Serpent Fears and Religious Motifs Among Mexican Women

Inez Cardozo-Freeman

> My grandmother . . . this is the way I heard it . . . she said that a woman had to protect herself a great deal when she was pregnant because a lot of things could happen that would kill the baby and one of the things was the invasion of a snake, and the snake, since it is associated with the devil *was* the devil and he will come and kill the children who are going into the service of God. . . . She called the snake a *serpiente diablo* [devil serpent] or something like that. If a woman did not take care of herself, he would invade the womb and he would suffocate the baby by putting his entire body inside its [the baby's] mouth and then by taking its tail and circling it around the umbilical cord and then . . . so that the baby wouldn't get any nourishment . . . and so it would die, and this was thought that if the baby was born dead, or was stillborn, or it was a miscarriage, that's 'cause the devil had done his work. . . . In order to protect herself the mother would have to . . . wear the little . . . scapular . . . when you do your communion they give you this scapular with the Virgin of Guadalupe on one side and then, they had to wear that so that would protect them, and then pray, of course, you know. Say, "Thank you, God, for giving me one more day with my child. I hope that it is born well and serves you in the ways it's supposed to." And this was to be said every day, the prayer, to protect. And when they went to bed at night it was repeated again. . . . She would always have to wear garments to protect herself so that it wouldn't get inside, you know, up into the womb or anything, so that she would have to be secure, and then there was a . . . special sash that they wore and it was blessed by the priest, and they wore it around the stomach. . . . The men had to do things, too, to help. The men would grow their beards so that would be some kind of way to help the woman from the serpent invading the house. It was a form of . . . not imitating . . . it was an image of Joseph with his beard, you know, and they would let their hair grow so that that would help the . . . keeping the evil away, keeping the serpent away. . . . The serpent would come regardless of where you lived. It did not matter because *el diablo viene* [the devil comes]. It does not matter where you are, he would come.

I collected this oral narrative—or memorate—on July 10, 1978, from Maria S., a graduate student at Ohio State University after a discussion in my class on serpent lore. It is very interesting because it adds a religious dimension, which has never been collected before, to a growing body of lore which centers around serpent fear among women in Mexican and Mexican-American culture. There appear to be essentially two cycles of legends dealing with serpents and women. One, Rosan Jordan calls the "vaginal serpent";[1] the other I will refer to as the milk-stealing serpent.[2] Milk-stealing serpent lore deals with snakes in Mexico[3] which come into houses, particularly in rural areas where mothers have nursing babies. Once inside the house the snake puts the mother to sleep (if she is not already asleep) either by some supernatural power or hypnosis, then substitutes itself for the baby at the mother's breast and, in many

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versions of the tradition, places its tail in the baby's mouth to make it think it is nursing. The snake steals the milk and leaves. In some versions the mother learns that the snake has paid a visit when the baby's mouth breaks out in sores. Sometimes the snake suffocates or asphyxiates the baby with its tail. The following example was taped in Delta, Ohio, on July 10, 1975, by Chelo C., age forty-nine. The incident which she relates took place in Guanajuato, Mexico. *Alicante* is one of several names by which the milk-stealing serpent is known.

I. I want to know when the *alicante* appears.
C. When a woman has a baby it steals the milk.
I. I don't understand how the *alicante* can suck the milk from the mother's breast and she not know about it.
C. She's asleep.
I. Is it true as I have heard that the *alicante* makes the mother sleep?
C. I believe so.
I. But how?
C. I'm not sure . . . many times a snake stares at a rat which is running and when the rat sees the snake staring at it, it stops running. . . .
I. I see, hypnotize.
C. Yes, the rat can't move and the snake catches it. It's this way with the *alicante.* When the *alicante* stares at a cow[4] or a woman . . . I don't know for sure . . . hypnotizes . . . I don't know. . . . Once the *alicante* has done it [suck milk] it does it every day at the same time.
I. The *alicante* sucks the milk from cows, also?
C. Yes. We had them on the ranch [in Guanajuato].
I. Is it a snake, really a snake?
C. Yes, it's a snake, but it doesn't have teeth like a snake. . . . A cousin of my mother, she . . . this was on the Rancho de la Presa. She died because of an *alicante.* Because she had a little baby, and when the baby was two months old she liked to go sleep in the shade of a tree. The tree was close to a big pile of rocks. While my aunt was sleeping the animal came and caught the breast and began to suck the milk. But the baby began to play with the *alicante's* tail (put it in its mouth) and then the baby . . . that's when the sores break out. . . . . Yes, and this aunt of mine . . . one time my uncle, when my uncle was out in the fields working, when he came back to the house he saw that his wife had the snake on her breast and he saw the baby, like this playing with the snake's tail. They didn't know what it was, but they used to see sores on the baby's mouth, they didn't know why the baby was so thin. It was because it wasn't getting milk from the breast. So now he was very angry and he grabbed the *alicante,* and he grabbed it from her breast and when he yanked the *alicante* away my aunt screamed out and died.
I. From fear?
C. No. I believe it tore her breast. This was, I believe, in 1932 or 1933. I was very small then. . . .

