Patterns in Comparative Religion

by

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mankind's sufferings, died and rose from the dead to redeem them. That same "thirst for the concrete" which was forever thrusting the sky gods—with their remoteness, their impossibility, their indifference to the daily struggle—into the background, is shown in the importance given to the "son" of the sky god—to Dionysos, Osiris, Aleion and the rest. The "son" often invokes his heavenly father; but it is not his paternity that explains the all-important part he plays in the history of religion, but his "humanity", the fact that he definitely shares the lot of mankind, even though he passes beyond it in his periodic resurrection.

31. SKY SYMBOLISM

We have looked at a series of sky divinities, or divinities closely connected with the hierophany of the sky. In every case we have observed the same phenomenon of the withdrawal of the sky gods in face of more dynamic, concrete and familiar theophanies. However, it would be quite wrong to limit the hierophanies of the sky to divine or semi-divine figures issuing from them. The sacred nature of the sky appears in innumerable rites and myths which are not, in appearance at least, directly connected with any sky god. The sacred as manifested by the sky lives on in men's religious experience, after the actual sky god has faded into the background, in the symbolism of "height", "ascension", "centre", and so on. Then, too, we often find in such symbolism that while a fertilizing divinity has been substituted for the sky divinity, the celestial nature of the symbolism remains.

Mountains are the nearest thing to the sky, and are thence endowed with a twofold holiness: on one hand they share in the spatial symbolism of transcendence—they are "high", "vertical", "supreme", and so on—and on the other, they are the especial domain of all hierophanies of atmosphere, and therefore, the dwelling of the gods. Every mythology has its sacred mountain, some more or less famous variation on the Greek Olympus. All sky gods have certain high places set apart for their worship. The symbolic and religious significance of mountains is endless. Mountains are often looked on as the place where sky and earth meet, a "central point" therefore, the point through which the Axis Mundi goes, a region im-
pregnated with the sacred, a spot where one can pass from one cosmic zone to another. So, in Mesopotamian belief, "the Mountain of the Lands" unites earth and heaven, and in Indian mythology Mount Meru rises up in the centre of the world; above it the Pole Star sends forth its light. The Uralo-Altaic peoples also have a central mountain, Sumbur, Sumur or Semeru, above which hangs the Pole Star. According to Iranian belief, the sacred mountain Haraberazaiti (Harburz) is at the centre of the earth and is fastened to the sky. In the Edda, Himingbjorg is, as its name suggests, a "celestial mountain"; that is the point where the rainbow (Bifrost) touches the dome of heaven. Such beliefs are also to be found among the Finns, the Japanese and other peoples.

The mountain, because it is the meeting place of heaven and earth, is situated at the centre of the world, and is of course the highest point of the earth. That is why so many sacred places—"holy places", temples, palaces, holy towns—are likened to "mountains" and are themselves made "centres", become in some magic way part of the summit of the cosmic hill (cf. § 145). Mounts Tabor and Gerizim in Palestine were also "centres" and Palestine, the Holy Land, held therefore to be the highest place on earth, and to have been unaffected by the Flood. "The Land of Israel was not submerged by the deluge," says one rabbinic text. To Christians, Golgotha is the centre of the world, for it is the peak of the cosmic mountain and the spot where Adam was created and buried. According to the tradition of Islam, the highest spot on earth is the Ka'aba for "the Pole Star proves that ... it lies against the centre of heaven." The very names of some sacred temples and towers bear witness to this assimilation to the cosmic mountain: "the hill house", "the house of the hill of all lands", "the

