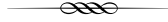


Introduction



Uto-Aztecs comprise all ethnic groups that are connected by the same etymologically originated languages in North and Central America. The iconic practices of Uto-Aztecs may be studied integrally and from a unique perspective if we are to bear in mind that their religious iconography is a product of human behavioral reflexes toward nature and the environment. Through extensive studies, we can reveal a rich backdrop of cultural reference, and especially the emotive practices and visions of the Uto-Aztecs. The cosmic thread that illuminates their cultural symbolism has not been previously presented in an unambiguous context or—better yet—emphasized as a key determinant of religious values in these cultures.

We believe that the religions of pre-Columbian Uto-Aztecs, whose presence has been noted in the entire geographic expanse from west of the Rocky Mountains and the Great Basin to the southern fringes of Mesoamerican topography, have all been eco-critically conditioned by the snake and its isomorphic representations. Uto-Aztecs used the snake as a central hallmark for the forces that guide human life and destiny. As a fierce animal, it symbolized the inevitability of death and the possibility of resurrection as key themes of human existence. Specifically, the snake provides a metaphorical analog for this consciousness. Indeed, the belief was so fundamental that it provides one of the unique instances in human iconographic practice on a global and temporal scale, and marks a sense of continuity and resilience for symbolic behavior. The attempt to study

a snake simulacrum as an abiding and evolving trope of survival behavior thus constitutes the basic objective of this book. We must admit that a long, all-embracing iconicity of snakes and related snake motifs are evident in Uto-Aztec art, and the tradition of rich handicrafts, textiles, chromatic representations and utility artefacts, that are all evinced in products of the varied populations of the region.

The term ‘iconicity’ as used in the present work refers to a human potential. It is at once a subjective prerogative of the human animal to create a motif or expressive form and to fall back on it as a resource for socially meaningful, interpersonal communication and as a model of quotidian or existential valorization. The snake has been recognized as a panoramic symbol in the founding scholarship of some European and American scholars. Walter J. Fewkes, who studied the Hopi snake dance rituals in his important paper of 1893 drew attention to the potent influence of a snake-healing motif and a snake-rain analogy. Fewkes’s more neutral and empathetic insight into the Hopi ceremony is of interest because it is the first time that a large Proto-Uto-Aztec (PUA) snake oral tradition became prominent in academic literature. Fewkes’s studies, in essence, now invite the question whether the Aztecs themselves had any inner diachronic knowledge of the snake among their related populations. Indistinct and discretely manifested snake expressions were almost always epitomized in all Uto-Aztec-affiliated populations. These include the distant Pima or Luiseño in the northern coordinates (California) and the urbanized Uto-Aztec groups of south-central Mexico. Uto-Aztecs incorporated contesting entities like the *in cuauhtli*, that is ‘jaguar’ or a ‘warrior-spirit,’ whose existence was fraught with battles, territorialization, hunting forays, and conflicts that punctuated the course of their rivalry and appropriation of resources. But the snake’s metaphorical meanings transcends those conflicts, becoming a hallmark symbolic signature and causing an iconic display among these factions and peoples. Although there is no record of any written script, it may be assumed that a snake narrative was not developed to the extent that there could be a tradition of reflexive commentaries and religious consolidation of the idea of the snake *per se*. Uto-Aztec religions present multiple layers of iconographic socialization, but there is no indication of a self-consciously cultivated doctrinal element except in some of the variants of sacred folklore. Like the plumed serpent and the mother earth tropes delineated by scribes who wrote the Codices, the snake was ultimately represented in the last chain of surviving iconography. The iconography was elaborated in stupendous architectural expressions in the urbanized domains of the Toltecs of Tula, the Xochicalco people, and in Tlaxcala, or in the southern *Nahuatl* speaking groups like the Mixtecs of Mictlan.

