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6

Goddess Androgyny: Coatlicue of the Aztecs

Lanier Graham

Coatlicue was the great goddess of the Aztec people. Like great goddesses around the world, she was regarded as the origin of life, the mother of the gods and of all being. Because of her there are humans, animals, rocks, trees, the sun and moon and stars. She also was the one who devoured all that is at the end of its lifespan. In short, she was a typical great goddess who developed during a Stone Age context and remained very much alive among the Aztecs.

Images of her are considered among the most horrific ever made. A monumental stone statue of her in the National Museum in Mexico City is nine feet tall. It was found near the ceremonial center of the old Aztec capital (now Mexico City) in 1790 by Antonio Leon y Gama. Her head consists of a double-serpent, two rattlesnakes looking at each other. Although only her head can be seen, her entire body probably was visualized as a double-serpent.

Her hands and feet are claws. At her center is a large skull. Her skirt is made up of interwoven serpents, hence her name in the Nahuatl language means "she of the serpent skirt." Her necklace is made of human hearts and hands, apparently symbolic of life and death and life again. Her sagging breasts speak of having nourished millions of lives.

Many think this is one of the most hideous images ever carved. After the statue was excavated by the Spanish in the late 18th century, it was

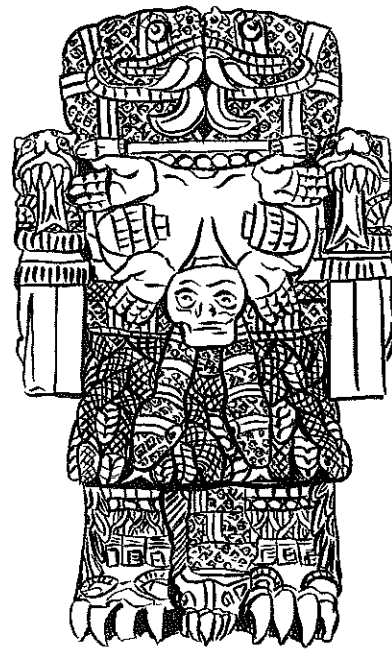


Figure 6.1 Goddess Androgyne: Coatlicue of the Aztecs. (Copyright Hrana Janto.)

put back into the earth. Why was it reburied? Many have reported that it was because she is so ugly. That makes a good story, but a more rational answer is probably that the statue was reburied because the Christians feared her image would stir up the old faith. Indeed, when the statue was rediscovered in the 19th century and placed back in the main plaza, local people began to make offerings. It was quickly removed to a museum, and there it has remained.

She also was called Cihuacoatl, which means "Serpent Lady," and Toci, which means "our Grandmother." As Our Grandmother, she was the patron of women who died in childbirth. Among her many epithets is "Goddess of Life, Death, and Rebirth."

Many modern scholars often speak of Coatlicue only in connection with life and death. This is a narrow view of the subject and a dualistic way of thinking that overlooks the fact that continuous rebirth is what traditional metaphysics is all about. All great goddesses are involved with the eternal cycle of life, death, and rebirth, not just life and death.

"Serpent Lady" also was the mother of Feathered Serpent, who is pictured from time to time as Double-Serpent. It is difficult for modern minds to comprehend, but Feathered Serpent and Double-Serpent are

interchangeable metaphors in this mythology. Mother and son were seen as aspects of each other, not as totally separate beings. She is a double-serpent and he is a double-serpent. They are reflections of each other.

Chronology of Coatlicue

When did the worship of Coatlicue begin? There is not enough evidence to form a detailed theory. However, she probably is as old as the Aztec people. How old are they? Their own legends say they entered the Valley of Mexico from somewhere to the northwest during the 1100s. That might mean the northwest of what is now Mexico or the southwest of what is now the United States where variations of the Uto-Aztecan language group are still spoken as far north as northern California and Nevada.

The Aztecs claim to have started their capital of Tenochtitlan in 1325. That capital eventually became Mexico City. Their nomadic tribe learned a great deal about the "civilized arts" of writing and painting, as well as monumental art and architecture, from the Maya and the Toltec. By the 15th century the Aztecs had constructed a large empire that was conquered by the Spanish in 1519.

