

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE JAGUAR AND THE CAYMAN
IN SOUTH AMERICAN ICONOGRAPHY,
RELIGION, COSMOLOGY

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Once upon a time, there were two brothers. One made himself a hide-out at the top of an Azywaywa tree, the flowers of which the macaws used to come and eat. He had already killed a great many birds, when two jaguars appeared on the scene carrying gourds which they filled with nectar pressed from the blossoms on the tree. For several days running, the hunter watched the animals without daring to kill them, but in spite of his advice, his brother was less prudent. He shot at the jaguars without suspecting that they were invulnerable. The animals raised a storm, which shook the tree, bringing down both the hide-out and its occupant, who was killed instantly. They carried off the corpse to the underworld, the entrance of which was as small as an anthole, and they placed it on a wooden cross standing in bright sunshine.

The hero, after being changed into an ant, came to the jaguar's hut, where vessels full of honey were hanging. He learned the ritual songs, and every evening he resumed his human form and danced with the jaguars; in the day time he became an ant again.

When he returned to his village, he told his companions of all he had seen (Levi-Straus, 1973:34).

The above myth as told by the Tembe Indians of South America is typical of myths explaining the origin of a natural substance; in this case it is honey. However, as we look deeper into the myth, we not only discover that honey was given to the Indians by jaguars, but we also understand that these jaguars are to be feared, are capable of supernatural powers, and are invulnerable. These revelations are very valuable as we try to unfold the ancient stories and current mysteries of the role of the jaguar in South American iconography and religion.

Before proceeding, it must be noted that it is not only the jaguar which is central to South American myths and mysteries. Many other animals are represented with one of the most important being the alligator-like cayman. The cayman is as feared and revered as the jaguar by some Indians, and it is also believed to be the donor of such necessities as cultivated plants (Reed, 1977:742). Both the cayman and the jaguar have been widely represented in the

iconography and religion of South American Indians. Almost all aspects of the Indians' existence and well-being is believed to be affected by one of these two animals in some way. The task at hand is to determine which animal, if either, plays the more important role symbolically and otherwise. If this were to be judged quantitatively, we might suggest that it is the jaguar purely because there is more documentation on this animal. However, through a systematic approach it will be seen that the jaguar, in concordance with the amount of written work which represents it, seems to be afforded more importance in South American art, religion, cosmology, and modern life. This paper will compare and contrast the cayman and the jaguar with attention being focused on the nature of the Lanzon and the Obelisk Tello located at Chavin de Huantar, Peru.

First, it is necessary to define the cayman and the jaguar in terms of their respective environments and characteristics. The jaguar is a carnivore and can be found in the Amazonian jungle. Likewise, the cayman is also a meat-eater and its habitat includes the Amazon tributaries. The two animals often share the same living space, and are much more in contact with one another than one might think. Although the cayman rarely becomes terrestrial, the jaguar's favorite site for hunting in the area near particularly well-watered forests (Ewewr, 1973:211). In fact, even though the cayman and the jaguar are at the tops of their respective food chains, while the jaguar is hunted only by man, the cayman is a regular meal for a full-grown jaguar (Minton, 1973:50). In the survival of the fittest, the jaguar triumphs over the cayman in a direct manner.

Although the jaguar here obtains a point in its favor, the cayman plays a role in its environment of which no parallel exists in terms of the jaguar. The cayman has always eaten dangerous liver fluke which are known to infect sheep, cattle, and sometimes man (Ibid.:43). Also, many Indians once believed that by killing the caymans, they could increase the fish population by adding those fish upon which the cayman normally fed. This however, has been disproved. In fact, ". . . a decline in the fish population has paralleled the disappearance of the caymans" (Ibid.:43) This follows because in addition to controlling liver fluke, the body of the cayman destroys certain bacteria and sediment in the water which is harmful to the fish.