What we have tried to respect in this volume of essays is the role played by the snake among the various layers of Uto-Aztec prehistory. As Keraudren (2016) shows, the Codices, especially the Boturini, fashioned in the fifteenth century, provide a reflexive map of the Aztec creation stories of their homeland—that can be read as a rudimentary history of their ethno-genesis. We move from the Archaic or even more ancient early Holocene (3rd millennium BCE) to the later urban military cultural centers of Teotihuacan (fourth century CE) and Tula (seventh century CE) among others. The snake death semiotics may be traced in the various cultural artifacts in different locations along the Mojave Desert trail in the Mojave Desert in the Sonoran Desert and the inland mountains of Mesoamerica's Sierra del Sur. Our approach to this thematic study lies in identifying snake metaphors in the visual culture elements on different layers of archaeological and cultural artifacts, of which the earliest examples are rock art, petroglyphs and picto-grammatical markings. But the snake symbology appears more compelling when one considers the American Southwest and into Mesoamerica. The chapters deal with this connecting theme in a variety of expressions. As a functional hypothesis, the snake imagery alone helps explain the religious value and priority given to the visual index in the different forms of its utility and social life, as ritual symbols and even totemic representations. We suggest that the snake uniquely determines the visual theogony. Humans have not been imagined independently of their snake association. There is no other instance of such proximity of a single animal life form in iconographic practices—not with such consistent dedication. The iconicity is a collective trait that has been carried over from the most ancient Uto-Aztec artificers.

Thus, the architectonics of the snake in the governed *habitus* of these peoples—in the pyramids, totemic pillars and well-wrought reliefs and mural patterns abound in examples of such incorporation. It was integrated in two steps. First, there is evidence of an iconicity that is sensitive to astronomical movements and effects. Second, it was achieved through the preponderance of mathematical knowledge. Further, Uto-Aztecs became aware of the efficacy of precious stones, like obsidian, jade, and turquoise, which were traded in many denominations and locations. In every instance, the art was elevated by the fierce existential theme of the snake and its potential referentiality of death. The snake was configured in a celestial world as an object of veneration. No iconography is valid without its emotional impact, and hence the artist's sensitivity to the more profound and positively valenced structures of artistry are represented. Uto-Aztecs exploited the snake's fearsome reminder as a portal to the emotion of death coupled with a belief in divinely connected afterlife. The journey of the

human soul is presented with the animistic guardians that guide us while they act as seminal power-brokers in human affairs. What happens when the events of the real world are viewed through this transcendent and animistic lens? Human life becomes a moment, or a temporal event, and thus relates to a larger trajectory of time, creating a rational context for constant experiences of war, death, and human sacrifice among the Uto-Aztecs. Hence, the snake image enables this death consciousness and continuity to arrive and thrive. It rationalizes human sacrifice. The snake image was thus at once the cause of the growth and consolidation of an idea but also a sensorial cause or trigger for a death view that rationalizes killing and sacrifice. In this latter sense, the snake rituals also caused discontent and fall of the Aztec way of life.

The iconicity of Uto-Aztecs is thus conditioned by this transcendental vision of death and, as such, this consciousness alone emerges as a profoundly human achievement. The essays in this book present the notion that Uto-Aztec iconicity is a death-dealing memory, driven by simultaneous imagination of fear and transcendence for life in a hereafter that the shamans shared, visualized, and interpreted. The shamans accomplished this aim to implicate their followers in their vision. If the abiding symbol



Figure 0.1. The plumed serpent motif at Templo Mayor, remnant of Tenochtitlan (sixteenth century CE), Mexico City. Photograph by Armando Perez.

is that of the snake—and the related snake-water eco-symbol—then its meaning lies in the human play with death, survival, and heroic furor in the animistic continuum. Our certitude of this belief also comes from the empirical interviews and exchanges we had with the practicing shamans of their culture. The ethnographic bearing of this culture anchors to consciousness of continuum through life, death, and communication with the



Figure 0.2. Mictlantecuhtli, the Aztec snake god of death and the afterworld, from *Templo Mayor*, Mexico City. Photograph by Armando Perez.

spirits. Individual shamans, even today, connect not just to nature, but also to machines and technology. Technological instruments are also informed with a spiritual life. Philosophically, Uto-Aztec piety is best realized in the perception of the ontological experience of a continuity among separate things and entities. The way a radio functions, or a sensor responds to an input, is associated in Aztec shamanism with guiding spirits. Shamans and commoners, both men and women, are behaviorally sensitized to this level of experience. In contemporary Mexico, animism co-exists with Christian spiritualism in a syncretic mélange of Catholicism with Indigenous theology. The snake sensitizes and opens the portal to the next world—a supernatural and ethereal world. Its artifice however is visible in the objects around the whole of life, both here and now.