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The Meso-American Goddess Coatlicue:
Too Terrifying for the Spaniards

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The Coatlícué myth of Meso-America is currently represented by the huge basalt statue of the Earth goddess on display at the National Museum of Anthropology and History in Mexico City. The Spanish invaders who unearthed the statue promptly reburied the goddess, who did not again see the light of day until 1803. Today she commands attention both as a singular work of art and as a reminder that Earth is, at the same time, a loving mother and an insatiable monster, one who ultimately devours those to whom she has given birth. From a postmodern stance, myths are fluid, not static, texts, and the story of Coatlícué will be examined from this perspective.

Keywords: Coatlícué, Aztec, nahuatl, goddess, serpent, monolith, Meso-America,

The mythology and art of the ancient Mexican cultures are unique, because for thousands of years they, like the Inca Empire of the south and the tribal civilizations of the north, were isolated from events in the rest of the world. There was considerable interplay between Greco-Roman culture and the philosophies of Egypt and Persia, between the Buddhist texts of both China and India, and somewhat later between Judeo-Christian and Muslim monotheism. Roman mythology adopted a number of Egyptian deities, the Slavs adopted the Cyrillic alphabet, and several of the same characters appear in the Talmud, the Old Testament, and the Koran. In the Americas, however, there was nothing resembling the impact of Babylonian astronomy on the Phoenician alphabet. Over the centuries, the basic worldviews and mythologies became the same throughout Meso-America (Paz, 1990).

In contemporary English, the word “myth” is equated with superstition and falsehood, but its anthropological meaning is more profound. Myths can be conceptualized as statements or stories that express and explain ambiguous observations and existential issues, thus having an impact on human behavior and comportment. Myths were pre-scientific attempts to describe and explain some practice, institution, or natural phenomenon as well as the underlying forces that direct it (Schwaller de Lubicz, 1949/1978). Joseph Campbell (1999) has written extensively about the many functions of myth, one of which was to make sense out of the workings of nature. If a mythological description appeared to be reliable, it could be repeated and measured. The mythological tales of celestial bodies led to the surprisingly accurate calendars of the Mayan astronomers; the Meso-American shamans who determined the amount of time needed to germinate corn seeds or to build a pyramid initiated a process by which myth was transformed into science and magic into technology (Krippner, 2016).

Using ancient Babylonia as an example, Francesca Rochberg (2016) has argued that to separate magic from science neglects the sophistication of the culture’s knowledge of mathematics and astronomy. An examination of surviving cuneiform scripts (the world’s oldest writing system) demonstrates that divination by sacrificed animal entrails (ridiculed by contemporary scientists) followed principles of inference and analogy. In the same vein, myth and magic permeated all aspects of the Meso-American cultures before the Spanish invasion (Nichols, Brumfield, Neff, Hodge, Charlton, & Glascock, 2002). The official justification for the Conquest was evangelical, to save the souls of the pagans encountered by the Europeans. Adopting a new religion is accompanied by a change in social structures, community and personal behavior, and mythologies and worldviews. J. A. Manrique (1990) called this “the first great extension of the European tradition outside its geographical bounds” (p. 237).
The Spanish Discovery of Coatlicue

In 1790, the Spanish conquerors unearthed a five-ton basalt statue of an ancient Aztec goddess during an excavation of the major plaza of what is today Mexico City. Although the image was worshipped by the conquered populace, it terrified the Spaniards. The Roman Catholic priests feared what they thought was its demonic powers, and it was reburied (Leas, 2004). Octavio Paz (1990) described the monuments and sculptures of ancient Mexico as “works that at once are marvelous and horrible” (p. 5). Roman Catholic priests admired these edifices, but claimed that they were “inspired by the devil” (p. 6). For Paz, these works of art reflect the omnipresent dualities of Meso-American civilization: life and death, sun and moon, sacrifice and survival. Yet these dualities were not antithetical, as they were forever engaging in a circular cosmic dance.

The buried statue, a portrayal of the goddess Coatlicue, was rediscovered by the explorer Alexander von Humboldt in 1803. This time it was put on public exhibition; today it is one of the prize displays of the National Museum of Anthropology and History (Reed, 1966). The massive image of the Earth Mother fertility deity presents a horrifying physiognomy, its “face” formed by the masterful joining of two serpents’ heads in profile. Centuries later, Picasso experimented with similar full-face profile combinations in his surrealist work (Krippner & Grossman, 1972; Rubin, 1980, p. 139). Examples include his 1932 painting, “Girl Before a Mirror,” and his 1961 “Bust of a Woman” (Rubin, 1984, p. 329).