As the myth at the beginning of this essay suggests, the jaguar was the animal responsible for giving honey to the Indian. There are many other myths from various tribes which explain the origins of other resources gained from both jaguars and caymans. For example, although the frog is believed to be the giver of shamanistic abilities, the Tupi of the Amazon Valley relate that this frog can be

transmuted into a jaguar (Levi-Strauss, 1973:215). Also, according to Levi-Strauss, a fifth deviation of this myth is the transformation of the female frog into the male jaguar (Ibid.:250). Related to the acquisition of shamanistic powers is the giving of tobacco to the Indians by the jaguar. Here, tobacco can loosely be translated as hallucinogenic snuff. Again, according to Levi-Strauss, "tobacco comes into existence through the jaguar . . . [and] the jaguar comes into existence . . . through the invention of the bark tunics. The wearing of the bark tunics and the absorption of tobacco are two ways of entering into communication with the supernatural world" (Ibid.:368). Simply put, the jaguar was believed to have given tobacco to the people, and his image was carried on by humans through the wearing of painted bark tunics. These bark tunics combined with the use of tobacco helped produce the jaguar state of the shaman which was necessary to enter into the world of the supernatural (Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1975:47, 120).

In another myth the jaguar gives the Barasana Indians the spice, pepper. The jaguar is believed to have received this pepper directly from the creatress, Romi Kumu (S. Hugh-Jones, 1979:95). Locating the cayman in the origin of basic needs, Donald Lathrap notes that this animal is believed to have given the Indians one of their most important resources: cultivatable plants (Lathrap, 1977:346). He related that the "Great Cayman" gave humans manioc, the basic staple of many South American Indians, and also pepper. Here we see how both the cayman and the jaguar can be believed to have brought the same gifts to humans.

Other than that stated above, the cayman is relatively absent in most origin myths. Jaguars seem to play a much more universal role in these myths, although I was able to pinpoint the cayman in two others. In the first, the cayman is punished for having sex with a human woman and he is destined always to be eaten (Levi-Strauss, 1973:244). In the second, a red hot stone is plunged into the mouth of a cayman found eating his sons-in-law. This results in the burning and subsequent loss of his tongue (Ibid.:228). These two stories represent explanatory myths rather than those of origin, and in both the cayman is punished by man. In the myths I've encountered, there has been no evidence of jaguars being punished by man; in fact, in northwest Amazonia, jaguars are seen as being the closest counterpart of man in many ways (C Hugh-Jones, 1979:84). At any rate, the jaguar must share its limelight with the cayman as the latter's importance in origin myths cannot be overlooked.

Turning our attention to iconography, we find the feline motif in many and varied works of art -- particularly at the ceremonial center of Chavin de Huantar. Throughout

the Andes even today, sculpture, pottery, and other forms of art carry the mark of the jaguar. These pieces are not art for the sake of art, they are often connected in some way with the cult of the feline. For example, in Tiahuanacu the sculpted jaguar head is dominant, and a ceramic jar (Zahumador), feline in shape, is thought to be of ritual purpose (Osborne, 1952:135). Osborne cements the concept of the jaguar with that of the cult in the following statement: ". . . it is certain that a pre-Inca universal cult was associated with the worship of a feline deity . . . Today, all the tribes of the Amazonian jungle agree in according special worship to the jaguar" (Ibid.:134).

This is perhaps the most important concept in the religious/iconographic sphere of South America: that of tremendous emphasis being placed upon a feline deity. But why is the feline considered to be of such great importance to the Chavin art style? Michael Kan answers this question in the The Cult of the Feline by stating, "primarily because feline elements are the most omnipresent figurative devices, and, as Rowe (1967) suggests, are the elements that generally distinguish natural from supernatural or mythological representations" (Benson ed., 1970:76). The felines are often depicted in a highly stylized fashion, but with common features of actual jaguars. These include crossed canines, flaring lips, short noses, heavy jowls, and usually a general snarl.

One of the most general questions that comes to mind is that of the origin of such a cult that worshipped felines. Why did it exist? In answering such a complex question, we must not forget about the cayman. Although there is no known "cult of the crocodilian," this reptile has tremendous importance within the realm of religion/iconography and it is also depicted as a deity.