1 Jeremias, Handbuch der altorientalischen Geisteskultur, Berlin, 1929, p. 130.
3 These are Buriat beliefs: Holmberg-Harva, Der Baum des Lebens, Helsinki, 1923, p. 41.
6 Text from Kisa'i, quoted by Wensinck, op. cit., p. 15.
mountain of storms”, “the union of earth and heaven” and so on.¹ The Sumerian term for ziggurat is u-nir (hill), which Jastrow interprets as meaning “visible from afar”.² The ziggurat was actually a “cosmic hill”, that is, a symbolic image of the cosmos; its seven levels represented the seven heavens of the planets (as at Borsippa), or were the colours of the world (as at Ur). The temple of Borobudur was itself an image of the cosmos and was built in the shape of a mountain. An extension of the sacredness of the temple (hill, centre of the world), to the whole town, made certain cities in the East “centres” themselves, peaks of the cosmic mountain, points of junction between the cosmic regions. Thus, Larsa was called, among other things, “the home of the junction between heaven and earth”, and Babylon, “the home of the foundation of the sky and the earth”, “the union of heaven and earth”, “the home of the luminous hill”, etc.³ In China, the capital of the perfect sovereign stood at the exact centre of the universe,⁴ that is, at the summit of the cosmic mountain.

We shall come back in a later chapter to this cosmological symbolism of the centre in which mountains play such an important part (§ 143). What we can note for the moment is the consecrating power of “height”. High places are impregnated with sacred forces. Everything nearer to the sky shares, with varying intensity, in its transcendence. “Height”, “what is higher” becomes transcendent, superhuman. Every ascent is a breakthrough, as far as the different levels of existence are concerned, a passing to what is beyond, an escape from profane space and human status. I need hardly add that the sacred value of “height” is explained by the sacred value of the upper regions of air, and therefore eventually by the sacredness of the sky itself. The mountain, the temple, the city, and so on are consecrate because they are given the attributes of the “centre”; originally, that is, they were assimilated into the highest point of the universe, and the point where heaven and earth meet. Consequently, the

¹ Dombart, Der Sakraturm: I Teil: Ziqqurat, Munich, 1920, p. 34.
³ Dombart, p. 35.
⁴ Granet, La Pensée chinoise, Paris, 1934, p. 324.
consecration conferred by rituals of ascension and the climbing of hills or of ladders owes its power to the fact that it is placing the believer in a higher celestial sphere. The richness and variety of ascension symbolism may at first look chaotic but, seen together, all such rites and symbols are explained by the sacred value of "height", that is, of the celestial. The transcending of the human condition by entering a sacred place (a temple or an altar), by some ritual consecration, or by dying, is expressed concretely as a "passage", a "rising", an "ascension".

32. ASCENSION MYTHS

Death means transcending the human state and "passing to what is beyond". In those religions which place the other world in the sky or in some higher sphere, the souls of the dead trudge up mountain paths, or clamber up a tree, or even up a rope. The usual Assyrian expression for dying is "grappling oneself to the mountain". And in Egyptian, myny, "grasp" or "grapple" is a euphemism for "die". The sun sinks between the mountains and the path of the dead to the other world always goes that way. Yama, the first to die in the mythical tradition of India, went by "the high passes" to show "the way to many men". Popular belief among the Uralo-Altaics is that the road taken by the dead goes up the hills; Bolot, a Kara-Kirghiz hero, like Kesar, the legendary king of the Mongols, enters the world beyond by going through a tunnel to the top of the hills—rather like an initiation trial. The shaman's journey to hell is made by climbing several very high mountains. The Egyptians preserved in their funeral texts the expression asket pet (asket means "step") which shows that the ladder offered to Ra for him to climb from earth to heaven is a real ladder. "The ladder is in place for me to see the gods", says the Book of the Dead. "The

gods are in the Kingdom of the ladder."

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9. RV, x, 14, 1.
The same path by which the souls of the dead go to the other world is also taken by those who, because of some exceptional condition or because they have carried out some efficacious rite, manage to enter heaven even while they are alive. This idea of "ascension" into heaven by means either of a rope, a tree, or a ladder, is fairly widespread in all five continents. I will mention only a few examples.