The basalt statue of Coatlicue is one of several that have been unearthed, but this one contains the most detail. Coatlicue is wearing a necklace of severed human hands and hearts, with a large skull pendant. Her skirt is made from entwined snakes, giving rise to her sobriquet, “Serpent Skirt.” Indeed, her name in the classical Nahuatl language is generally translated as “skirt of snakes.” Coatlicue’s face is gone, but the stump of her head contains 13 tresses of hair, probably symbolic of the 13 months and 13 heavens of the Aztec cosmology. Her hands and feet are marked by huge claws, used to rip up human bodies before she eats them. A primal Earth Mother, Coatlicue gives birth to humans but also devours them once they die. The Aztecs believed that there would be a mass extermination if the sun failed to rise, during which time the star demons would consume humanity. This lurking doom might be symbolized by the monster found at the base of the statue, an image that cannot ordinarily be seen.

Nicholson (1967) commented, “Whereas it looks cruel to human eyes, it is aloof from either cruelty or compassion because it is describing an objective fact: eat and be eaten, for all will return to the basic skull form in death. Her skirt hangs from a belt composed of two gods associated with creation. The serpent heads replacing her skull are Quetzalcoatl and his twin Xolotl, representing yet another polarity. Every part of the statue is rife with symbolism, often with multiple meanings.

A temple was created to commemorate Coatlicue and her son’s victory in Templo Mayor, the center of the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan. The temple took the form of a giant pyramid, covered with snake sculptures. The shadows cast by its steps were designed to reflect Mt. Coatepetl. Large stones placed at the base of the pyramid depict the dismembered goddess Coyolxauhqui, the estranged daughter of Coatlicue. Despite the disloyalty of all but one of her children, Coatlicue is the goddess of childbirth as well as agriculture and governance (Boone, 1999).

Coatlicue was originally a pre-Aztec Mexican goddess. There is an account of Moctezuma II sending a delegation of his advisors to visit her in her ancestral home. Laden with gifts, the delegation members found themselves bogged down in a sand hill. This was an unfortunate omen, because the delegation had come to seek esoteric knowledge. Coatlicue’s response to their question was to foretell the demise of the Aztec Empire, with its cities falling to invaders, a prophecy that was fulfilled shortly after the delegation returned. However, Coatlicue also foretold that the demise of the Aztecs would allow her son Huitzilopochtli to rejoin her in their ancestral homeland, her head and face having been restored.

The Story of Coatlicue

To understand the impact of this sculpture more fully, it is necessary to appreciate the context, especially the nature of the goddess herself. It is

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generally agreed that Coatlicue was originally a pious temple priestess who maintained a shrine atop a sacred mountain – Coatepetl, or Snake Mountain. One day, while the shrine was being cleaned, a ball of feathers fell from the sky. Being very conscientious, and wanting to keep the temple clean, Coatlicue tucked the feathers into her belt. Their power seeped through to her uterus and impregnated her. Soon, she gave birth to Huitzilopochtli (sometimes referred to as Vitzilopuchtli), who later became the Aztec war god. However, Coatlicue’s daughter, Coyolxauhqui, already a powerful goddess, was shocked by this outrageous pregnancy and sought support from her 400 brothers, the Huitznaua. They planned to murder their mother, but one of the brothers had second thoughts and warned his unborn brother about the plot. The warning came too late, as the rebellious children had already beheaded their mother; the two coral snakes in the basalt statue represent flowing blood coming from the stump of Coatlicue’s head. Huitzilopochtli arrived on the scene, grown and fully armed, and butchered his rebellious siblings (Klein, 2008; Miller, 2012).

As is often the case when myths are told and retold, there are several versions of the story. In one of them, Huitzilopochtli emerges from his mother’s womb immediately after, not before, her decapitation. He slays the other children and is especially vengeful to Coyolxauhqui, chopping her into several chunks and tossing them down a hillside. In yet another variation, Huitzilopochtli throws his sister’s head into the sky where it becomes the moon. Huitzilopochtli becomes identified with the sun, and his treacherous brothers are revisioned as the stars. Huitzilopochtli’s victory over the moon and the stars symbolizes the identical daily victory of the sun over the sources of light in the night sky. In yet another version of this myth, the sun already existed at the time of Huitzilopochtli’s birth, the result of a gathering of deities during which they immolated themselves. In this version, the moon also emerged from this mass suicide (Franco, 2004).

The eminent artist Leo Katz (1945) was intrigued by the manner in which ancient myths reflected contemporary issues and dilemmas. An acquaintance of Sigmund Freud, Katz agreed with the founder of psychoanalysis that complex personal and social problems had been vividly represented in classical mythology. Katz took a special interest in Coatlicue, noting that her image was created not only for art’s sake but in order to have a masterful, lasting impact upon the beholder. Katz went on to say, “No matter how much most Pre-Colombian sculptures … seem to defy our powers of interpretation, one can hardly escape the impact of the incredible vitality and creative passion [that] these carved stones emanate” (Katz, 1945, p. 134). However, contrary to Freud’s description of the Oedipal complex and the guilt sons feel when lusting after their mothers, Huitzilopochtli did not disguise his devotion to his mother. Instead of being overcome with guilt (as was Oedipus, when he discovered he had slept with and married his birth mother), Huitzilopochtli champions Coatlicue and wreaks vengeance on the rest of the family. Since he emerged from her womb with no father as his rival, it is his siblings who feel his wrath.

