A. K. Coomaraswamy's Interpretation of Chthonic Myths and Its Impact on Mircea Eliade's History of Religions

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Abstract

This study examines the intellectual relationship between Mircea Eliade's history of religions and the Traditionalist School, with particular attention to Ananda K. Coomaraswamy's influence. Although Eliade's work has been widely debated through both critical deconstruction and reconstruction, its connection to Traditionalist thought has received limited scholarly attention. The Traditionalist School, initiated by René Guénon and further developed by Coomaraswamy and others, understood "tradition" as deriving from primordial and universal metaphysical principles that transcend historical and cultural boundaries. The paper analyzes Coomaraswamy's interpretations of chthonic myths, focusing on two later works: "The Rape of a Nāgī" (1937) and "On the Loathly Bride" (1945). In these studies, Coomaraswamy interpreted mythological motifs such as serpents, dragons, and transformative marriages as symbolic expressions of primordial unity, cosmic polarity, and mystical reintegration. He presented the serpent as both the original totality of existence and, in later mythological stages, as a negative or chaotic force opposed to solar and divine order. The study further explores how Coomaraswamy's concepts and methodology influenced Eliade. While Eliade adopted key Traditionalist notions such as archetypes, symbolic correspondence, and the coincidence of opposites, he transformed them by removing their normative metaphysical claims and reinterpreting them in terms of universal human religious experience. Unlike Guénon's static and doctrinal traditionalism, Coomaraswamy's dynamic interpretative approach, grounded in concrete cultural expressions, provided Eliade with methodological inspiration.

Keywords: history of religion, traditionalist school, chthonic myth

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Introduction

Following the death of the historian of religion Mircea Eliade, his research methods and achievements have been subjected to rigorous criticism. Debates concerning Eliade have, on the one hand, sought to "deconstruct" the "myth" he constructed, while, on the other hand, they have represented attempts to "reconstruct" Eliadean religious studies (Rennie, 1996). However, within these parallel debates, the relationship between Eliade's history of religion and the Traditionalist School has been largely overlooked.

The Traditionalist School, also known as the Perennial Philosophy School, is a branch of thought that emerged in 1921 with a series of writings by the thinker René Guénon (1886–1951) and was further developed by thinkers such as A.K. Coomaraswamy (1877–1947), Julius Evola (1898–1974), and Fritschof Schuon (1907–1998). In this intellectual tradition, "tradition" does not denote historically formed specific customs or values, or specific divisions indicating stages of culture, but is treated more holistically in terms of value as something opposed to modernity.

Guénon says that "tradition" has its origins in ahistorical and transhuman "universal principles," or "primordial tradition." All traditions other than modern civilization are guided by revelations from these principles and are, therefore, essentially the same "normal" traditional civilization (Guénon, 1942, pp. 31–32). The arts, sciences, and other fields are based on "metaphysics," the recognition of higher principles, and each is an application of that (Trufas, 2010). Traditionalists believe that this superiority of intellectual intuition over reason or "pure metaphysics" can be found not only in the mystical literature of the East and the West but also in all oral traditions.

Primarily known only to a select group of scholars and general readers, mainly in Europe, the Traditionalist School gained broader attention in the 2000s following the successive publication of its works in America. The publication of academic research by Spineto and Sedgwick (Sedgwick, 2004; Spineto, 2001) furthered this scholarly reappraisal. Consequently, it became apparent that several key concepts forming Eliade's theoretical framework—such as "axis mundi" and "archetype"—were borrowed from the works of traditionalists like Guénon and Evola (Pisi, 1998, p. 97, p. 60; Spineto, 2001, p. 67). Among these, art historian and thinker A.K. Coomaraswamy has been regarded as exerting a greater influence on Eliade than Guénon himself, particularly in terms of concepts and methodology (Pisi, 1998, p. 51). This study examines Coomaraswamy's works, which display marked similarities with the field of the history of religion, specifically his research on chthonic myths, and attempts to explore the relationship of influence between the two.

