First, a general and matter-of-fact profile of snakes will be outlined. It will also be useful to characterise in general terms the human emotional attitude towards snakes. The opinions of a range of analysts, notably encyclopaedists, about what snakes have symbolised or stood for in human civilisation through the ages will be reviewed followed by an exploration of the Freudian and Jungian perspectives on snake symbolism. Part I of this study will show that ophidian symbology has been typically multifaceted and paradoxical. The final chapter of Part I will be devoted to the process of symbolisation and its crucial role in the shaping of human experience and culture. The steps outlined in the initial part of this study will lay the groundwork for the investigation of snake symbology in Eastern Africa, the Horn, and elsewhere.

CHAPTER 1.1

A BRIEF PROFILE OF SNAKES

That animals are “good to think about” would seem a gross understatement as far as snakes are concerned. Paying attention to what snakes are like and how they actually behave in nature helps considerably to understand why it has consistently been so. Charlesworth (p. 32) rightly observes that the understanding of “ophidian symbolism must be grounded by studying and holding snakes.”

Snakes have been around for 100 to 130 or even 150 million years. The older ophidian fossils are not bigger than contemporary snakes, contrary to other reptiles, especially the saurians (Rage 2006: 29). The diversity in size, length, and colouring of snakes is truly amazing. They have adapted to various latitudes and biotopes. The extent of their diversity is considerable in the warmer parts of the planet but a few species thrive in northern latitudes, such as in Scandinavia. The number of existing species is estimated at some 2,700. In evolutionary terms, ophidians have therefore been very successful. This is obvious from the comparison of snakes to, for instance crocodilians (only 20 existing species) and turtles (260 existing species).¹

Most lizards and all snakes belong to the scaly Squamata order of reptiles,² with the snakes forming the “Serpentes” suborder of Squamata. This suborder comprises some 17 or 18 families of snakes, the more common of which are the colubrids (the largest family, non-venomous), the boids (pythons, boas, etc.), the elapids (cobras, mambas, etc., all highly venomous), the viperids (vipers, adders, etc., all venomous), and the sea snakes, many of which are venomous.

Over 200 different ophidian species are represented in Africa. These belong to eight families and 30 genera. All these families are represented

¹ The comparative statistics are provided by Rage (p. 26).

² The crocodilians and turtles are two other reptilian orders.

for instance in the Democratic Republic of the Congo,³ where 152 ophidian species have been identified (Chifundera 1990: 141-42). Of these, 79 species, belonging to five families and 28 genera, are venomous (p. 145). Judging from DRC evidence, native African snake taxonomy was approximate. Ophidians of differing species but similar in colouring, size, and behaviour were often given the same name; some species were given more than one name by the same ethnic community; and rarely seen or less noticeable species often lacked specific names (p. 153).

Though they are more often seen on the ground and have a liking for dark places such as holes in the ground or crevices in rocky areas, continental snakes can also be found in water, swimming in rivers and lakes, or climbing high up on trees. In other words snakes can be found almost anywhere.⁴

These cold-blooded vertebrates may be found in dry and hot conditions because their peculiar keratin-rich epidermis and the lack of sudoriferous glands protect them effectively from dehydration. Relative to their weight, snakes are characterised by an extensive body surface, which maximizes heat exchange with the environment, either to gain internal heat or to cool down their organs. Everywhere snakes may be seen catching the heat of the sun, lying on a rock or a sand bed. In warm environments such a scene will be observable in the morning after a cool night. The many species that have adapted to the temperate zone hibernate underground during the cold months. As Saint-Girons (2006: 84) notes, “Usually, once the internal temperature is at the desired level, the snake maintains this equilibrium by placing part of its body in the shade, or it limits its exposure by folding part of its body on itself.” When the temperature goes down, snakes tend to coil or retire in underground shelters.

The body of snakes lacks limbs, resembling a headed-tail more than anything else:

The vertebrate column of a snake is most wonderfully formed (...). Each vertebra is rather elongated and has at one end a ball joint, while at the

³ Henceforth, this country will be designated DRC.

⁴ There is no such thing as a truly flying snake. But in creating dragons, human imagination filled the gap. Indeed, most snakes lay eggs, setting them in the same class as birds.

other end is a corresponding socket into which the ball of the succeeding vertebra fits. This enables the creature to writhe and twist in all directions without danger of dislocating its spine. (Snook, 1973: xiii)

The number of vertebra varies from species to species. It may exceed 300 (Gasc 2006: 60), reaching close to 400 in the case of pythons (Bauchot 2006: 19). Snakes use more than one mode of reptation: lateral undulation, skidding, accordion, and/or sidewinding (Gasc, p. 63-66). Some thick-bodied species move in straight progression when on a smooth surface (p. 67) whereas lateral undulation serves snakes well in water or on water surfaces (p. 70).

