

Raising the Serpent Power: Some Parallels between Egyptian Religion and Indian Tantra

TERENCE DUQUESNE

Unapparent is better than apparent connexion.

Heraclitus fr B54 D-K

Awake in peace.

You Who are supreme in your marshland a wake in peace!

You're a wakening is peace.

As the young uraeus awakens in peace

So your be awakens in peace.¹

Thus, in the famous Middle Kingdom *Hymns to the Diadem*, is the snake at pharaoh's brow invoked. As Erman showed clearly, these morning ritual hymns have very ancient associations and echo the *Pyramid Texts*.² The Cobra goddess is often named as *Wrt-hk3w*, the Powerful of Magic.³ Both the symbolism and the iconography of this serpent, or more properly these twin serpents, seem strongly reminiscent of *kuṇḍalinī*, the 'serpent power' invoked in Indian Tantric ritual.

In a number of my publications I have referred to the role of *kuṇḍalinī* by way of analogy in the context of Egyptian magical ritual.⁴ It is not my purpose to argue here the case, if there is one, for diffusion from Egypt to India, because it appears self-evident that certain symbols or hypostases are in the Jungian sense archetypal and therefore that they will be found in diverse cultures: familiar examples include the trickster and the psychopomp. Study of one manifestation of an archetype sheds valuable light on others. Stricker has noted a parallel between the site of the uraeus and the Hindu *tilaka*, or red dot on the forehead,⁵ a reference to the third dyd of Śiva⁶ and to the *ājñā cakra* through which, according to Tantric doctrine, the serpent power emerges.⁷

Tantra is a system of spiritual practice of which there are closely interrelated Hindu and Buddhist strands. It is an ancient but living practice which is based on the texts known as Tantras,⁸ very few of which have been edited or translated. Among its characteristics are that it has practical as well as spiritual goals; knowledge of the divine world is gained by meditation; it employs coded language; empowerment is gained through magical proficiency; and the practitioner has a partner who is regarded as an incarnation of the goddess Śakti, consort of Śiva. Tantric techniques are, in short, a means of seizing the

initiative spiritually, and the notion that enlightenment is possible in one's present existence reverses the apparent fatalism of conventional Hinduism. In Tantra, the body is regarded as having a kind of collateral circulation in the form of two 'arteries', *iḍā* and *piṅgalā*, one of which is red and one white, which may be regarded as two snakes. These are connected to a number of 'circles' (*cakra*) [figure 1]⁹ one of which, located at the brow, is designated for *ājñā* or 'gnosis'.¹⁰ This is precisely the site of the uraeus on the Egyptian royal diadem. In the course of Tantric meditation, awareness is achieved when *kuṇḍalinī*, the 'serpent power' is activated.¹¹

This divine snake courses upwards from the *mulādhāra cakra* at the perineum, where it normally lies coiled and inactive, to emerge from one of the *cakras* in the head, rather like the Lightning Flash of the Qabalah, only in reverse.¹² Whereas in the *Vedas* sexuality is regarded as impure,¹³ the Tantric initiate achieves the *coincidentia oppositorum* through *tabu*-breaking as part of the ritual. In the context of *kuṇḍalinī yoga*, this is done by means of a sacred act of coitus with the female partner.¹⁴ The Indian poet Kāṇha, in an important series of hymns devoted to the raising of the serpent power, expresses its symbolism thus:

Just as salt dissolves in water, so is the heart which possesses the Mistress of the house.

*At this exact moment it discovers a like savour if it unites with her again and again for ever.*¹⁵

Again there is an analogy with the sexual aspects of Hebrew mysticism,¹⁶ although with the difference that in Tantra retention of semen is considered crucial.¹⁷

In Egyptian religion, the two Merty-goddesses represent a symbolism analogous to that of the red and white snakes of *kuṇḍalinī*. The parallelism is particularly striking because the Merty are shown in the form of serpents and symbolize the two royal crowns – one red and one white – and hence the two complementary parts of Egypt.¹⁸ These deities are also intimately connected with Hathor in her role as goddess of divine intoxication.¹⁹ *The Book of the Dead* contains an invocation to the two snake-goddesses as protectresses of the solar barque, whose ambiguity is reflected in the apparently quite inappropriate title 'Spell for warding off (*xsf*) the two Merty :

Hail to you Two Companions Two Sisters Merty

I have opened you (wp.n.i.tn) by magic (m-hk3)