Elements of the Coatlicue legend suggest that some of her myth may have been borrowed from the Toltec people who were greatly admired by the Aztecs. Indeed, the Aztec traced their descent from the Toltecs, who were the most powerful empire in central Mexico until about 200 years before the Aztecs arrived. Little is known about them because the Aztecs destroyed most of the material culture of the Toltec capital at Tula, some fifty miles north of Tenochtitlan, in order to construct their own capital. The Toltec origin is uncertain, but some think their ancestors came from Teotihuacán. Near Mexico City, Teotihuacán for many centuries was sacred to the Maya and the Aztec and most of Mesoamerica.

The monumental statues of Coatlicue now known are thought to be not earlier than about 1400–1500 CE, but they could be much older. Those large statues obviously were major public monuments. However, there is evidence that small statues of her were made for private use. A small stone example was exhibited at the University Art Gallery of California State University, East Bay, in 2008. As stone cannot be dated scientifically, there is no way to determine its age. However, it obviously has been well worn, that is to say intensely worshiped over a long period. It could be only a few centuries old, or it could be quite old, possibly older than 1500 CE.¹

Her Mythology of Nonduality

A great deal can be learned about a society by looking at its creation myth where the core values of a society are reflected. For example, if a male deity and a female deity are regarded as co-creators, the gender named first in the myth usually is the gender held in higher regard by that society. In the typical mythology of the Oaleolithic world, the supreme being is the great goddess.

She is dominant in Old Stone Age societies around the world. She creates all. She does it alone, with no need for a male partner. This is one of the symbolic meanings of Coatlicue being visualized as a double-serpent. In the New Stone Age the typical great goddess usually gives birth to a great god who becomes her partner as co-creator of the universe. This could be Brother Sun and Sister Moon, but more often is Mother Earth and Father Sky.

In other words, in the Aztec world, the great Female and the great Male together constitute another way of understanding the great double-serpent. Male and female are one. In traditional mythological systems, at the highest level of understanding there is no duality. There is only one supreme reality that can be perceived from different perspectives. From lower levels of awareness, one is always perceiving dualities. From higher levels of awareness, there is only oneness.

A powerful image of the double-serpent being worshiped on an altar is an illustration of about 1500 CE in the Aztec-Mixtec book known as the *Codex Fejervary-Mayer*. The deity being visualized probably is Quetzalcoatl, god of civilization, learning, and the shamanic priesthood; but it also could be his mother Coatlicue. Why? Because they are aspects of each other—the “One which is not Two.” Without further information, one cannot tell which aspect of divinity is being pictured, the male or the female.²

A related image of Quetzalcoatl is on a stone found in Veracruz, also dated to about 1500 CE.³ His two hands are birds, while his two legs are serpents. In other words, this is a variation on the theme of Feathered Serpent—another striking image of nonduality. There is a certain degree of interchangeability among these symbols. Both Double-Serpent and Feathered Serpent are visual metaphors for the ultimate nonduality of Heaven and Earth.

The deep meaning of the bi-singular symbol is the ultimate nondualistic reality of oneness. The reference is not only to the nature of the gods and goddesses, but to the nature of human consciousness. In public myths,

supreme qualities are associated with deities. In the secret teachings of the great wisdom paths, supreme qualities are associated with human beings who have moved beyond their self-centered ego to a transcendent truth. Once this level of understanding is gained, there is a new vision. Reason and intuition are one. Heart and Mind are one. Male and Female are one. Heaven and Earth are one. Humanity and God are one.

To realize the full truth of nonduality is to attain the full potential of our humanity. To know that fully is to have become an androgyne. This has nothing to do with sex or gender. The androgyne is a mythic metaphor. Androgyny is a quality of consciousness. Androgyny takes place when one has attained enlightenment, or the state of grace, or whatever words are used to describe that which cannot be described.

The Science of Nonduality

Modern brain science has revealed aspects of how the human mind perceives the world in ways that help explain types and qualities of consciousness. During the 1940s and 1950s, in an effort to relieve symptoms of severe epilepsy, surgeons cut that part of the brain that connects the two sides of the brain, the corpus callosum. This is the large bundle of nerves that connects the left hemisphere and the right hemisphere of the frontal cortex, the place where higher functions are processed. Those operations often relieved the worst symptoms.