Snakes have no mobile lips. They also lack external ears, thereby being deaf to airborne sounds. They are covered with scales, somewhat like fish. Also remarkable is the hissing sound coming out of the mouth of various species⁵ and the swift in-and-out movement of the tongue. Through the flicking of its tongue without opening its mouth, the snake feels its immediate environment. The slender forked organ carries the particles of matter it catches up to tiny cavities located in the roof of its mouth and connected to its sense of smell. With the exception of some desert species, which never drink, the tongue is also used at times by snakes to swallow drops of water one by one (Saint-Girons, p. 90).⁶ If it does not flick its bifid tongue once in a while, an ophidian is likely to be sleeping.

Snakes are reported to have fair to good eyesight, leaving aside the burrowing species. They are among the few animals to lack movable eyelids. Instead, their eyes are covered with transparent scales, known as brille. That is why snakes are often reported to have a staring gaze. Some species can close their retina so that they can sleep in broad daylight. Other snakes sleep with their head buried among the folds of their body.

Relative to their size, many snakes appear to have a large mouth. Basically designed to bite, their sharp teeth are usually poor chewing instruments. Therefore, snakes swallow their prey whole and sometimes not quite dead.

⁵ Notes Bauchot (p. 20), "In many species, Viperidae in particular, the epiglottis vibrates when air enters the trachea, and the snake then emits its characteristic hiss." Most snakes that do not hiss will breathe loudly in a defensive posture (Saint-Girons, p. 169).

⁶ However, a cobra under observation during many years in captivity was never seen sipping water (Pitman 1974: 188). That may have been because the food given to it was sufficiently rich in water.

Indeed, serpents are noticeable for the size of what they can ingest. In some species the trachea juts out to prevent asphyxiation. The loose articulation of the jaw bones allows snakes to swallow animals much larger than their own normal diameter. The lack of sternum is also facilitating in this regard (Beauchot).⁷

Many snakes are experts at hiding under cover and are not easily discernible even at close range. When resting or sensing danger, snakes coil. In a fraction of a second, an almost motionless coiled snake will project the anterior portion of its body in a sudden attempt to bite or hit an intruder. On the move some snakes are surprisingly swift.

Sexual dimorphism is not a prominent feature of ophidian biology. In a number of species, female specimens are reportedly larger than males. In a few cases, the colouring or skin designs of male and female snakes differ somewhat.⁸ It is difficult to identify the sex of individual reptiles since their reproductive organs are only visible at mating.

The organ of male snakes—like that of some lizards—is divided into two lobes, known as hemipenes. The duration of the process of mating and copulation may be unusually long. Snakes are generally prolific, some of them laying soft-shelled eggs, unlike bird eggs, others giving live birth. Newly born snakes are highly vulnerable. Those of the venomous species, however, are dangerous. In most cases parents offer no protection to their offspring, which, if lucky enough, are able to take care of themselves from the moment of their birth. In the course of their physical growth, snakes shed the whole of their skin periodically. The frequency of this process, coined ecdysis,⁹ varies from species to species: once, twice, or thrice a year; more often in the case of pythons (Bauchot, p. 18). It also depends on age, a young snake moulting more often than an adult one (Ibid.).

The life span of snakes varies in nature, from some 10 years to about 30 years, depending on the species. Larger snakes such as boas and pythons enjoy a longer life expectancy.

⁷ Some so-called “primitive” snakes have retained a vestigial pelvis (Rage, p. 30), which is an indication that their remote ancestor had posterior limbs.

⁸ This seems to occur more often between young and mature snakes of a given species, irrespective of sex (Bauchot, p. 15).

⁹ Ecdysis is a feature of all reptiles. In the case of snakes, it is the outer skin that is wholly discarded.

Snakes are hunters and work individually. They move so silently that an encounter with one of them generally turns out to be an unwelcome surprise. Normally snakes avoid humans, who rate with some birds of prey as their chief enemies. Their elusiveness comes from a built-in warning system: they pick up ground vibrations from a distance. Once encountered, most snakes will disappear quickly.

Like all reptilian species, snakes cannot display emotions through facial expression, not even fear. Nonetheless various ophidian species have very special patterns of behaviour. The cobra for instance is capable of raising the anterior part of its body and staring at its adversary's eyes and some varieties of more or less harmless "house-snakes" are known to casually "visit" people in their dwellings, threading their way into houses through holes in walls or doors, in search of rats and other small animals.