Coomaraswamy's Interpretation of Chthonic Myths

Eliade points out that in an early period, Coomaraswamy's work had "a growing familiarity with some problems of the history of religions." "The symbolism of chthonian fertility represented by the Magna Mater, and the aquatic cosmogonies, rituals, and mythologies" are treated in these works (Eliade, 1979, pp. 168–169). Nevertheless, Coomaraswamy's fascination with "chthonic" myths and symbols persisted until the very end of his life. Below, by examining two works written during his later years, we will glimpse Coomaraswamy's thought and his influence on the history of religion.

"The Rape of a Nāgī: An Indian Gupta Seal"

"The Rape of a Nāgī," written in 1937, is an article written by Coomaraswamy after he became a research fellow at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. It interpreted a Gupta-period seal in the museum's collection through the perspectives of mythology and iconography. In this article, he interpreted the motif of "Garuda (the eagle) carrying off the serpent-woman Nāgī", characteristic of ancient Indian iconography, as representing the fundamental opposition between sun and serpent. Through comparative analysis of several illustrations, Coomaraswamy posited that what the Garuda, the sun-bird, was tearing apart is Nāgī's serpentine form, which simultaneously represented the manifestation of Nāgī's human nature and brought forth ecstasy. He further asserted that behind this mythological expression lies a metaphysical meaning: the reintegration (union) of light and darkness derived from primordial oneness.

> We shall find that … in the older Indian ontology whatever is evil is represented by the 'snake skin' or other reptilian integument; and that the procession of any individual principle, whether that of a human or divine 'person,' is thought of as a 'casting of the snake-skin,' from which the purified being emerges, 'just as a blade of grass is pulled from its sheath.' (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. 334)

Coomaraswamy, in order to understand the actual content and raison d'être of the iconography, referred "as usual to much older and pre-Buddhist literary sources" (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. 334) and focused on the conflict between angels and Titans (serpents). Here, he assigned to the serpent the negative aspect of the bipolar opposition structure comprising darkness versus light, evil versus good. Creation myths in which a sky god vanquishes the serpent—a symbol of darkness, the underworld, and water—are widely found across the world. In India, too, it is the sun god Indra who vanquishes the primordial serpent Vṛtra. Based on this binary opposition, in myth, serpents and dragons are often regarded as "evil", "to be vanquished", or "ugly". Furthermore, Coomaraswamy interpreted this opposition using older beliefs such as the cult of Vṛtra.

> The primordial serpent or dragon—really the Godhead, as distinguished from the proceeding God—is described as 'omniform,' or 'protean,' in accordance with the exemplarist doctrine of the first principle as being of a single form that is the form of very different things. There is accordingly something more than a simple opposition of the solar-angelic and lunar-titanic powers of light and darkness. (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. 334)

Coomaraswamy stated that "really the Godhead" possessing a chthonic nature, preceding those deities who would later be revered as gods—namely the solar deities—constituted the primordial single form, the foundational shape of all existence. Here, the serpent was emphasized as symbolizing the formless, or the totality of form that could become anything.

> Because of the temporal form of our understanding, we think and speak of the one as proceeding *from* the other, and of an eventful division of 'the light *from* the darkness' (Genesis), or of Heaven *from* Earth (Vedas, passim); and thus regarding the Supernal Sun, Eternal Avatār, or Messiah, as having most effectively cast off all adherent potentiality and as wholly in act, it is inferred by analogy that it lies within the competence of every separated creature to effect in the same way a riddance of evil, 'just as the serpent sheds its skin.' (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. 334)

The serpent (or dragon), originally regarded as the sole divine presence, embodied the "omniform" of all things. Its fundamental nature was primordiality (which Coomaraswamy expressed as the first principle) that resolved all oppositions. Yet, due to the limitations of human comprehension, we easily grasped phenomena through causality, perceiving one side of a binary opposition (positivity) as possessing the completeness to exclude the other. This, it was interpreted, constituted the "division of light and darkness" (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. 334). To illustrate an example where this separated state was reunited, Coomaraswamy cited the Vedic myth of the snake-skinned woman sanctified by Indra's light.