The Dieri tribe of Australia have a myth of a tree growing, by the power of magic, as high as heaven. The Numgahburran talk of two miraculous pines that grow till their tops touch the sky because a taboo has been violated. The Mara tell of a similar tree which their ancestors used to climb till they got to heaven, and climb down again. The Maori hero, Tawhaki's wife, who was a fairy from the sky, stayed with him only until their first child was born; after which she climbed up to the roof and disappeared. Tawhaki went up to heaven by clambering up a vine, and succeeded in getting back to earth afterwards. In other variations of the story the hero reaches the sky by climbing a cocoa-tree, a rope, a spider's web, riding on a kite, and so on. In the Hawaiian islands, they say he climbed up the rainbow; at Tahiti, that he climbed a high mountain and met his wife on the way. One fairly widespread myth in Oceania tells how the hero reached the sky by a "chain of arrows"; that is, by shooting one arrow into the sky, the second into the first, and so on till a chain of arrows stretched from heaven to earth.

Ascension by rope is to be found in Oceania, in Africa, in

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1 Weill, p. 28.
3 For further study, cf. Eliade, pp. 404 ff.
4 Van Gennep, no. 32.
5 Van Gennep, no. 44.
6 Van Gennep, no. 49.
South America, and North America. In almost the same places there exists the myth of ascension by a spider's web. Climbing a ladder into the sky was known in ancient Egypt, Africa, Oceania and North America. And the ascent might also be made by means of a tree, a plant, or a mountain.

33. ASCENSION RITES
For all these myths and beliefs there are corresponding concrete rites of "rising" and "ascension". The determining and consecrating of a place of sacrifice constituted a sort of sublimation of the profane space: "In truth the officiating priest makes himself a ladder and a bridge for reaching the celestial world," states the Taittiriya Samhita. In another passage, the same book shows the celebrant climbing up a staircase; having got to the top of the stake of sacrifice, he raises his hands and cries: "I have reached heaven, the gods; I have become immortal!" The ritual climbing up to heaven is a dārohana, a "difficult climb". A great many similar expressions can be found in Vedic writings. Kosingas, priest-king of some of the Thracian peoples (the Kebrenioi and Sykaiboai), threatens to leave his subjects and go to the goddess Hera by climbing a wooden ladder. Ascension to heaven by means of a ceremonial climbing of a ladder was probably part of the Orphic initiation. We certainly find it in Mithraic initiation. In the mysteries of Mithra the ceremonial ladder (climax) had seven rungs, each made of a different metal. According to Celsus (Origen, Contra Celsum) the first rung was lead, and corresponded to the "heaven" of Saturn, the second tin (Venus), the third bronze (Jupiter), the fourth iron (Mercury), the fifth "the alloy of money" (Mars), the sixth silver (t ring, C. By clim going t empyre: Even carry o and in achieve when t sacrifice occasion: The sac of the two to contain with ni for the his drum after ar body of his arm

1 Alexander, Latin-American Mythology, Boston, 1925, p. 271.
2 Stith Thompson, Motif Index of Folk Literature, Helsinki, 1934, vol. iii, p. 7.
3 Muller, Egyptian Mythology, Boston, 1918, p. 176.
4 Werner, p. 136.
5 Chadwick, p. 481.
6 Sea Dyaks, Chadwick, p. 486; Egypt, Muller, p. 176; Africa, Werner, pp. 136 ff., etc.
8 vi, 6, 4, 2.
9 Cf. Coomaraswamy, Svayamatraṇṇa, passim.
10 Polyphemus, Stratagematon, vii, 22.
silver (the moon) and the seventh gold (the sun). The eighth rung, Celsus tells us, represents the sphere of the fixed stars. By climbing this ceremonial ladder, the initiate was in fact going through the "seven heavens" and thus attaining the empyrean.

Even to-day among the Uralo-Altaic peoples the shamans carry out exactly the same ritual in their journey to heaven, and in their initiation ceremonies. The "ascension" is achieved either within the framework of an ordinary sacrifice—when the shaman goes with the offering (the soul of the sacrificed horse) to Bai Ulgen, the Supreme God—or on the occasion of the magic cure of invalids who consult them. The sacrifice of a horse, which is the chief religious ceremony of the Turco-Tatar races, takes place once a year and lasts two to three nights. The first evening a new yurt is set up containing a birch tree whose branches have been removed with nine steps cut into it (tapty). A white horse is chosen for the sacrifices; a fire is lit in the tent, the shaman passes his drum through the smoke, while calling on the spirits one after another, after which he goes out, and straddling the body of a goose made of rag and stuffed with straw, he waves his arms as if flying, and sings:

Abovethe white heavens,
Beyond the white clouds,
Abovethe blue heavens,
Beyond the blue clouds,
Fly up to heaven, bird!