I am the one who shines from the sektet-boat

I am Horus the son of Osiris

*I have come to see my father Osiris.*²⁰

Elsewhere in *The Book of the Dead*, Osiris is addressed as the one "whose crown has reached the sky and touched the earth",²¹ and a spell in the *Coffin Texts* has the king declaring: "I have come here so that I may turn my snake, that I may raise the uraeus, and that I may cure the great god [Osiris] of that which he has severally suffered."²² The

transformation of the eye of Re^c into a cobra is referred to in an obscure passage in Bremner-Rhind,²³ and ‘raising the uraeus’ is documented, not only in the hymns to the diadem to which reference has been made, but in the daily temple ritual during the New Kingdom.²⁴ *The Book of the Dead* contains a short but powerful spell for making a transformation into a snake called Sa-ta (‘Son of the Earth’):

*I am the snake Son-of-Earth²⁵ the one extended in years
 One who sleeps²⁶ and is reborn every day
 I am the snake Son-of-Earth who is at the limit of the earth
 I sleep and I am reborn
 Renewed and rejuvenated every day.²⁷*

This is nothing less than the justified soul incorporating the *ouroboros* Mehen²⁸ and thus spanning earth and sky. The sloughing of the snake’s skin can be clearly seen as a symbol of healing and rebirth,²⁹ and in the indigenous population of Arnhem Land the initiate may be reborn only if he is able to be metamorphosed into a rainbow serpent.³⁰ Jung came close to making a direct association between the snake-and-staff of Asklepios and *kunḏalini*,³¹ the former being a prototype of the Hermetic caduceus with its twin snakes.³² For those with a symbolic turn of mind the fact that DNA, the basic molecular building-block, has the shape of a dual helix³³ may seem significant. The rhetor Aristides had a dream in which the god Sarapis, taking on the role of the divine healer, held a knife and made an incision (*peritemnein*) in the center of his forehead, the site of the snake-diadem,³⁴ and Marinus reports that the philosopher Proclus, when sick, saw a snake creeping round his head at the location of his illness.³⁵ ‘Heraldic’ figures of twin snakes which resemble those of the caduceus are found in the ancient Near East³⁶ and, in Egypt, twin ram-headed serpents occur in the iconography of the god Atum, whose name means ‘the complete one’.³⁷ [figure 2] Jachin and Boaz, the twin pillars of the temple of Solomon, similarly suggest the complementarity of *yin* and *yang*.³⁸ The double snake occurs twice in Hour 10 of the Egyptian *Amduat*: in the upper register, parallel coiled snakes support the sun-disk, while the middle register shows a snake with two heads, one of which wears the red and the other the white crown.³⁹ [figures 3 & 4]

Ascent by means of transformation into different magical animals is well attested in Egyptian religion. According to the *Coffin Texts*:

*If you (gods) ascend to the sky as serpents
 I shall ascend on your coils
 If you (gods) ascend to the sky as cobras
 I shall ascend on your brows.⁴⁰*

The Brooklyn Museum has a beautiful bronze sphinx of Dynasty XIX. [figure 5]⁴¹ The animal is upright on a standard shaped like a sledge with two upraised uraei in front of its forepaws. This motif is strongly suggestive of typical figures of the jackal god Upwawet, a hypostasis of Anubis. Upwawet’s role, in the Old Kingdom, is to take pharaoh to the sky on his sledge, which is usually adorned with an erect cobra. [figure 6]⁴² This

parallels the work of Anubis as psychopomp.⁴³ In a cryptic entry, the lexicographer Hesychius tells us that “dogs are also snakes.”⁴⁴ The dog and the snake appear together, for instance, on the iconography of Asclepius.⁴⁵ Both types of animal have a strange ambiguity in their symbolism: they are closely associated with death and also with healing, rebirth and transformation.⁴⁶

The above brief and preliminary study will, I hope, highlight a number of interesting topics in comparative religion. I have deliberately avoided entering here into profound questions, crucial as they are, about the ontological status of archetypal symbols. There is certainly evidence, from inscriptions in Prakrit and Old Tamil, that Indians lived and traded in Egypt from at least the second century CE.⁴⁷ It is not suggested that Indian motifs are derived from Egyptian, or *vice versa*, or that Egyptian conceptions of the body-soul axis resemble those of Hindu-Buddhist philosophy in every particular, because such is not the case. However, certain analogies relating to invocation of the serpent goddess as the repository of a special sexual and metaphysical power are clearly discernible. Further research is required into the role of ecstasy in Egyptian and other religions, including the importance of *tabu*-breaking for certain magical purposes, and into the multivalency of the snake as a symbol of death, rebirth, and transformation.

