

Meeting la Corúa

JAMES S. GRIFFITH

July 7, 1983, was a warm day in Northern Sonora. I was with my friend Richard Morales, visiting craftspeople whose work we had previously encountered at the important regional pilgrimage town of Magdalena de Kino, some sixty miles south of the Arizona-Sonora border, along Mexico's International Highway 15. Magdalena's annual Fiesta de San Francisco provides an occasion for the manufacture and sale of painted glass frames intended for holy pictures and family portraits. We were gathering information on these frames and the people who make and use them, in preparation for an exhibition to be held later that year in Nogales, Arizona.¹

We were on the outskirts of the eighteenth-century mission town of Imuris at the house of Olga Ruiz, a woman whom we knew from several visits to the fiesta. At fiesta time, Olga usually sets up a stand at the northwest corner of Magdalena's Plaza Monumental. There she sells medicinal and other herbs as well as the painted frames which were the object of our interest that afternoon. We had done our interview, taken several photographs while she painted one of the frames, and purchased a couple of frames from her. Now we were sitting in front of her house, drinking coffee and visiting.

The summer rains had already started, and the concrete ford and the footbridge that cross the Río Magdalena just west of Imuris had washed out. The river was passable for our pickup, however, and we drove to Olga's house on the low ground across the river from the colonial town.

1. The exhibition was "Glittering Recuerdos: Reverse Painting on Glass from Magdalena, Sonora." It appeared at the Pimería Alta Historical Museum in Nogales, Arizona, from October, 1983, through March, 1984, and then traveled through Arizona and the Southwest courtesy of the Arizona Commission on the Arts. See also James S. Griffith, "The Magdalena Holy Picture: Religious Folk Art in Two Cultures," *New York Folklore* 8 (2-4):71-82.

JAMES S. GRIFFITH is director of *The Southwest Folklore Center of the University of Arizona*. Among his many publications on the region is *Southern Arizona Folk Arts* (University of Arizona Press, 1988). "*Meeting la Corúa*" is drawn from his new book, *Beliefs and Holy Places: A Spiritual Geography of the Pimería Alta*, published by the University of Arizona Press (1992).

Olga belongs to a social class locally called *pajaderos* ("bird catchers"). Pajaderos typically make their living in a number of ways: trapping and selling wild birds, for instance, and making bird cages to hold them; gathering and selling wild foods and medicines; picking whatever commercial crops might be in season; and catering to the needs of religious pilgrims to Magdalena by making frames and other objects of glass. On this day, Olga and her husband were preparing to go off into the mountains for a few weeks to harvest *bellotas*, the edible wild acorns (*Quercus emoryi*) that are an important seasonal snack food for many dwellers of the Sonoran Desert. In fact, their stake-bed truck was loaded and waiting by the house when we arrived. We were discussing the impending trip and congratulating ourselves that we had shown up before they departed.

Olga mentioned that they would be camped by a certain spring. There was another spring nearby where they had formerly camped, she told us, but someone had killed the *corúa* that lived there, and the spring had dried up. Richard and I looked at each other, then asked her to repeat what she had said. The spring had dried up when someone killed its *corúa*, we were told. When we asked the next question—what is a *corúa*—she replied that a *corúa* is a big snake that lives in springs of water and protects them. If the *corúa* is killed, the spring disappears.

Richard and I discussed *la corúa* on the drive back to Tucson later in the day. Richard, who was born and brought up in the farming community of Marana, north of Tucson, thought he remembered the word being used for a kind of irrigation pipe that leads the waters over a wash or an arroyo. He decided to ask some of the old-timers he knew about *la corúa*, particularly his father-in-law, Pete Castillo, a countryman born in Caborca, Sonora, in the early years of this century.

Richard called a few days later with his news. The *corúa*, according to Pete, is the snake—the BIG snake—that lives in springs and protects them. It is harmless and has a round mouth without teeth. It also has a cross between its eyes, on its forehead. If you kill it, the spring it lives in will dry up. As Richard put it to me, "If you kill the *corúa*, you lose your water rights." Another member by marriage of the same family, Frank Urquides, remembered that when he was little he had been warned not to play after dark or in irrigation ditches, lest the *corúa* "get him."