The aim of this rite is to seize hold of the soul of the sacrificed horse (pura), which is supposed to have fled as the shaman approached. Having seized the soul and brought it back, the shaman sets the "goose" free and sacrifices only the horse. The second part of the ceremony takes place the following evening, when the shaman takes the soul of the horse to Bai Ulgen. Having passed his drum through the smoke and put on his ritual vestments, having invoked Merkyut, bird of the sky, to "come singing" and "sit on his right shoulder", the shaman begins his ascent. Lightly climbing up the notches of the ceremonial tree, the shaman goes one by one through all the nine heavens, and describes to his audience in great detail all that he sees and all that is happening in each. At the
sixth heaven he venerates the moon, in the seventh the sun. At last, in the ninth, he is prostrate before Bai Ulgen, and offers him the soul of the sacrificed horse. This episode is the climax of the shaman's ecstatic ascension. He finds out whether the sacrifice is accepted by Bai Ulgen and is given predictions about the weather; the shaman then falls to the ground and after a moment's silence wakes up as if from a deep sleep.¹

The notches or steps made in the birch symbolize the spheres of the planets. During the ceremony the shaman begs the assistance of the various divinities whose specific colours show their nature as planetary divinities.² As in the Mithraic initiation ritual, and as with the walls of the city of Ecbatana, which are all different colours³ to symbolize the heavens of the planets, the moon is in the sixth heaven and the sun in the seventh. The number nine is a substitution for the older number of seven grooves; for, to the Uralo-Altaics, the "pillar of the world" has seven notches⁴ and the mythical tree with seven branches symbolizes the celestial regions.⁵ The ascent of the ceremonial birch tree is equivalent to the ascent of the mythical tree that stands in the middle of the world. The hole in the top of the tent is identified with the opening opposite the Pole Star through which one may pass from one cosmic level to the other.⁶ The ceremonial is thus effected in a "centre" (§ 143).

The same ascent takes place in the shamanic initiations. Among the Buriats, nine trees are placed next to each other, and the neophyte climbs to the top of the ninth and then goes along the tops of all the others.⁷ A birch is also placed in a tent, and sticks out of the opening at the top; the neophyte climbs with a sword in his hand till he is outside the tent, thus effecting the journey to the last heaven. There is a rope attaching the birch in the tent to the nine other birches and on this rope hang scraps of different coloured cotton, represent-
ing the heavenly spheres. The rope is called the “bridge”, and symbolizes the shaman’s journey to the home of the gods.

The shaman performs a similar ascent to heal the sick when they come to ask his help.\(^1\) The mythical journeys into heaven performed by the Turco-Mongolian heroes bear a striking resemblance to the shamanist rites.\(^2\) According to Yakut belief, there used once to be shamans who actually rose into the sky; spectators could see them gliding across the clouds with the sacrificed horse.\(^3\) At the time of Genghis Khan, a Mongol shaman of repute would ascend to heaven on his charger.\(^4\) The Ostyak shaman sang that he rose into the skies on a rope and pushed aside any stars that barred his way.\(^5\) In the Uighur poem *Kudatku Bilik*, a hero dreamed that he was climbing a fifty-runged ladder, at the top of which a woman gave him water to drink; thus revived, he was able to get to heaven.\(^6\)