A team of psychologists, including Roger Sperry at the California Institute of Technology, tested these patients to see what the effects of the surgery were. It was found that these two sides of the brain are pathways for two very different kinds of perception. The left brain processes linear information, for example, timelines, lines of writing, lines of math, individualized patterns, and other types of measurable, divisible realities. The right brain processes intuitive information, for example, feelings, colors, spaces, and synthetic patterns. Roger Sperry received a Nobel Prize for this discovery in 1981.

The left brain came to be known as the “male” brain, and the right brain came to be known as the “female” brain. The left brain also was commonly called the “dominant” brain. This naming followed the stereotype of men, who (it is said) usually think reason is more important than feeling. This naming also followed the gender stereotype of modern society as a whole that asserts males are naturally more “rational” than females, and females are naturally more “intuitive” than males.

This brain model entered popular culture during the 1970s and 1980s, bringing with it a great deal of superficial oversimplification among the trendy, and some interesting theorizing among the thoughtful. Individuals of different genders were said to be either "right-brain" or "left-brain" personalities.⁴

Clinical tests with EEG machines have tended to support this theory. Some people approach the world primarily in left-brain ways. Some people approach the world primarily in right-brain ways. Particular moments of perception literally "light up" on brain scans. For example, when just listening to music the right brain is active. When analyzing that music, the left brain goes to work.

Whole societies have been called "right brain" or "left brain" by widely respected theorists such as Gregory Bateson and Julian Jaynes.⁵ Tribal societies are certainly more intuitive than modern societies. One study by Leonard Shlain strongly suggests that when tribal people learn to read and write, their theologies transform. When alphabetic reading and writing, which is linear and nonpictorial, replaces picture-writing, which is inherently intuitive, traditional goddess-oriented theologies are replaced by god-oriented theologies.⁶

Modern urban societies with education systems that stress "reading, writing, and arithmetic" clearly produce individuals who give special value to left-brain modes of perception and tend to think that left-brain types of reality are the most real type. Such people think rational reality is the only true reality. People so educated seem less able to recognize and deal with profoundly important intuitive realities such as art, love, and divinity. The traditional spiritual teachings argue for rational/intuitive balance.

As scientific testing continued during the 1980s and 1990s, females turned out to be naturally more balanced in their daily perceptions than males because their corpus callosums are larger. Less lateralization enables more equality of attention.

One very disturbing study of modern brain shapes as they have developed over the last century showed that the left brain is getting larger and larger while the right brain is getting smaller and smaller relative to each other. If this trend continues, the human race could become a very intelligent race with little or no capacity to feel.⁷

Some of the most interesting laboratory tests on unusual individuals, such as yogis, revealed that such people tend to have extremely high degrees of what is called by the scientists "interhemispheric phase coherence." In other words, the energy field generated by their right brain and the energy field generated by their left brain tend to be equal. This

indicates that they are thinking and feeling with equal intensity and clarity. Such mental harmony is said to be typical of enlightened human beings.

This clinical finding is precisely what students of comparative religion would expect. The traditional wisdom paths tell us that to become whole we must bring heart and mind into harmony. The absolute balance of our capacity to be rational and our capacity to be intuitive is said to be the goal of the mystic quest.

In many religions, the psychological unification of both sides of consciousness is called the "sacred marriage." Visual metaphors for "sacred marriage" around the world include the Double-Serpent and the Androgyne. Coatlicue was both.

Her Legends

Many stories about Coatlicue have come down from Aztec times. How is it that she became the mother of the sun and moon and stars? There are many variations of the story but a general consistency. One story tells of how she became pregnant one day without realizing it. All she did was put into her skirt a little ball of blue hummingbird feathers that had fallen from the sky. After she had finished sweeping the temple, she looked for the feathered ball but it had disappeared.

The result was a "virgin birth"—a miraculous conception—"without sin." But her children did not believe and were sure she had dishonored the family by a sexual sin. So they planned to kill her. They gathered for the attack. She stood facing them on a high hill.

She was saved by the sudden birth of her son, who emerged fully grown and fully armed. He slew hundreds of the unbelieving children who were stars. The head of the sister who had led the attack was thrown into the sky, and that became the moon. Few stars survived the Battle of Serpent Hill.