References

¹ A. Erman. *Hymnen an das Diadem* [Berlin, 1911] 34-35 (c. 10-11). I follow Erman (38) in translating *mnhyt* as ‘die kleine Uräusschlange’.

² Erman. oc.11-15. A good book on snakes and their symbolism in Egypt is overdue. The following references are selective: T. Hopfner. *Der Tierkult der alten Ägypter* [Wien, 1913] 136-149; E. Hornung, Tiergestaltige Götter der Alten Ägypter, in *Mensch and Tier*, ed. M. Svalar [Bern, 1985] 11-31; H. Kees. *Der Götterglaube im alten Ägypten*² [Berlin, 1956] 52-58; S.B. Johnson. *The Cobra Goddess of Ancient Egypt* [London, 1991] 5-11; H. Bonnet. *Reallexikon der ägyptischen Religionsgeschichte* [Berlin, 1952] 733-735 (Sonnenaug), 844-847 (Uräus); I. Nebe. “Werethekau”, *LÄ VI* [1986] 1221-1224; K. Martin. “Uraus”, *LÄ VI* [1986] 864-866.

³ E.g. *Pyr* 1832. Cf. T. DuQuesne. *Book of the Dead Spell* 194 [in preparation, 1992] § 113.

⁴ For instance T. DuQuesne. *A Coptic Initiatory Invocation* [Thame, 1991] §§ 149, 157; T. DeQuesne. Review of B.H. Stricker. *Het zone-offer* [Amsterdam, 1989], *Discussions in Egyptology* 23 [1992] 86 [83-92].

⁵ B.H. Stricker. *De geboorte van Horus V* [Leiden, 1989] 655; B.H. Stricker. The Enemies of Re (I), *Discussions in Egyptology* 23 [1992] 71 n274 [45-76]. I discover that *Kuṇḍalinī* itself is referred to in the context of ‘ancient Egyptian Yoga’ by D. Khane, “Signification symbolique de la double royauté pharaonique”, *Bull IFAN* 45 ser II [1983] 277-301; also D. & B. Khane & Khane, *Le Yoga des pharaons* [1983] 65-89. Khane is an astute writer who relies on secondary sources. K. Baer has complained about the conventional translation ‘Book of Breathings’ for LE funerary texts, a title which according to him “sounds like a manual of yoga”: K. Baer, “The Breathing Permit of Hor”, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 3 [1968] 111 n7 [109-134].

⁶ W.D. O’Flaherty. *Śiva. The Erotic Ascetic* [Oxford, 1981] 375 (7cd¹). Loose references in occultist writings to the third eye should not obscure the fact that the *cakras*, and the mythology of Śiva’s third eye, reflect profound and considered concepts in Hindu and Buddhist Philosophy.

⁷ Tantric sources differ on the exact locus for the exit of *Kuṇḍalinī* ‘the coiled one’, a word which may mean ‘snake’ in Sanskrit: J.P. Vogel. *Indian Serpent-lore* [London, 1926] 13n. Cf. Sir J. Woodroffe. [Arthur Avalon] *The Serpent Power*⁷ [Madras, 1964] 141-142 and 394-414v (specifically on the ājñā cakra).

⁸ On the complex issue of dating: S. Gupta et al. *Hindu Tantrism* [Leiden, 1978] 21; cf. also a Padoux, *Tantrism, Encyclopedia of Religion* XIV [New York, 1987] 272-280. The earliest surviving Buddhist Tantras may belong to the third century CE.

⁹ The number of *cakras* varies: cf. D.U. Neff, “The Great Chakra Controversy”, *Yoga Journal* [December, 1985] 42-52. The illustration (figure 1) has been published, *inter alia*, in M. Eliade, *Patañjali and Yoga* [New York, 1969] 191.

¹⁰ Cf. the excellent paper by H. von Stietencron, Bhairava, *ZDMG. Suppl.* 1. 17.3 [1969] 870-871 [863-871]; also E.C. Visuvalingam, Bhairava’s royal brahmanicide, in *Criminal Gods and Demon Devotees*, ed. A. Hildebeitel [New York, 1989] 157-229.