Katz recalled that the Aztecs were conquerors from the North who inherited an
advanced astronomy and other sciences and arts, translating this legacy into their philosophy that they were a warrior people, destined to rule. Aztec art, as represented by the Coatlicue monolith, mirrors this belief system. Therefore, this art has no use for sugarcoated tastes. It revels in its ability to face the stark and cruel realities of life and death without a whimper. Tragedy, human or celestial, did not frighten these people. Katz (1945) continued:

Terror, manmade or terrestrial, held no ultimate threat. ... Mythology never takes the risk of turning truth into a lie by separating details from the ensemble from which they are a part. ... We know enough to recognize a sun-myth in the story of Vitzilopuchtli [Huitzilopochtli] rising out of the terrestrial womb as a result of an immaculate conception. ... His appearance and career could not be anything else but one of a warrior hero, since the artist belonged to a nation of savage fighters with their typical war-psychology and their education for death in contrast to other pre-Colombian philosophies of an agrarian background. (pp. 136-137)

For Katz (1945), the Coatlicue story is a more direct example of these unconscious archetypes than the Greek myths employed by Freud. Oedipus is not aware that the man he killed is actually his father or that the woman he married is his birth mother. These acts do not spring from a conscious act of hating one’s father or desiring to possess one’s mother. Thus the Oedipus myth is not a direct description of children’s supposed primordial feelings toward their parents.

Huitzilopochtli, on the other hand, acted as a lover and protector of his mother even before his birth. For Katz (1945), the surrealistic power of the sculpture represents a cosmic struggle more powerfully than the Greek, Roman, and Christian statues that denote an idealized form of humanity. Meso-American artists produced images such as Coatlicue with her ponderous breasts, her writhing serpent skirt, and her petrifying physiognomy. Yet the myth maintains that there is a unity in the universe, one that emerges from the seemingly conflicting messages that come from ordinary waking consciousness. The inner and outer psyches are one, humanity and the cosmos are one, life and death are one, joy and terror are one.

Cross-Cultural Comparisons with Similar Female Deities

While it is always hazardous to compare mythological symbols across cultures, it is noteworthy that Coatlicue appears to belong to a category of deities with similar features. There is a remarkable resemblance between Coatlicue’s saga and that of the Tantric goddess Chhinnamasta, a life-giver and a life-taker. As a sacrificial act, Chhinnamasta severed her own head, and is often depicted with a snake emerging from her neck. Chhinnamasta’s female followers are often portrayed as drinking her blood in order to absorb her vigor and sexual energy. Like Coatlicue, she is frequently depicted adorned with serpents. Her sacrifice was felt to nourish the universe. Eventually, Chhinnamasta’s head was restored, representing the eternal cycle of death and rebirth, just as the serpent sheds its skin without dying (Campbell, 1962).

In true post-modern perspective, human beings who can sense this unity and flow along with it will live more fulfilling lives than those who, like Coyolxauhqui and the Spaniards who reburied Coatlicue’s statue, attempt to superimpose their egotistical constructs upon a universe whose design is beyond their ability to comprehend rationally. Post-modernists are able to live with seeming contradictions and to engage in ways of being that are non-rational, if not irrational. From a post-modern and feminist perspective, Coatlicue represents one aspect of the Divine Feminine, dark in fury for having been ignored, dismissed, and subjugated too long.

Post-modern students of mythology look upon myths as fluid rather than static texts, as discourses reflecting contexts of time and space (Krippner, 2015). From this point of view Coatlicue’s story is reminiscent of the ancient Greek myth of Demeter, goddess of the harvest, and her daughter Persephone. When Persephone was abducted by Pluto and taken to the Underworld, her mother was grief-stricken, and the crops dried up until a compromise was reached allowing mother and
daughter to spend half the year together (Rivers Norton, 2016). But from a post-modern and feminist perspective, the myth can be recast to highlight Demeter’s righteous anger as she curses Zeus, the father of Persephone, for facilitating the abduction as a favor to his brother Pluto.

Rather than the sorrowful figure who appears in many literary treatments, there is an aspect of Demeter that resembles Kali, the fearful Hindu Mother Goddess who is both a destroyer and a protector. Like Earth itself, this goddess is a loving mother but also an insatiable monster, one who ultimately devours those to whom she has given birth. Kali’s stomach is a void, one that can never be filled. But her womb is constantly giving birth to all aspects of Nature. She is commonly depicted brandishing a knife dripping with blood, wearing a necklace made of the skulls of demons she had eradicated. Like Athena, who emerged in full armor from the head of Zeus, Kali (in one of several accounts of her birth) burst from the head of Durga, a violent warrior goddess (Campbell, 1962; Hackin, 1963). She is portrayed in black, a color that symbolizes her capacity to destroy as well as to create.