As was previously mentioned, both the cayman and the jaguar are the kings of their respective spheres of influence: the cayman in the water and the jaguar on the land. According to myths, they are also "kings" (deities) in the world of the supernatural. For example, the cayman is seen as the master of terrestrial water while the frog (the mother of the jaguar) is seen as the mistress of celestial water (Levi-Straus, 1973:249). In the meantime, to effect a polarity, the jaguar is also seen as the master of fire (Ibid.:250). In a similar situation the cayman plays the role of the master of rain in Chaco myths while the Black Jaguar is believed to be a personification of thunder (Ibid.:229).

Above, the cayman and the jaguar have been loosely identified as deities. The most important modern discovery to support this hypothesis is the temple at Chavin de

Huantar. In the temple are two very important columnesque statues: the Lanzon and the Obelisk Tello. The latter without question depicts two caymans as the main icons with jaguars and other beasts among them. Donald Lathrap has done extensive work on this piece and is the main promoter of cayman as deity. His arguments, however, are not as strong when attempting to downplay the role of the jaguar in favor of the cayman.

The Obelisk Tello, according to Lathrap, is a complete and detailed model of the cosmos (Donnan, ed., 1985:249). There are two fairly obvious caymans depicted on it; one of which is the Great Cayman of the Sky, and the other the Great Cayman of the Water and Underground. The two are divided by a thin strip which represents normal, everyday life. Between these three areas are jaguars giving forth the images of plants. The jaguar is portrayed as a mediator between the natural and the supernatural. This is also demonstrated in The Palm and the Pleiades where the Barasana Indians believe that "jaguars are conceived of as mediators between the human world and spirit world of the ancestors" (S. Hugh-Jones, 1979:125).

Lathrap's hypothesis is believable even though the obelisk's namesake, Julio Tello, describes the piece as representing only jaguars. The major jaguar deity depicted at Chavin is not Tello's obelisk, however, but the Lanzon.

The Lanzon is believed by Lathrap to post-date the Obelisk Tello. According to Michael Kan, this image has many of the feline elements common to other jaguar-oriented works including the upturned mouth with long upper canines, the large rounded nostrils, and the eccentric rounded eye (Benson, ed., 1970:77). Many of these and other feline characteristics are also present on the Obelisk Tello demonstrating how easy it is to confuse the cayman and the jaguar in iconography. In fact, the artist often intended the viewer to become confused. He wanted the observer to see simultaneous images of the same mythical being or to associate two animals whose attributes are joined (Benson, ed., 1970:79). However, according to leading archaeologists, the Obelisk Tello is mainly a representation of joined caymans while the Lanzon is a representation of the Feline.

As has been established, the jaguar was conceived of as "Master of Fire" and the cayman as "Master of Terrestrial Water." It seems only logical to pursue these deities in terms of myths about the cosmologies of the ancient South American peoples. This subject is too broad for the purposes of this essay, but a brief overview will be presented here.

In the Kogi cosmology, the universe consists of nine disks piled on top of one another. Each of these disks or layers represents a different world of beings. Humans are believed to inhabit the disk at the center, while the second disk appears to be the birthplace of the first mythical jaguar in creation (Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1975:55). This must be where the divine jaguars live. Underneath the human world is the evil side of the universe (demonstrating a duality) where the Tundebo believe that the devil lives. The devil is also a jaguar (Ibid.:46).

The Barasana have a different view of the cosmos which includes a trinity-like entity. It consists of one large and dominant predator made up of three parts: the eagle in the sky, the jaguar on land, and the anaconda in the water (many times the anaconda is substituted for the cayman) (S. Hugh-Jones, 1979:124). This is similar to Lathrap's view of the Obelisk Tello in one important way. He states, ". . . the Obelisk Tello represents a standard sort of trinity, with the whole standing for 'the Great Cayman' as Creator and Master of the Fish; and with the two discrete depictions standing for a sky deity and a deity of the water and underworld respectively" (Lathrap, 1977:341). Many other South American myths depict a trinity-like entity with the jaguar on land, the cayman in the water, and the happy eagle in the sky.