Like other reptiles, "snakes have a number of successive dentitions, with each tooth remaining functional for a few months only" (Bauchot, p. 34). Their teeth also lack roots, some even being mobile (Ibid.). That being said, most snake species are non-poisonous and kill by constriction, i.e. suffocating their prey by tightening around them. The bite of these species is usually harmless although the saliva of "some colubrids" has "some toxic properties" (Rage, p. 23). The number of poisonous species is estimated at 400 (Bon 2006: 200). Most of these show more or less prominent fangs, generally anterior teeth anchored in the maxillary. These teeth are either grooved or display an internal duct for the passage of venom (Rage, p. 22). According to Rage (p. 23),

Venom's primary function is obviously the capture of prey, but it also plays an important role in digestion, thanks to its constitutive enzymes.

As a defence mechanism, some species of cobra can project their venom a few metres forth, generally aiming directly at the eyes of their enemies: "The snake abruptly expels air from its lungs, while a muscular contraction makes the venom gush forth at the [tip] of the fangs" (Saint-Girons, p. 168). Two jets of venom droplets are blown out, often causing severe eye irritation if not destruction of the cornea and blindness.

"Over large stretches of Asia and Africa," according to Wilson (1996: 22), "the known death rate from snakebite is 5 persons per 100,000 each year or higher." A province in Burma reportedly holds the world record of 36.8 deaths per 100,000 a year (Ibid.). According to a more recent global evaluation referred to by Koh et al. (2006), "about 2.5 million people are

bitten by snakes annually, more than 100,000 fatally.” It had been estimated that in the large and populous country of DRC, some 24,000 persons are bitten by snakes every year (Chifundera, p. 144). According to DRC hospital records, some 10% of the snake-bite victims die from envenomation (Ibid.). It is to be noted that in developing countries, most patients are not brought to hospital soon after envenomation, thereby significantly compromising their prospects for recovery.

Importantly, most snakes do not seek to kill humans. They will generally abscond rather than confront people. Noxious to most living creatures, including humans but excluding some reptiles, snake venom is a highly modified form of saliva. It is a complex mix of toxins, enzymes, and other proteins (Bon, p. 194). The venom of some dangerous snakes, such as the African cobras and mambas, is neurotoxic, causing death through the partial or total stoppage of the heart or respiratory muscles; that of the Southern African boomslang is haemotoxic, causing the blood to ooze out of the mouth and bowels; other types of poisonous snake are not lethal but, as with puff adders, their bite entails a painful local necrosis of skin and muscle (Snook, p. 162). Most of those indications are corroborated by David (2006: 208-209) who, however, notes that a specific venom “always” has “multiple effects.” The bite for instance of a puff adder may cause “unstoppable bleeding from the fang holes” and even “hemorrhagic shock” (Ibid.). There are many exceptions to the theory that the lethal effect of elapids’ venom has to do with its neurotoxins’ paralysing action whereas that of Viperids’ venom is due to its action on the cardiovascular system and on blood cells (Bon, p. 195).¹⁰ Fevers, nausea, headaches, vomiting, sweating, etc., are common symptoms of snake bites. These may be caused by the toxins injected by venomous ophidians but they can also derive from the anxieties of the human victim (David, p. 209).

A distinction has to be made between the noxiousness of a snake’s venom and the damage caused by venomous snakes to humans.¹¹ The most

¹⁰ The Elapid family comprises notably the cobras whereas vipers and rattlesnakes are part of the Viperid family. As little as “0.3 micrograms of the neurotoxin from a *naja* is lethal” (Chalesworth, p. 195). Reportedly a single bite from a king cobra can kill an adult elephant. On the complex effects of the multiple enzymes present in snake venom, see also “Snake venom.” Accessed September 13, 2013. <http://www.chm.bris.ac.uk/webprojects2003/stoneley/types.htm>.

¹¹ The present paragraph is wholly inspired from “Snakes and snake bites.” Accessed December 10, 2011. <http://www.reptileexpert.co.uk/snakes-snake-bites.html>.

potentially lethal snake family would seem to be sea snakes. However, those snakes are even-tempered and rarely bite humans. They only inject their venom into creatures they usually prey upon. Humans are simply not part of that group. Some poisonous snakes that are not extremely harmful are much more dangerous to humans. The highly irritable puff adder is a good example. The actual impact of bites by harmful snakes of the same species may differ considerably “depending on a range of factors including how much venom the snake has injected, how old or fit the victim was, what was bitten and how quickly treatment began.” Moreover, the mental attitude of the victim also plays a significant part. It is reported that people can die from the bite of a harmless snake simply because they believe they have been attacked by a very poisonous one. Such cases are striking illustrations of the power of the human imagination.

From a teratological standpoint, the most common anomaly in snakes is albinism (Matz 2006: 106) but the more spectacular anomaly is known as “axial duplication.” According to Mundkur (1983: 77), two-headed snakes are “surprisingly common” in some regions. Indeed,

About 400 cases of bicephalic, or, even rarer, two-tailed, snakes have been inventoried. Most of the time the heads alone are duplicated, but there may also be two necks; in those cases, a longer part of the spine is forked. (Matz, p. 107)

As a rule such individuals are very short-lived but a few have been reported to survive for ten years or more (Ibid.). Except for albinism and lack of scales, most anomalies seem to be caused by unfavourable circumstances during foetal development, notably too low or too high temperatures.