> Apālā (the 'Unwed'), being thrice drawn through the hub of the solar wheel, or in other words, by means of three successive 'deaths' and 'births,' is stripped of her reptilian aspects, and acquiring thus a 'sun-skin,' becomes the fitting bride of the solar Indra. (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. 335)

Coomaraswamy further elaborated by citing Meister Eckhart (1924, p. 292), that for the bride to become one with the sun, the death of the attributes of darkness—namely, "a death to all selfhood" and "a rejection of all private essence"—was required.

> 'The soul, in hot pursuit of God, becomes absorbed in Him, just as the sun will swallow up and put out the dawn'; in the same sense numerous Vedic texts describe the solar Indra as both the destroyer and the bridegroom of the Dawn. It may be called a law of metaphysics that a divinely inflicted 'death' is also an "assumption." (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. 336)

The experience of the soul being absorbed in God, as seen in Eckhart, was said to represent the same process as that of "Dawn" (that is, the bearer of darkness) being destroyed and then wed to the sun god Indra. Similarly, Nāgī also underwent the experience of being "devoured" and "raped" by the sun-eagle, which was interpreted as the mystical union where the individual self was annihilated and ecstatically assimilated into the Greater Self (the Immortal Self).

> If the Eagle, *noster Deus consumens*, really 'devours' the Nagi (…), this is not merely a consumption, but also an assimilation and incorporation; if the act of solar violence is a rape, it is also a 'rapture' and a 'transport' in both possible senses of both words. (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. 336)

In these interpretations, Coomaraswamy demonstrated that the conception of the "serpent" involved two distinct stages: one where it was perceived as the primordial unity and archetype of all things, and another where it was conceived as "negativity" placed in opposition to the "positive" qualities, such as the sun, (which may also be termed cultural or human qualities) established as "good" in the subsequent myths. He concluded that the iconography of The Rape of Nāgī expressed the assimilation and absorption of this second-stage "serpent" into the sun, based upon the original unity, in the form of "rape" (death, violence, and yet union, ecstasy).

"On the Loathly Bride"

In his essay "On the Loathsome Bride," written in 1945, which recounts the tale of a hideous woman's metamorphosis, Coomaraswamy introduced the folkloric variant of the serpent's primal nature seen above. In this work, Coomaraswamy examined the "Loathly Lady" tales

prevalent in medieval Europe and argued that this narrative—where an ugly woman transforms into a beautiful maiden through a "Fierce Kiss" with a hero—represented a universal mythic form symbolizing the marriage of earth and sun.

> We have so far seen that the heroic motif of the transformation of a hideous and uncanny bride into a beautiful woman cannot be regarded as peculiarly Celtic, but rather represents a universal mythical pattern, underlying all marriage, and one that is, in fact, the 'mystery' of marriage. In more than one case it is emphasized that the disenchantment is effected by a kiss. (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. 363)

Furthermore, he cited Slavic folk tales and the narratives employed by William Morris, stating that in the typical version of the "Fierce Kiss" legend, the maiden appeared not as an ugly woman, but in the form of a serpent or dragon.

> [T]he hero reaches the Otherworld, Underwave. The population is enchanted. He enters a castle. A great snake enters, and begs him, 'kiss me,' but he refuses. …[Finally,] He kisses it, and 'as soon as he had kissed it, the snake turned into a beautiful maiden, as beautiful as a maiden could be….' (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. 363)

> [A] beautiful woman, who tells him that in her enchanted form, from which she is released on only one day of each year, she is a Dragon, and that if he would win both her and the kingdom, he must kiss her in the dragon form, in which she will appear to him on the morrow. (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. 364)

According to Coomaraswamy, the ugly woman (often guardian of the fountain of life) whom the hero kisses shared a common origin with the pre-cosmic dragon or serpent found universally. These narratives could thus be identified with the heroic tales of world creation achieved by conquering (that is, marrying) the primordial dragon. The primordial dragon also symbolized the chaotic earth, inhospitable to humans, yet the source of life. Consequently, this form constituted "the mythological theme of the marriage of the sun god and the earth" (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. 353), signifying the transfer of sovereignty over the land, and could be found in mythologies beyond Europe.