Huitzilopochtli, the hummingbird who also was the Sun God, was her other famous son, along with Quetzalcoatl. Hummingbird was at the very center of public Aztec mythology. Feathered Serpent played a more esoteric role. Sometimes known by the shamanic name of "Hummingbird Wizard," Huitzilopochtli as a war god led the Aztecs into battle, and as the sun itself battled his way across the sky each day fighting the demons of darkness. At night he returned to his mother, the Earth, to be spiritually replenished. Physically, in order to live and to radiate life-giving light, he had to be nourished with human blood. Unless there was a sacrifice of a living human heart, the sun would not rise the next day.

Another creation myth has come down that many think is rooted in an even older level of Aztec mythology. It begins with Coatlicue as a strange-looking, frog-like creature swimming in the waters of chaos before there was an order in the universe. In other words, she was formless omnipotentiality. She had the capacity to take on any form. Then, it is said, Feathered Serpent and Tezcatlipoca ("Smoking Mirror") decided that there should be order in the universe. They turned themselves into serpents and divided Coatlicue so that her lower half became the earth and her upper half became the heavens.

That males are dividing up a female in this version of the story suggests it is a fairly late Stone Age or post-Stone Age rendering of the narrative with the distinctive element of patriarchy. In the original Old Stone Age version of the story, she probably divided herself by herself in order to be all that is.

In addition to daily blood sacrifices to feed her, there were two major public festivals devoted to Coatlicue. The spring festival was called Tozozontli. It took place at the start of the rainy season. As the goddess of agriculture, Coatlicue was offered the first fruits of the season. In the autumn, a hunting ritual was called Quecholli. This included a human sacrifice. The fact that as a fertility goddess she was associated with hunting and agriculture suggests she may have been worshiped since the prefarming era of the Old Stone Age.

Most scholarly discussions of Coatlicue, from the short ones on the Internet to the longer ones in books, usually stress her horrific aspects. Indeed, she often is compared with Kali, the fierce Hindu deity. A more balanced view would include how much she was loved as the everlasting bringer of the bounty. Here are some lines from an Aztec hymn:

Hail to our Mother
who causes the yellow flowers to blossom,
who scatters the seeds of the agave plants,
as She comes forth from Paradise. . . .

Hail to our Mother
who pours forth white flowers in abundance
who scatters the seeds of the agave plants,
as She comes forth from Paradise.

Hail to the Goddess
who shines in the thorn bush like a bright butterfly.

Ho! She is our Mother, Goddess of the Earth.
She supplies food in the desert to the wild beasts, and causes them to live.

Thus, she appears as an ever-fresh model of liberality toward all flesh.

And what the goddess of the earth does for the wild beasts, so does she also for the green herbs and the fishes.⁸

In the traditional mythology of the great goddess around the world, she is the material world, all of it. Her body is what makes up all that can be seen, touched, smelled, and tasted. All these are her gifts.

When the supreme reality is thought of as a couple, during and after the New Stone Age, she is matter and he is spirit. He activates; she manifests. He starts what is the intention of each moment with an impulse. She completes that invisible intention by bringing it into physical reality, the realm of space and time.

In earlier versions of traditional mythology, Old Stone Age versions, she is both matter and the spirit that animates matter. In short, she is the singular totality of doubleness. She is the cosmic androgyne.

Notes

1. Illustrated in Ianier Graham, *Global Vision: A Survey of World Art*, pt. 2, *Stone Age, Bronze Age, and the Americas* (Brentwood, CA: World Art Press, 2008), cat. no. 96.

2. This image may be found, with difficulty, in expensive facsimiles, and more easily online as External Links to the "Codex Fejervary-Mayer" article on Wikipedia. This contextual analysis of the image first appeared in Ianier Graham, *The Tribal Culture of Our Ancestors: An Overview of Shamanic Art from the Stone Age to the Iron Age* (San Francisco: World Art Press, 1976), and again in Ianier Graham, *Sacred Visions: A Survey of World Art and Architecture* (Antioch: World Art Press, 1991), 1:91. For a general overview of Mesoamerican codices of this type, see Elizabeth H. Boone, *Stories in Red and Black: Pictorial Histories of the Aztecs and the Mixtecs* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000).

3. Illustrated in Mary E. Miller and Karl A. Taube, *An Illustrated Dictionary of the Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 141.