This description also resonates with the Babylonian Tiamat, the monstrous goddess of primordial chaos. Tiamat was, at the same time, the goddess of creation and mother of numerous other deities. When she was killed by her own son, Marduk, her arteries opened up to create the universe (Campbell, 1962). In addition, this myth resembles the one of the Egyptian lion goddess Sekhmet, the goddess of both warfare and healing, who almost destroyed humanity during one of her rages. These paradoxes helped ancient people make sense of their Universe, but were foreign to the less nuanced worldview of the Spaniards, a schema in which there was only good and evil, only light and darkness.

Persephone, in the meantime, escapes her overly-protective mother and comes into her own as the Queen of the Underworld, a position of eminence that few other mythological maidens ever attained. Her marriage to Pluto is a happy one, and together they welcome the dead into their realm. The Spaniards had nothing comparable in their own pantheon; Mother Mary, St. Catherine, St. Barbara, and the other female saints were benevolent, matronly, and often virginal. The Spanish reburial of Coatlicue is symbolic of their rejection of a concept of femininity that violated the idealized woman of their era.

However, the Spaniards neglected a key tradition from early Christianity: women could assert their independence and unshackle themselves from their subjugation to men. Their virginity was an important component of this ideal, exemplified in the iconic figure of the “virgin saint” (Armstrong, 1987, p. 131). In many ways, these saints were equal to men, and their virginity was a component of this role model. If a saint had lost her virginity, usually against her will, she hastily reverted to celibacy. As a result, virtually all the female saints were virginal. So it was not the case that the Catholic pantheon lacked strong women; it was simply that they assumed their power by becoming independent of men.

**Possible Hermeneutical Value of Coatlicue for Contemporary Western Culture**

Two mythic themes of the conquered populace were sacrifice and survival. This found expression in the legendary tale of an image of the virginal mother of the sacrificed Jesus reputedly appearing on the cloak of an Indian laborer. The priests used this “miraculous” occurrence as an instrument of conversion. But even in contemporary times, the “Virgin of Guadalupe” is commonly referred to as Tomamtzin, an Aztec Earth goddess (Paz, 1990, p. 37). As was often the case in both Spanish and Portuguese colonies, the dark-skinned deities were given white faces to save a vestige of traditional mythology, unbeknownst to the invaders. However, no amount of camouflage or subterfuge could mute the brazen image of Coatlicue or the adoration of the vanquished people who began to worship her. Coatlicue was too terrifying for the Spaniards and had to be reburied.

Armstrong (1987) has described how “virginity very soon became a highly respected Christian ideal and the Fathers of the Church developed a theology of chastity and virginity” (p. 131). Marriage and family were not given a great
deal of value. Jesus and St. Paul saw men and women as equal co-workers in establishing the Church and spreading the Gospel. However, chauvinism, misogyny, and sexual fear crept into the later letters attributed to St. Paul, even though Biblical scholars have established that these were written decades after his death (p. 292). Originally, marriage had no special ritual in the Christian tradition; the first documented description of a Christian nuptial did not appear until the 9th century, and then it was similar to established Roman rites.

The Coatlicue myth is especially pertinent in the 21st century. Using the United States as an example, Kathleen Fine-Dare (2018), Melinda Gates (2018), and others have described how far women have come and yet how far they deserve to go. Women’s talents and ambitions are still met with hostility in many quarters. Women have made impressive gains in many areas, yet many of those who were sexually abused in the workplace felt too intimidated to complain until the second decade of the century, as attested to by the #MeToo movement. At that point, like Coatlicue, Kali, Demeter, and similar mythological figures, they lashed out against their oppressors. Demeter’s angry outburst against Zeus, the supreme deity, can be likened to the public accusations made by women against omnipotent male executives who never thought their prerogatives would be called into question.

Coatlicue shifted from a pious temple priestess to a vengeful warrior; Demeter morphed from a gentle mother to an aggressive protestor; many contemporary women who were sexually violated transformed themselves from powerless victims to instigators of lawsuits (Carbonell, 1999; Franco, 2004; Rivers Norton, 2016). Christian women could hearken back to their roots to reclaim a healthy freedom, with or without marriage (Armstrong, 1987).

Indeed, times have changed. Women and their status have been transformed in much of the world and are still being transformed in the rest. By reviving the Divine Feminizer’s righteous fury and incorporating it into their lives, and by using the symbols emerging from art, dreams, and mythology, humans can become reconciled with the turbulent, ever-changing cosmos that, for better or for worse, is their home.

References


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