Considering the overall picture outlined above, it is not at all surprising that few human societies have been insensitive to snakes. However, people have never been fully aware of the biological features of ophidians nor of all the ethological facts about them. The impact of snakes on communities depended partly on the recognition of some of these features and facts, and partly on biased perceptions and imaginary constructs. For instance, in the understanding of some peoples, notably the Macha Oromo of western Ethiopia, “all snakes are dangerous” (Bartels 1969: 407). As Wilson (1996: 28) reflects, the reptilian snake has been more or less universally transformed into “a more powerful creature, the serpent, surrounded by a mist of fear and wonderment.”

CHAPTER 1.2

DREADED BUT FASCINATING CREATURES

According to Freud (1973: 447), “most of us have a sense of repulsion if we meet a snake.”¹ Likewise, an anthropologist underscores the “real loathing snakes inspire in people” (Drummond 1981: 657). This wholly negative perception reflects an old Western bias against snakes which will be dealt with in this book. The false but common belief that snakes are slimy may be a by-product of this bias. As for the emotions triggered by the unexpected presence of snakes, most writers and analysts stress fear and anxiety, on the one hand, and fascination on the other.

Few people can differentiate for sure between the harmless species and the venomous ones whereas others believe that all or most species are or may be more or less poisonous. The fear of snakes is obviously related to the possibility of being attacked and bitten by a member of a venomous species. In the case of a large ophidian such as a python or boa, many fear being strangled to death by a powerful constrictor.

As Charlesworth (p. 216) underscores, “No creature seems to strike fear in the heart of the human as much as the snake.” In his opinion snakes are feared

primarily because they can inflict death, spewing or injecting their venom that attacks the blood and heart or the nervous system. (...) We also fear these animals because it is impossible to control or communicate with them, let alone tame them. We abhor snakes because they can appear without warning in our homes. (p. 264)²

The deep fear of snakes lends plausibility to a short story entitled “The man and the snake” written in 1891 by an American journalist and writer (Bierce 1952: 142-48). A man returning home after various travels around the world

¹ Excerpt quoted by Royle (2003: 141).

² However, the contemporary negative perception of snakes is not a necessity. Charlesworth is keenly aware that the serpent can be a predominantly positive symbol, as will be seen below.

is offered hospitality in San Francisco by his friend, a scientist who happens to be a snake specialist as well as a collector of live snakes, many of them venomous. One evening the visitor feels that he is not alone in his room. The pair of glaring eyes, which he locates under his bed, fills him with horror. He wants to walk out of the room but can't, being almost completely paralysed by fear. He falls on the floor, hurting his face badly a short distance, he believes, from the reptile. He dies crying out of terror. The cause of his death was a stuffed snake whose eyes were shining buttons.

For persons suffering from ophidiophobia, the mere sighting of a snake in the countryside, in a zoo, or even on television entails a certain level of anxiety and even panic in extreme cases. Doubtless, along with arachnophobia, which has been defined as "an abnormal and persistent fear of spiders,"³ snake-phobia is among the most common phobias in the Western world and perhaps beyond.⁴

An early Western student of Indian culture and religion suggested that the "mysterious fear" which was and still is associated with the snake in India and elsewhere is triggered by the following factors: the snake's "stealthy habits, its sinuous motion, the cold fixity of its gaze, the protrusion of its forked tongue, and the suddenness and deadliness of its attacks" (Crooke 1896, II: 123). In his view fear was the "chief basis" of the many local snake-cults.

The notion of fascination implies a mental attitude of a different nature than dread. To be fascinated is to be intrigued intellectually and emotionally amazed by some out-of-the-ordinary phenomenon: "What in the world is that?" In the course of his fieldwork among the Fipa in rural southern Tanzania, a British anthropologist came one day upon a rising and five-foot-long spitting cobra, *nalwiiko* in local parlance (Willis 1990a: 250-51). Fascinated by its compelling "beauty," he followed the sliding ophidian regardless of the danger. He soon encountered it again, this time in a coiled position. His curiosity was stronger than any fear he should have experienced:

Gazing with interest into the eyes of Nalwiiko, I saw no anger there, but yet a warning that said: Come no closer! Still I was close enough to sense

³ See "Medical definition of arachnophobia." Accessed October 10, 2011. <http://www.medterms.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=12194>.

⁴ Freud (1973: 447) believed that ophidiophobia was "a universal characteristic," as quoted again by Royle (Ibid.).