Coomaraswamy drew parallels with the myth of Apālā in the Rig Veda, which was also discussed in the previous paper. Apālā, wishing for her barren land to be revitalized by the power (vital energy) of the sun god Indra, asked him to marry her, and Indra drank soma from her lips. Coomaraswamy pointed out that Apālā possessed the nature of the primordial serpent.

> The longer versions of the Brāhmaṇas make it clear that Apālā was originally 'of evil hue' and that the purifications are removals of her scaly reptilian skins, so that from the third she emerges in the fairest of all forms and as one to be embraced…. Beyond all question, Indra's drinking of Soma involves a Fier Baiser. (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. 357)

Indra's consort was given various names besides Apālā, but according to Coomaraswamy, these were all ultimately "forms of the Earth Goddess" and "as such represent Dominion; not the Ruler himself, but the Power, the Glory and the Fortune with which he operates" (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. 357). Referring to the hymn to the Earth Mother in the Atharva

Veda (vii.1), he stated: "The expression, 'shaking off the serpent,' i.e., casting her slough, is in itself a proof of Mother Earth's originally ophidian nature" (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. 357).

In this paper, Coomaraswamy (1) identified the divine marriage myth of heaven and earth as the archetype for the European legend of the "loathly woman", (2) pointed out that it possessed a universal structure also found in Indian mythology, and (3) noted that it constituted a form of the cosmogonic myth from chaos. Furthermore, (4) he argued that this marriage ultimately converged towards a mystical interpretation signifying the submission of the "individual self" (the outer man, the soul) to the "immortal self" (the inner man, reason).

> These two, cohabitant Inner and Outer Man, are at war with one another, and there can be no peace between them until the victory has been won and the soul, our self, this 'I,' submits. (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. 366)

In both papers, Coomaraswamy employed a dual interpretative approach: he interpreted iconography or folktales through chthonic mythological motifs and further interpreted such myths through mystical doctrines. This methodology demanded both a panoramic perspective encompassing myths and legends from various regions and a thorough mastery of myths and doctrines. Moreover, his interpretations possessed flexibility and clarity absent in previous mythological interpretations.

> [A]nd every such story has been told, at least in the beginning (however it may have been 'voided of content on its way down to us'), not merely for the amusement of 'children' whether young or old but also to expound a doctrine for the sake of those who have ears to hear and to whom it is given to understand the mysteries of the kingdom of God. (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. 366)

The nature of the "beginning" as envisaged by Coomaraswamy requires more detailed examination. Whether it signifies a specific epoch or civilization accompanied by highly abstract thought, as Guénon suggests, or whether it is an ontological reality shared within humanity's religious experience, as Eliade's "il tempo" derived from the creation myths of various cultures, cannot be thoroughly explored here. Nevertheless, when reading Coomaraswamy's understanding of myth below, it seems there is scope to interpret it as ontological.

> Myths are not distorted records of historical events. They are not periphrastic descriptions of natural phenomena, or 'explanations' of them; so far from that, events are demonstrations of the myths. The aetiological myth, for example, was not invented to explain an oddity, as might be supposed if we took account only of some isolated case. On the contrary, the phenomena are *exempla* of the myth. (Coomaraswamy, 1977, pp. 368–369)

In stating the above, Coomaraswamy likely intends to criticize the modern viewpoint that denies the sacredness of scripture itself by asserting that "myths were created by humans". He emphasizes the necessity of maintaining an intrinsic understanding that myths possess an irreducible primal quality and constitute the archetypes of the world. This is just as the marriage of the "loathly woman," and the hero constitutes the "archetype" of all human marriages, that is, it ontologically precedes all marriages.