4. The most widely read books on this aspect of modern brain science have been written by Robert Ornstein, a psychologist who has taught at the UC San Francisco Medical Center and Stanford University. His best-known books include *The Psychology of Consciousness* (1972), *The Evolution of Consciousness: The Origins of the Way We Think* (1992); and *The Right Mind: Making Sense of the Hemispheres* (1997).

5. Bateson's better-known books include *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1975), *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity* (1979), (with Mary Catherine Bateson) *Angels Fear: Towards an Epistemology of the Sacred* (1987), and *A Sacred Unity: Further Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1991). From conversations I had with Bateson between 1975 and 1980 came a study guide to suggest research directions for students: "Bimodal Culture: The

Graham-Bateson Model, an Outline Summary" in *BOA: Bulletin of the Archives of the Art Information Center* 20 (1979). Our conversations were recorded in "Metalinguistic Mentations: Conversations with Gregory Bateson," in *Iconography of Infinity: Essays on Art and Philosophy* 4, no. 3 (1995). The projects we worked on together inspired *The Bimodal Brain: Parallel Structures in Art, Psychology, and Anthropology*, ed. Lanier Graham (1995). Jaynes, a research psychologist at Princeton University, is best known for his book, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (1977).

6. Leonard Shlain, *The Alphabet vs. The Goddess* (New York: Viking, 1998). Shlain also has written *Finding Balance: Reconciling the Masculine/Feminine in Contemporary Art and Culture* (2006).

7. Reported in Lanier Graham. "The Divine Androgyne in Sacred Art," a paper prepared for a conference of psychologists and anthropologists on "The Bicameral Mind" at the Esalen Institute, 1978. The finding reported is the relationship between the bicameral brain model and the sides of the traditional Androgyne image that are male and female. There was found to be a one-to-one relationship in Androgyne images from many parts of the world over thousands of years: Tribal America, Hindu India, Taoist China, the ancient Near East, and Judeo-Christian Europe. The proper right side of the Androgyne image, controlled by the left brain, is always male. The proper left side of the Androgyne image, controlled by the right brain, is always female. Androgyne images of this type, including those in the 1978 paper, are illustrated in Lanier Graham, *Duchamp and Androgyny: Art, Gender, and Metaphysics* (Berkeley: No-Thing Press, 2003).

8. This song is translated online in "Coatlicue," www.paganwiki.org/index.php?title=Coatlicue. The words are from "Hymn to the All Mother" translated in Daniel G. Brinton, *Rig Veda Americanus* (Philadelphia: Brinton, 1890). Brinton noted that Our Lady of Guadalupe first appeared on the site of an ancient Coatlicue temple. I have changed Brinton's past tense to present tense, and made other minor changes in the translation.

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Xochiquetzal: Goddess of Flowers and Love

Patrizia Granziera

Xochiquetzal ("flower feather" or "precious flower") was the goddess of flowers and love in ancient Mexico. Originally, she was a goddess of the Tlahuicas, a Nahuatl-speaking people who inhabited the southern half of the present state of Morelos—a region that was, and still is, renowned for its luxuriant vegetation and flowering trees. She was adopted into the Aztec pantheon when the cotton-producing area of southern Morelos was incorporated into the Aztec empire.

Xochiquetzal was the patron of the thirteen-day period of Aztec calendar that started with the day *ce xochitl* ("one flower"). The name Xochiquetzal, from *xochitl* ("flower" in Nahuatl), was related to femininity and thus to fertility. In the *Codex Magliabechiano* it is reported that all flowers were the product of Xochiquetzal's genitals. It is said that one day, while he was bathing, Quetzalcoatl masturbated and his sperm fell upon a rock and was transformed into a bat. The gods sent the animal to Xochiquetzal's house, where it bit off a piece of her vagina while she slept. From this flesh all sweet-smelling flowers originated.¹

Flowers were given considerable importance in Nahua world. "They were offered to the gods and given to leaders to strengthen them for their tasks and to affiliate them more closely with divine powers. Their fragrance was thought to be derived from gods and was equated with leadership." Sweet-smelling flowers like *yollaxochitl* (*Talauma mexicana* or Mexican magnolia), *izquixochitl* (*Bourreria buanita* or little strongbark), *cacaloxochitl* (*Plumeria acutifolia* or fragipani tree), and *tlilxochitl* (*Vanilla planifolia*, the plant from