The second example was recorded on January 23, 1975 in the home of Emma U., age thirty-one, whom I met at the University of The Americas in Puebla, Mexico.

> The name is *cuatro narices* because it has four noses. The head is smashed and it looks like it has four noses, probably has four noses. My brother-in-law told me . . . they had this belief in Necaxa, Puebla. It's a snake and when you had a baby and you start feeding him, the custom is to feed the baby lying down in the bed and they say this happened to my sister. She was feeding the baby, or nursing him, and the snake came and sprayed *bao*[5] on the mother and make her unconscious and the snake put the tail in the baby's mouth and suck[ed] the mother's breast and the baby die, asphyxiated. The snake put the tail in the baby's mouth, so small the baby was asphyxiated.

The snake (*alicante*) in the first memorate serves the function of explaining why the baby does not gain weight, why its mouth breaks out in sores, and why the mother dies; whereas the snake (*cuatro narices*) in the second memorate functions as an explanation for the baby's death.[6]

The legend of snakes stealing milk from women's breasts and fooling and pacifying babies by inserting their tails into babies' mouths is not indigenous to Mexico or to the New World, nor is stealing milk from cows.

> In ancient and medieval Europe, they [snakes] were supposed to prefer wine to all other beverages and, through lack of moderation, frequently became drunk. When alcoholic refreshment was not available, they would content themselves with milk obtained by sucking the udders of cows, goats or sheep. Nor were human beings exempt. Imagine the feelings of a nursing mother, who wakes up in the night to find a snake feeding at her breast, while her baby sucks contentedly on the reptile's tail which the cunning creature has popped into the infant's mouth to act as a dummy.[7]

The second cycle of legends dealing with women and serpents involves serpents or serpent-like creatures which crawl into women's vaginas, sometimes strangling or suffocating the infants in the womb or laying eggs in the vagina which then proceed to hatch. Mothers warn their daughters not to sit on the ground, particularly near water or damp and dirty places as it is believed that the creatures live in these areas. Some versions of this tradition tell of snakes that whistle at women and sometimes invade their bodies, driving them insane. I taped the following memorate from María Encarnación R., age seventy-five, of Pachucho Hidalgo, Mexico, who was selling artifacts in a little shop near the pyramids of Teotihuacan (outside of Mexico City). The term she uses for snake, *cincuate,* is, I assume, a Nahuatl word for snake.

> The *cincuate* abuses the woman the way men do; they make love to the woman. They make the woman crazy. They whistle at the women and the woman goes

> to sleep. The husband of the woman, when the woman doesn't show up, goes looking for her because it looks like she's with another man. When he finds the woman and the woman wakes up, he kills it. They are women who live out in the country, Indians. I've heard this from the old Indians who talk about this today. The woman dies because she goes crazy with the animal. . . .

Among the examples of the lore presented here, which are representative of the lore thus far collected, all strongly suggest anxieties and fears which Mexican and Mexican-American women have regarding sex and/or childbearing and child rearing. Why should such anxieties, which are common to women of all times and all ages, take the form of fear of snakes among Mexican and Mexican-American women? Quite possibly one answer might be because there are (and were) so many snakes in middle America and in areas of the Southwest which were at one time a part of Mexico. Serpents are a central motif in Meso-American architecture, sculpture, and religion, dating back several centuries before the advent of Christ in Western culture. Throughout history, wherever there have been large numbers of snakes, there have been myths, legends, and tales, even true stories of women and snakes. The Morrises report in *Men and Snakes* that there are many examples of sexual encounters between women and snakes in Oriental, Hindu, Arabian, and Native American lore.[8]

However, there is only one remembrance collected that goes beyond simply reflecting fears and anxieties and which attempts to *prevent* the disasters and dangers of childbearing through rituals and practices which are religious in nature. The beliefs and rituals described in Maria S.'s memorate are strongly Catholic and therefore European in origin and do not, apparently, reveal any Indian (Aztec or other Meso-American) influence. But some intriguing ideas are suggested when one looks at Meso-American religion and belief.

In Mexico before the coming of the Spaniards and Catholicism, nine of the fourteen fertility gods of the Aztec pantheon were female. Three of these goddesses had names with the word "snake" (*coatl*) in them: Chicomecoatl (Seven Snakes), an ancient corn and earth goddess dating from around "the centuries immediately preceding and following the birth of Christ";[9] Cihuacoatl (Serpent Woman), the earth goddess who ruled over childbirth and death by childbirth; and Coatlicue (Serpent Skirt), also an earth goddess, and mother of Huitzilopochtli (Hummingbird Wizard), the war and sun god and the chief god of the Aztecs. Tonantzin (Our Mother), who was considered the mother of the gods, was a synonym, according to George C. Vaillant, of Cihuacoatl (Serpent Woman).[10] Vaillant believes it possible that Tonantzin, Coatlicue, and Cihuacoatl were actually one and the same earth goddess.[11] So we have in these three goddesses one goddess who is the mother of gods and man and rules over childbirth and death by childbirth.