Influence on Eliade

While Eliade did not recognize the academic value of Guénon, his evaluation of Coomaraswamy remained consistently favorable. In his essay "Ananda Coomaraswamy", originally written in 1937 (Eliade, 2004, pp. 241–247), he highly commended Coomaraswamy for demonstrating the coherence of Tradition through scholarly methodology and the possibility of a hermeneutics that coexists with it. Coomaraswamy's method was to illustrate the Primordial Tradition in literature and works of art, drawing on a wealth of sources from Eastern and Western classics. Such an unrestrained interpretive approach was a characteristic not seen in other oriental scholars. Coomaraswamy's methodology, which dealt with symbols from various religions as well as from India, was a tangible clue for the young Eliade in his search for a new direction in comparative religion. It should also be noted that several concepts found in Eliade—such as the "anthropo-cosmic correspondence," and "symbolism"— are common to those of Coomaraswamy and other Traditionalists (Spineto, 2001, pp. 66–67). Among these, the notion of the "archetype" in Coomaraswamy's works is most likely a direct source of Eliade's use of the term. Moreover, the coinciding polarities of "light and darkness" and "sun and serpent" observed in both papers would undoubtedly have influenced Eliade's theory of "the coincidence of opposites" as Pisi points out (1998, p. 54).

It is also significant that Pisi mentions that while Eliade borrowed the principal concepts forming the core of his historical-religious hermeneutics from traditionalists (particularly Coomaraswamy), he simultaneously emptied them of the ontological and normative value held by the interpreters of the philosophia perennis, employing them solely at a descriptive and morphological level (Pisi, 1998, p. 73). To supplement Pisi's observation, I would suggest that what Eliade placed in that emptied space was an "experience" common to all humanity. It required no initiation and was not restricted in its manifestation by any historical circumstances. Even if its modes of expression changed due to historical conditions, these were based on human experience reflecting archaic metaphysics and remained irretrievable (Eliade, 1988, p. 153). Such religious experiences must be grasped "on their own plane of reference", without being reduced to factors such as society, history, or psychology (Eliade, 1969, pp. 6–7).

For Eliade, what mattered was not the static, pure essence of "tradition" but rather the dynamism of irreducible individual religious phenomena expressed through human religious experience and the dynamism of reinterpreting them. In this respect, Eliade could not accept Guénon's approach (Eliade, 1988, pp. 152–153). On the other hand, the approach of Coomaraswamy seen in his later interpretative work on mythology involved extracting primordial meanings from motifs such as iconography and folk tales. Though strongly inclined towards mysticism, his interpretations possessed a dynamism that simultaneously places multiple stages of cognition in an overview while descending into the depths of the experiencer's spirit. This can be regarded as having exerted a certain influence upon Eliade's theory and methodology of the history of religion.

Conclusion

Coomaraswamy's later works are considered to bear a stronger influence of the transcendental and paternalistic Genon compared to his earlier and middle-period works. Lipsey referred to this period as "when he had reached his unique balance of metaphysical conviction and scholarly erudition" (Coomaraswamy, 1977, p. xxix). Nevertheless, examining Coomaraswamy's interpretation of the Chthonic myths during this period revealed several

points that closely approximate Eliade's history of religion. Firstly, his approach was cross-disciplinary, handling material not confined to the refined; secondly, the dynamism of his comprehensive interpretation; thirdly, the concepts enabling such comprehensive interpretation; and finally, his conviction in the autonomy of myths and doctrines. Although this study did not extend to a comparison of Coomaraswamy's early and middle periods, it revealed that the similarity to the mythological interpretation of the history of religion was evident even in his later work. While Guénon's traditionalism relinquished concreteness in favor of abstract thought, Coomaraswamy, who constantly sought to penetrate the depths of the human spirit by "interpreting" concrete objects, may have exerted a greater influence on Eliade than researchers have assumed.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The author further declares that, apart from Grammarly, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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