¹¹ Most reputable accounts of *Kuṇḍalinī Yoga* are technical. L. Silburn, *La Kuṇḍalinī* [Paris, 1983] gives probably the best account in one volume. Reliable sources include, for Hindu aspects: W.C. Beane. *Myth, Cult and Symbols in Śākta Hinduism* [Leden, 1977] 242-256; S.B. Dasgupt. *Obscure Religious Cults*³ [Calcutta, 1969] 88-109; M. Eliade. *Yoga* [Princeton, 1969] 236-249; M. Eliade. *Patañjali and Yoga* [New York, 1969] 175-193; Gupta et al. *oc* [1979] 163-185; A. Mookherjee. *Kuṇḍalinī* [London, 1982]; A. Padoux. *Kuṇḍalinī, Encyclopedia of Religion* VIII [New York, 1987] 402-403; P. Rawson. *The Art of Tantra* [London, 1987] 166-182; S. Visuvalingam, *The Transgressive Sacrality of the Dikshita*, in *Criminal Gods and Demon Devotees*, ed. A. Hildebeitel [New York, 1989] 427-462; Woodroffe. *oc*. For the Buddhist strand, see particularly: [P.C. Bagchi. *Studies in the Tantras* [Calcutta, 1939], not seen]; S.B. Dasgupt. *An Introduction to Tantric Buddhism* [Calcutta, 1950] 118-125, 186-196; W.Y. Evans-Wentz. *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines* [Oxford, 1935]; D.L. Snellgrove. *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism* [London, 1987] 293-294; G. Tucci. *Teoria e pratica del mandala* [Roma, 1949] *Passim* (translation as *Theory and Practice of the Mandala*.. London. 1961, especially 108-133..

¹² On the lightning-flash: e.g. A. Bain. *The Keys to Kabbalah* [Bristol, nd. (c 1989)] 4; R. Wang. *The Qablistic Tarot* [York Beach, M.E., 1983] 168-170.

¹³ J. Gonda. *Vedic Ritual* [Leiden, 1980] 284, 290-291, 462. On Snakes in the R̥g Veda 4.23.5 & 10.189 : *oc* 400, 422-424. For the ambiguity of the serpent and rebirth symbolism, cf. *Mānavadharmasūtra* 2.79, 11.229; also 4.135, 11.134.

¹⁴ On the symbolism, a very useful account by C. Pensa, Considerazioni sul tema della bipolarità nelle religioni indiane, in *Fs G. Tucci* II [Napoli, 1964] 379-409. Cf. also E. Zolla. *Verota segrete esposte in evidenza* [Venezia, 1990] 126-130; Wayman. *The Buddhist Tantras* [New York, 1973] 180-183; Silburn. *Kuṇḍalinī* 164-168.

¹⁵ *Kāñha Dohakosa* 32: in *La Bouddhisme*, ed. L. Silburn [Paris, 1977] 362 [334-365]; cf. M. Shahidullah. *Les chants mystiques de Kāñha* [Paris, 1928] 9-24. The energy concerned “blazes with rays of light whose essence is subtle among subtle things”: *Vijñāna Bhairava*, ed. L. Silburn [Paris, 1961] 80 # 28.

¹⁶ M. Idel. *Metaphores et pratiques sexuelles dans la Cabale*, in *Lettre sur la sainteté*, ed. C. Mopsik [Paris, 1986] 327-358.

¹⁷ L.W. Meldman. *Coitus reservatus and mystical sex*, *Gnosis* 17 [1990] 34-38.

¹⁸ W. Guglielmi. *Die Göttin Mr. t* [Leiden, 1991] 201-214.

¹⁹ Guglielmi *oc* 92-99, 226-229. The association between Hathor and divine, sexual intoxication is close. *Tabu-breaking* is also involved in Tantra, as in the cults of deities such as Kotytto, on whom see S. Srebrny, *Kult der thrakischen Göttin Kotytto*, in *Fs. F. Cumont* [Bruxelles, 1936] 423-447.