34. ASCENSION SYMBOLISM

Indeed Jacob dreamt of a ladder reaching to heaven, and “the angels also of God ascending and descending by it.”\(^7\) The stone on which Jacob lay sleeping was a *bethel* and was placed “in the middle of the world”, for it is there that the union of all the cosmic regions takes place (§ 81). In Islamic tradition, Mahomet saw a ladder rising from the temple of Jerusalem (the “centre” *par excellence*) into heaven, with angels on the right and on the left; the souls of the just went up this ladder to God.\(^8\) Dante, too, in the heaven of Saturn, saw a golden ladder rising dizzily to the furthest sphere of heaven for the souls of the blessed to ascend.\(^9\) The symbolism of steps, ladders and ascents has been preserved in Christian mysticism. Saint John of the Cross pictures the steps of mystical perfection as an ascent of Mount Carmel, and himself

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5 Chadwick, *Growth*, vol. iii, p. 204.
6 Chadwick, p. 206.
7 Gen. xxviii, 12.
9 *Paradiso*, xxii-xxiii.
illustrates it by a mountain with weary, winding paths up its side. All mystical visions and ecstasies include a rising of some sort to heaven. We gather from Porphyry that Plotinus had this sort of heavenly ecstasy four times during the period when they lived together.\(^1\) St. Paul too was "caught up even to the third heaven".\(^2\) The doctrine of the ascension of souls to the seven heavens—whether during initiation or after death—had tremendous vogue during the last centuries of the pre-Christian era. That it came from the East is certain;\(^3\) but Orphism had as much to do with its spread in the Graeco-Roman world as Pythagorism. These traditions will be more usefully examined in a later chapter. But it is important to glance at them here because their final justification is to be found in the sacred character of the sky and upper regions. In whatever religious context you find them, whatever sort of value is placed upon them—shamanist rite or initiation rite, mystical ecstasy or oniric vision, eschatological myth or heroic legend—ascents, the climbing of mountains or stairs, flights into the air, and so on, all these things always signify a transcending of the human and a penetration into higher cosmic levels. Levitation in itself means a consecration or divinization. The ascetics of Rudra "walk on the way of the wind, for the gods have entered into them".\(^4\) Exponents of yoga and Indian alchemists fly in the air, and cover vast distances in a few moments.\(^5\) To be able to fly, to have wings, becomes a symbolic formula for transcending human status; the ability to rise into the air indicates access to the ultimate realities. Obviously there is still a radical distinction, even in the phenomenology of ascents, between religious experience and the technique of the magician; a saint is "rapt" to heaven; Yogis, ascetics, magicians, "fly" by their own efforts. But in either case, it is their ascent that sets them apart from the mass of ordinary and uninitiated souls: they can enter the heavens which are impregnated with holiness, and become like gods. Their contact with the starry spaces makes them divine.

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\(^1\) *Vita Plot.*, 23.
\(^2\) 2 Cor. xii, 2.
\(^4\) RV, x, 156, 2–3.
35. CONCLUSIONS

Let me recapitulate briefly:

(a) The sky, of its very nature, as a starry vault and atmospheric region has a wealth of mythological and religious significance. "Height", "being on high", infinite space—all these are hierophanies of what is transcendent, what is supremely sacred. Atmospheric and meteorological "life" appears to be an unending myth. And the Supreme Beings of primitive races, as well as the Great Gods of the earliest civilizations of history, all display a connection—sometimes more, sometimes less, organic—with the sky, the air, and meteorological happenings.

(b) But these Supreme Beings cannot be explained simply as sky hierophanies. They are more than that; they have a "form" which indicates that they have a proper and exclusive mode of being which cannot, therefore, be explained simply in terms of events in the sky, or human experience. For these Supreme Beings are creators, good, eternal ("old"); they are founders of the established order and guardians of the laws—attributes which can be explained only partially by the hierophanies of the sky. This is the problem of the "form" of Supreme Beings, and I shall take it up in another chapter.