Although the jaguar and the cayman have thus far been attributed equal status in religion and iconography, the shaman and shamanism in general are ultimately and universally connected to the jaguar. For the most part, the cayman is excluded from all references to shamanism. What follows are the findings of several studies which illustrate the extensive importance of the jaguar over the reptile.

Very broadly, Joannes Wilbert states, "The shaman is the jaguar, and vice versa" (Wilbert, 1974:69). What this means is that often shamans and jaguars are thought to be almost identical, at least equivalent, in their powers, but each has his own sphere of action (Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1975:44). Why is this? In many parts of South America, the shaman as Jaguar acts as helper, protector, aggressor, or healer depending on the task at hand. This does not mean that the man literally changes himself into a jaguar, but rather dons a jaguar pelt, paints his face, and takes various hallucinogenic drugs, usually snuff or Hihi (Ibid.:33), which are believed to help him see as the jaguar sees. The shaman wishes to become like the jaguar because of the extended beliefs about the animal's prowess and deity-like qualities.

The shaman is also like the jaguar in terms of his role as mediator. A shaman using hallucinogenic drugs is said to

be able to communicate between the cosmic levels previously outlined (S. Hugh-Jones, 1979:125). Stephen Hugh-Jones says of the shaman/jaguar, "very powerful shamans . . . are able to change into jaguars at will, to keep jaguars like other men keep dogs, and to become jaguars on death" (Ibid.:124).

The main discrepancy concerning shaman/jaguars and other South American Jaguar ideals (the cult of the feline) is in the way the two are practiced. In other words, a shaman taking drugs and entering the world of the jaguar is experiencing something very personal. On the other hand, the very definition of a cult (such as in the cult of the feline) is a community of people all united in the pursuit of one common goal. In essence, what is being played upon is the group and their idea of "jaguarness" versus the individual and his ideas. This conflict was not solved in my research and may just remain as two sides of the same coin, each separate. However, Adolf E. Jensen does say, "a wide gap separates shamanistic practices from religious cult by the very fact that an individual takes the place of the community--the community which would recall its essential humanity in joint activity" (Jensen, 1963:231).

As I've stated, I found no direct evidence connecting the cayman to the shaman. However, one very odd bit of information about the cayman does correspond to the shaman in the state of the jaguar. South American caymans differ from American and Chinese alligators in that they possess bony armor underneath their belly skin rather than on their backs like most crocodillians (Minton, 1973:33). Curiously, when Colombian Indians were asked how a shaman turns into a jaguar, they replied, "To become a jaguar they turn their bellies upside-down. What is below, is up, and what is up, is below. The heart is on the back, and the backbone is where the belly was" (Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1975:120). In sum, the shaman-turned-jaguar's body structure is much like that of the cayman with the back being soft and the stomach being bony.

At the conclusion of this essay, the original thesis statement needs to be modified. Whether or not the jaguar is more important than the cayman is largely an opinion question to be left up to the reader to decide. The evidence presented here may lead one to conclude that the jaguar was indeed more important -- at least more visible. Perhaps much more data on caymans is yet to be published judging from the activities of Donald Lathrap. In any event, the cayman and jaguar both occupy an important place in world literature in both ancient and present South American cosmology, iconography, and religion. It may be that the theory of the mythical animal which is a combination of cayman and jaguar may need expansion. A

single figure carrying iconographic symbols of other animals is fairly common (Gary Urton, personal communication). For example, in the River Trombetas region, Frikel noted something representing a "water-jaguar" according to the Kochuyana (Levi-Strauss, 1968:121). Also, northern Manab, and in Esmeraldas, the god Cocijo is represented as a merging of feline and serpentine characteristics (Wilbert, 1974:69). This may be the next step in the evolution of comparison and contrast of these two animals. In any event, as Geoffrey H.S. Bushnell states in his concluding remarks of The Cult of the Feline, "In South America, felines are widespread but are not universally important . . ." (italics mine), leaving room for the mysterious cayman.

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