- ²⁰ Book of the *Dead Spell* 37 (Budge text 102/6-10). For *xsf-Mrty*. Cf. *Coffin Texts* V 303.
- ²¹ Book of the *Dead Spell* 181 c 52: É. Naville. *Papyrus funéraires* II [Paris, 1914] p110.
- ²² *Coffin Texts* III 3 (spell 164); cf. for instance III 200 (spell 219), IV 80 (spell 312), and IV 366 (s 344), where “I raise myself ... by means of this soul of the horned snake.” The rite of raising the uraeus is ancient: see *Pyramid Texts* 194-198,396.
- ²³ P.Bremener – Rhind 27/2-4 (pp.60-61, Faulkner).
- ²⁴ A. Moret. *Rituel du culte divine journalier* [Paris, 1902] 232-237.
- ²⁵ Written s3-t3+ undulating serpent determinative.
- ²⁶ *sdr. kwi* is probably a euphemism for death.
- ²⁷ *Book of the Dead Spell* 87 (Budge text; 188/1-5).
- ²⁸ Cf. B.H. Stricker. *De grote zeeslang* [Leiden, 1953]. For rebith as a snake in the Netherworld Book see W. Barta. *Komparative Untersuchungen zu vier Unterweltsbüchern* [München, 1990] 56-58.
- ²⁹ An eloquent account by Cornutus in *Theologiae Graecae opendium* § 33 Lang; cf. too Cosmas *Carmen Lil Gregorii Nazianzeni* (II. 1839, Mai); Schol Aristophanes *Plut* 733.
- ³⁰ P.S.C. Tacon. *Art and the Essence of Being*, in *Animals into Art*, ed. H. Morphy [London, 1989] 246 [236-250].
- ³¹ C.G. Jung. *Psychology and Alchemy*² [Princeton, 1968] 180; cf. also his *Mysterium conjuncti* [Princeton, 1964] 340-343.
- ³² [] Samter, Caduceus, *Pauly-Wissowa RE* 5 [1897] 1170-1171.
- ³³ Cf. J.D. Watson.. *The Double Helix* [London, 1968].
- ³⁴ Aristides. *Ort* XLIX 47.
- ³⁵ *Marinus vita Procli* § 30.
- ³⁶ E.g. the steatite vase of Gudea: J. Black and A.Green. *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia* [London, 1992]167. Cf. W. Burkert. *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* [Berkeley 1979]30-33 figs. 1-2
- ³⁷ K.Mysliwiec. Les problemes des recherches sur l' iconographie du dieu Atoum, in *Ist Int. Congr. Egyptology, Acts* [Berlin 1982] 489-491 fig. 10 (Greco-Roman, sarcophagus fragment CG29318); cf. his *1982*. An adze in the form of a ram-headed snake was called *wrt-hk3w* and used in the Opening of the Mouth ritual. Otto. *Das ägyptische Mundöffnungsritual* II [Wiesbaden, 1960] 19-20.
- ³⁸ R.B.Y. Scott. The Pillars Jachin and Boaz, *J. Biblical Lit.* 58 [1939] 143-149; for twin snake doorkeepers; Cf. A. Rosenvasser. *Kerub and Sphinx* [Buenos Aires, 1973]10- 11.
- ³⁹ E. Hornung. *Amduat* I-[Wiesbaden, 1963] 172-173-pl 10. The latter snake is called *ts-hrw* ‘rejoicing faces’, recalling *ts- tprw*, an epithet of Anubis in the *Book of Caverns* p1 90 Piankoff.
- ⁴⁰ *Coffin Texts* III 61(spell 175).
- ⁴¹ Brooklyn 61.20: S.B. Johnson. *The Cobra Goddess of Ancient Egypt* [London, 1990] 40 fig. 6
- ⁴² F.W. von Bissing. *Das Re-Heiligtum des Königs Ne- Woser-Re*[Leipzig, 1923]pl 15; other examples in Johnson *o c* 64, 65, 71,125.

⁴³ Cf. T. DuQuesne. *Jackal at the Shaman's Gate* [Theme, 1991] 18-21. In Greco-Roman times Anubis as psychopomp wears the double crown to symbolize the reintegration of the red and the white: DuQuesne. *Coptic invocation*. §§ 20, 103.

⁴⁴ Hesychius. *s v kuon*. I notice a rare, if not unique, Roman- period head of a mummy-mask which depicts a backwards- looking jackal whose tail terminates in a large uraeus, a motif wonderfully rich in symbolism: D. Kurth. *Der Sarg der Teüris* [Mainz 1990] 65 fig 23.

⁴⁵ C. Kerényi. *Asklepios* [Princeton, 1959] 10, 32.

⁴⁶ P.B. Adamson. The Association of the Dog with Deities of Healing, *Medicina nei Secoli* 1[1978] 53-68. In a number of religious traditions, including the Indian, dogs are also important in *tabu*-breaking:cf. j. Deppert. *Rudras Geburt* [Wiesbaden, 1977] 94-109. An interesting juxtaposition of the snake and the dog: *Prudentius Peristephanon* X 256-257: Venerem precaris, conprece et simiam. / placet sacratus aspis Aesculapii, / crocodillus ibis et canis vur displicent?

⁴⁷ R. Salomon. Epigraphic remains of Indian traders in Egypt, *JAOs* 3 [1991] 731-736.