For my part, I had been looking up snake and water terms in Horacio Sobarzo's *Vocabulario Sonorense*. I found that "*corúa*" was a regional word for boa constrictor and that it derives from a Yaqui Indian word meaning large, thick snake. I also found that the root of the word, *co*,

seems to mean “snake” in many languages of the Uto-Aztecan family to which Yaqui belongs, and that the same root appears in the Aztec word *quetzalcoatl*, the name of the great feathered serpent deity who was involved with the winds and with water. One of the still standing towns on the Río Sonora, Sobarzo writes, is Bacoachi; in the Opata language, this is said by Sobarzo to mean “the place of the water serpent.” There is a tradition that on this site there was a sanctuary dedicated to an enormous water snake.²

Still browsing through Sobarzo’s *Vocabulario*, I found another word, *alicante*. This word has two meanings locally. It is an above-ground irrigation channel, built of stone and mortar. It is also the local name for a small racer snake. The word is also used in Spain, where, by contrast, it refers to vipers.³

As Richard and I pursued this topic, we discovered that most of the older people to whom we talked knew about the corúa. Some, like the mother of one friend, didn’t recognize the name but knew all about a large snake that protects water sources. She told her daughter that an aunt had seen the one that lived in the Tanque Verde to the northeast of Tucson. Subsequently, the snake had been killed and the spring had dried up.

Another friend, Leo Armando Salazar, originally from Tres Alamos, north of Benson in the San Pedro Valley, remembered hearing his uncles telling him about la corúa. There were two corúas, he thought, a male and a female. The female had long hair reaching down its back. The male, which lived in Kuyper Springs, had two long fangs or tusks that it used to clean the veins of water. One occasionally would see a corúa sunning itself on the rocks. It is harmless; however, Salazar seemed to feel that it was best not to see or be seen by one. He told a story about some vaqueros who saw a corúa remove its fangs and swim in the water of a pond behind an earthen dam. One of the vaqueros hid the fangs, and when the corúa couldn’t find them, it killed itself. Shortly after the incident, the dam was washed away in a heavy rainstorm.

Another association between snakes and water came to light when Richard Morales visited his uncle Samuel Morales in San Luis del Río Colorado, Sonora, across the border from Yuma. It was just after the

2. Horacio Sobarzo, *Vocabulario Sonorense* (Mexico: Editorial Porrúa, 1966), pp. 81–84.

3. *Ibid.*, 11

heavy floods of October 1983; in a discussion of this event, Sr. Morales remarked that they had received *una media culebra* ("a half serpent") of water. When Richard asked him how much water a whole serpent would be, he answered that he had never seen that much but that this storm was definitely *una media culebra*. Back in Marana, Richard's father-in-law Peter Castillo agreed with this estimate; the storm certainly brought a *media culebra* of water with it.

Culebra or *culebra de agua* is also a local term for a severe wind and rain storm involving a funnel cloud. Rain from a *culebra de agua* is said to fall in sheets, rather than drops. A ceremony of prayer formerly used to avert one of these is called *matando la culebra* ("killing the serpent"). This ceremony involved special prayers that were recited by an elderly, respected, local woman. Upon being asked to perform the ritual, she would do so, standing outside her house and facing the storm. In some versions of the ceremony she would hold a knife in her hand. At the end of the ceremony, she would make the sign of the cross and go back indoors.⁴

A legend concerning a *culebra de agua* is still told in the old mission community of Oquitoa, Sonora, located in the Altar Valley some fifty miles south of the International Border. The story concerns the Franciscan missionary Joaquín Olizarra, who served Oquitoa in the first decade of the nineteenth century, and who is remembered as a man of great faith and piety. One day Oquitoa was threatened by a *culebra de agua*, described as a serpent-shaped cloud with the potential of destroying the entire village. Father Olizarra walked out of doors, and, facing the cloud, made the sign of the cross. The *culebra* dispersed and the village was saved.⁵

Finally, a long wisp of highly localized rain of the sort that one can often see in the summertime across the valley is often called *una cola de*

4. Maria Vigil, "When it storms try wrapping the knives." *Tucson Citizen*, Friday, August 26, 1983, Section B, p. 1.

5. Father Olizarra is a well-known figure in Oquitoa. Villagers still tell of the time he was summoned to attend a dying man in the mission community of Tubutama, several miles away. According to one version of the legend, when he arrived at the ford to cross the river into town, he found the river to be impassable. He knelt on the river bank in full sight of his Indian companions and remained thus in prayer for a long time. He then returned to Oquitoa. According to the people in Tubutama, he was seen to arrive at the bedside of the dying man, administer the Last Rites of the Catholic church, and leave town. Another legend has it that when his cloak would get wet, he would dry it off by hanging it on a sunbeam. (Kieran McCarty, O.F.M., personal communication.)

culebra, “a snake’s tail.” This term is also used in other parts of Spanish America.

Near the village of Cucurpe in Sonora’s San Miguel Valley, anthropologist Thomas Sheridan collected data concerning la corúa, which according to his informants is a sort of boa constrictor. It is very long and thick and can attract its prey to itself through some mysterious means, said by some to involve its sweat or its breath. However, it does not bite and can even be stroked. If you kill one at a water hole, the water will dry up.⁶ Although the Cucurpe area is now occupied by mestizos, it was originally an Opata Indian village and the site of a Jesuit mission to that people. Cucurpe is located about twenty miles east of Magdalena, just outside the Pimería Alta.