(c) Bearing in mind this unsolved problem—which is of some importance—we can discern in the "history" of Supreme Beings and sky gods one phenomenon which is extremely significant in the religious history of mankind: these divine figures tend to disappear from the cult. Nowhere do they play a leading part, but have become remote and been replaced by other religious forces: by ancestor-worship, worship of the spirits and gods of nature, spirits of fertility, Great Goddesses and so forth. It is noteworthy that such substitution almost invariably means a more concrete, more dynamic, more fertile divinity or religious force (such as the sun, the Great Mother, the male god, etc.). The conqueror always represents fecundity, or dispenses it; in other words, ultimately represents or gives life. (Even fear of the dead and of demons is simply fear that life may be threatened by those hostile powers which must therefore be exorcized and neutralized.) The profound meaning of this substitution will appear when we come to look at the religious significance of life and vital functions.
(d) Sometimes—as a result, no doubt, of the appearance of agriculture and religious forms connected with it—the sky god regains the field as a god of weather and storms. But such “specialization”, though giving him a great many attributes, limits his omnipotence. The storm god is dynamic and “strong”, he is the bull, he is the fecundator, the myths about him grow richer, and his cults become startling—but he is no longer the creator of the universe or of man, he is no longer omniscient; sometimes he is merely the spouse of the Great Goddess. It was against this storm god, the great male, orgiastic, rich in dramatic epiphanies, whose cults were lavish and bloody (with sacrifices and orgies) that the Semitic world produced its religious revolution, in form monotheistic, prophetic and messianic. It was in this struggle between Ba’al and Yahweh or Allah that “heavenly” values were brought anew into the field of man’s life, as against “earthly” (money, fecundity, power); criteria of quality (the interiorization of faith, prayer, and love) as against those of quantity (the physical act of sacrificing, the all-importance of ritual gestures, etc.). But because “history” made it inevitable that these epiphanies of the elementary forces of life should be outgrown, that does not mean necessarily that they were without religious value. As I shall show, these primitive epiphanies were originally so many ways of sanctifying physical life; they became dead things only as they lost their original function by ceasing to be sacred and becoming simply vital, economic and social “phenomena”.

(e) In many cases the sun god replaced the sky god. The sun then became the giver of fecundity on earth and protector of life (see infra, § 36 ff.).

(f) Occasionally the ubiquity, the wisdom and the passivity of the sky god were seen afresh in a metaphysical sense, and the god became the epiphany of the order of nature and the moral law (as with the Maori Iho); the divine “person” gave place to the “idea”; religious experience (already meagre in the case of almost all the sky gods) gave place to theoretic understanding, or philosophy.

(g) A few sky gods preserved their position in people’s religious life, or even strengthened it, by being seen as sovereign gods as well. These are those who were best able to maintain
ance of the sky and sky gods—but such attributes, like and myths—were no longer dominated by sky gods, the starry regions, sky symbolism, ascension myths and rites, all continued to hold an important place in the scheme of sacred things. What is "on high", "raised up", is still a revelation of the transcendent in any religious setting. Divine "forms" may change; indeed the very fact that they are revealed as "forms" to man's mind, means that they have a history and follow a definite course; but the sacred meaning of the sky remains a living idea everywhere and in all circumstances. Worship grew away from it, and myths put other things in its place, but the sky retained its importance in symbolism. And this sky symbolism was the foundation of a number of rites (of ascension, of climbing upwards, of initiation, of coronation, etc.), myths (the Cosmic Tree, the Cosmic Mountain, the chain of arrows and so on) and legends like the magic flight. The symbolism of the "centre", which plays such an important part in all the great religions of history, is made up of sky elements (sometimes quite clearly so, sometimes less clearly)—the Centre and Axis of the World, the point of communication between the three cosmic regions; it is only at a "centre" that a break-through can occur, a passing from one cosmic zone to another.

To sum up very briefly, one may say that "history" has effectively pushed into the background the divine "forms" of a celestial nature (as with Supreme Beings) or corrupted them (as storm gods or fecundators), but that "history"—which is simply man's ever-fresh experimentation and interpretation of the sacred—has not been able to do away with the direct and abiding revelation that the sky is something sacred; it is a revelation neither personal, nor temporal, and it is quite outside history. The symbolism of the sky has held its position in every religious framework, simply because its mode of being is outside time: in fact, this symbolism gives meaning and support to all religious "forms", and yet never loses anything itself by so doing (§ 166 ff.).