The three goddesses as a compilation of one call to mind Mary, the Mother of Christ, in Catholic belief. Undoubtedly there is evidence here that syncretism took place when Catholicism was superimposed upon the already flourishing Aztec religion of Tenochtitlan: this three-in-one Aztec goddess became the Virgin of Guadalupe. Many Mexicans believe that the Virgin of Guadalupe appeared as a pregnant woman, and that she is the special protectoress of Mexican women who are pregnant; for this reason, they address their special prayers to her, as in Maria S.'s memorate. The picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe which is enshrined in the Cathedral of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico City depicts a beautiful young brown-skinned woman looking demurely downward; whether or not she is actually pregnant is not discernible, but she is standing on a snake.

Maria S. had learned the memorate which she shared with me from her grandmother who, she told me, had grown up "on the outskirts of Mexico City." The Cathedral of the Virgin of Guadalupe was originally situated on the outskirts of Mexico City (before the recent population explosion). It is interesting to speculate on the possibility that before the coming of the Spaniards, Aztec women had come to pray and ask for protection during their pregnancies from the mother of the gods, Tonantzin, at the very place where Mexican women come to pray today to the Virgin of Guadalupe for protection during their pregnancies.

The Catholic belief that Satan can take the form of a serpent to attempt to destroy God's kingdom on earth is certainly an important theme in Maria S.'s memorate; the snake has been a scapegoat for a myriad of evils among Catholics for centuries. The superimposition of Catholicism upon the religion of the Indians in Mexico by the Spanish missionaries was so successful that it appears to have obliterated the respect and awe which was held for serpents in Meso-American culture and religion.

But, whether Aztec or Catholic, both views connect life and death with women, a distinctly insightful connection. Memorates in Mexican culture which deal with women and snakes most certainly appear to reflect anxieties about life and death; most central to the life-death cycle are sex and childbearing, in which women play the central role. Women are the creators of humankind and this can be an awesome responsibility, since it also involves death. It is possible that the fear of serpents reflects and embodies the fears that these women have of birth, life, and death.

NOTES

1. Rosan Jordan first reported serpent fear among Mexican-American women in a paper, "The Vaginal Serpent," presented at the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society in Austin, Texas in 1972. See also Jordan's "A Note About Folklore and Literature (The Bosom Serpent Revisited)," *Journal of American Folklore,* 86 (1973), 62-65, for her comments on Daniel R. Barnes' article, "The Bosom Serpent: A Legend in American Literature and Culture," *Journal of American Folklore,* 85 (1972), 111-22.

2. I presented "The Mexican Bosom Serpent" at the 1975 meeting of the American Folklore Society which was held in New Orleans, Louisiana.

3. During the winter quarter of 1975, I directed a program for Ohio State University students studying at the University of the Americas in Cholula, Puebla, Mexico. At this time I had the opportunity to collect versions of both the milk-stealing serpent and the vaginal serpent legends from women (and a few men) who I met and spoke to in the marketplaces in Puebla, Veracruz, Oaxaca, and Mexico City.

4. The tradition also extends to snakes stealing milk from cows in Mexico. This belief is also common in the United States, particularly in dairy areas where they are referred to as "milk snakes."

5. The exact meaning of this word is not certain. I could not locate it in Francisco J. Santamaría, *Diccionario de mejicanismos* (Mexico City: Editorial Porrua, 1959), or *Cassell's Spanish-English Dictionary* (New York: Funk, 1960).

6. Similar snakes have been reported in South America and in the South and Southwestern part of the United States. See, for example, Ramón Alberto Alderete Nunez, *¡La Vibora!* (Tucuman, Argentina: Museo Folklorico Provincial, 1946), p. 66; Tobias Rosenberg, *La serpiente en la medicina y en el folklore* (Buenos Aires: Tridentente, 1946), p. 91; J. Frank Dobie, *Tongues of the Monte* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1935), pp. 90-91; John G. Bourke, "Popular Medicine, Customs, and Superstitions of the Rio Grande," *Journal of American Folklore,* VII, 25 (April-June 1894), 119-46; Rosan Augusta Jordan, "Folklore and Ethnic Identity of a Mexican-American Woman," Diss. University of Indiana 1975.

7. Ramona and Desmond Morris, *Men and Snakes* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), p. 122.

8. Ibid., pp. 151-152.

9. George C. Vaillant, *Aztecs of Mexico* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1941), p. 28.

10. Ibid., pp. 182-83.

11. Ibid., p. 180.