The O’odham still live within the boundaries of their land, the Pimería Alta. They, too, know of large, water-dwelling serpents. Old-time Tohono O’odham believed in the existence of a big snake called *nehbig*. It lived in springs and was so powerful that it attracted lightning to itself. It was considered a thing to be respected.⁷ “Nehbig” is also the name of a monster that destroyed people and villages near the Sonoran O’odham village of Quito Wa:k by sucking or inhaling them into its mouth. It was finally dispatched by P’itoi, Elder Brother and Creator of the Tohono O’odham. In one version of the *nehbig* legend, the animal’s death throes caused the water to splash out of the pond in which it lived.

The Tepecano of Azqueltan, Jalisco, are the southernmost branch of O’odham speakers. They formerly told of large, serpentlike creatures called *chanes*. Chanes lived in streams and ponds, and were invisible, “except in rainy weather, when they appeared as great arcs or bows in the sky, striped with colors, head in one spring and tail in the other, as they visited. But ordinarily they were invisible, though their forms were well-known. They had the bodies of serpents with horns like cattle. They were to be treated reverently, as they had the power of sickening all those who disregarded them.”⁸

Finally, again from slightly outside our area, there is a Yaqui belief concerning a big snake with a cross on its forehead that lives in a large

6. Thomas Sheridan, personal communication, May, 1990.

7. Dean Saxton and Lucille Saxton, *O’odham Hobo’ok A’agithal* (Legends and Lore of the Papago and Pima Indians) (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1973), p. 316.

8. J. Alden Mason, “The Chief Singer of the Tepecanos.” In Elsie Clews Parsons, ed., *American Indian Life* (Lincoln: Bison Books, 1957), p. 206.

water hole under a hill in the valley of Sonora's Río Yaqui, some 300 miles south of the Arizona-Sonora border. This monster, which can suck animals and humans into its mouth with its breath, was once a Yaqui *maestro* or Catholic prayer leader named Acencio. As a result of wicked deeds committed while he was alive, Acencio was transformed after death into a monstrous serpent. Using prayers, the people chased him into the cave he has occupied ever since.⁹

While all these legends and beliefs link serpents with water in one way or another, the material concerning the *nehbig*, the Cucurpe *corúa*, and the monster who was once Acencio add something extra: the belief that these creatures attract their prey by sucking or breathing in. Legends concerning a Sucking or Swallowing Monster that was killed by a local hero are found among many North American tribes.

Snake stories may be found in our regional literature as well. In his book *Texas Cowboys*, describing his experiences in eastern Arizona early in this century, Dane Coolidge tells of hearing a story from an old Mexican farmer about a "big black snake down in Sonora that had a golden cross on its head. It lived in a cave on the mountain and the people offered it milk and young chickens and worshiped it like a god."¹⁰ No water here, but the size of the snake and the cross on its head are strongly reminiscent of both the *corúa* beliefs and the Yaqui legend of Acencio, the evil *maestro*. In fact, Coolidge's yarn may well be a version of the latter legend. European-descended Southwesterners have for a long time been telling stories about Indians who worship a huge snake in a cave. A literary use of this theme occurs in Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.¹¹

Closer to home is a published account of Joe Clark and Jesús Castro, early pioneers near Oracle, Arizona, who killed a huge rattlesnake near a spring in Peppersauce Canyon, some forty miles northwest of Tucson. They are said to have delayed killing it for a while, as they were concerned that some Indians might have worshiped it as the guardian of the spring.¹² The question occurs of where they might have gotten the idea that local Indians would do such a thing.

9. Ruth Warner Giddings, *Yaqui Myths and Legends*. Anthropological Papers of the University of Arizona, no. 2 (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1959), p. 67.

10. Dane Coolidge, *Texas Cowboys*. Reprint of 1937 edition. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985), p. 76.

11. Willa Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1945).

12. Elizabeth Lambert Wood, *Arizona Hoof Trails* (Portland: Binford and Mort, 1956), p. 34.

A VERY OLD SNAKE INDEED

There certainly seems to be a belief among some local Indians and Mexicans in certain connections between snakes and water. One of these involves some sort of large serpent with supernatural powers that guards springs of water. The animal seems to be harmless; I suspect that Frank Urquides's family simply used the threat of the corúa to keep him from harm in response to a traditional Mexican pattern of scaring one's kids into safety, rather than out of any belief in the actual malevolence of the reptile. In much the same way, other friends have been told by their parents that the pictures of sphinxlike animals that decorate old-style sewing machines were creatures that would carry off children who pestered their mothers too much.

Other connections between snakes and water are concentrated in two areas: irrigation and severe rainstorms with a strong potential for flooding. Faced with this complex and multifaceted set of snake-water associations, one is tempted to search in neighboring regions for similar beliefs. In this case, one needs only to look as far as Mesoamerica and the deity Quetzalcoatl, or the Plumed Serpent.

As is so often the case when one deals with alien religious systems, there is a real danger of oversimplifying the Aztec cosmography. Quetzalcoatl was much more than a plumed serpent connected with water. While his name can mean "plumed serpent," it can also mean "heavenly twin." He was god of the winds, god of the morning, god of twins and monsters, and the planet Venus, among other aspects and manifestations. Aztec religion was the sophisticated end product of centuries of philosophical speculation among the religious specialists of central Mexico's high cultures and is extremely difficult for a person steeped in European traditions to grasp fully. The fact remains, however, that one of Quetzalcoatl's aspects was that of a large, plumed serpent, and that this particular deity was involved with water.¹³ (Another god connected with water was Tlaloc; he is often portrayed with large, round eyes and long fangs. It is tempting to see traces of Tlaloc in the stories of the corúa in Kuyper Springs who cleans the veins of water with its fangs.)

How did this belief in a water serpent, which seems to be related to the religion and cosmography of the high cultures of Central Mexico,

13. Alfonso Caso, *The Aztecs, People of the Sun*. Trans. by Lowell Dunham (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), pp. 23–27.

come into this desert region so far to the north of its area of origin? One answer is suggested by the late archaeologist Charles Di Peso in his report on excavations at the huge archaeological site of Paquimé, near Casas Grandes in the Mexican state of Chihuahua. Casas Grandes is located about 65 miles as the crow flies south of the U.S.-Mexican border, and about 40 miles east of the Sonora-Chihuahua line. For those not traveling by crow, it can be reached by Mexican Highway 2 from the border crossing at Douglas-Agua Prieta, a distance of about 135 miles.¹⁴ Di Peso's contention, supported by a good deal of impressive evidence, is that the ruin he calls Paquimé was a sort of staging area for a deliberate attempt at trade and proselytization that were carried on by immigrants from Central Mexico's high cultures.

He feels this took place roughly between the years A.D. 1060 and 1340, and that many of the characteristics of what we think of as historic Southwestern Indian culture were in fact brought deliberately from Mexico. From the south, believed Di Peso, came such gods as Tezcatlipoca, Quetzalcoatl, and Huitzilopochtli, along with such practices as large-scale irrigation agriculture, the ceremonial ballgame, human sacrifice, and the ritual use of macaw feathers (as well as the actual macaws to provide the feathers). From the north came precious materials such as turquoise and iron pyrites, both important items in ceremonial use in ancient Mexico. These and other materials, according to Di Peso, were traded to the south, to the high cultures of the Valley of Mexico. The city of Paquimé flourished for almost three centuries as a religious and economic center, finally succumbing to decay, and in the mid-fourteenth century, to destruction by enemies.¹⁵

This is Di Peso's view, and he states it elegantly and persuasively in the first three volumes of his monumental site report. Many other archaeologists do not agree with his interpretations of the material, and most particularly with his early dating of the various phases of occupation at the huge site he excavated. But he is one of the few recent scholars to attempt an historical synthesis and explanation for the native cultures of what is now the southwestern United States and northwest Mexico.

According to Di Peso, the cult devoted to Quetzalcoatl is the most

14. Charles C. Di Peso, *Casas Grandes: A Fallen Trading Center of the Gran Chichimeca*. Vols. 1 and 2 (Dragoon, Arizona: The Amerind Foundation and Flagstaff: Northland Press, 1974).

15. *Ibid.*, 290-95.

visible of the various Mesoamerican religions to arrive at Paquimé. Quetzalcoatl's image in his manifestation as the plumed serpent was painted on pottery, engraved on shell, and even piled out of dirt and stones to form a huge effigy mound at Casas Grandes itself. Serpent motifs appear on pottery, on shell jewelry, and in rock art in many parts of the prehistoric Southwest, as well as in and near Paquimé.¹⁶

The importance of this figure among Native Americans of the American Southwest is not confined to the past. Contemporary Pueblo Indians know about a great horned water serpent that lives in bodies of water. According to the Hopi, Water Serpent came from the Red Land of the South and is the patron of the Water Corn Clan who also derive from that land. Water Serpent can cause floods, earthquakes, and landslides. He figures in the ceremonial art of Hopi, where he is called *Palelekon*, and of Zuni, where his name is *Kolowi:zi*.¹⁷ In the New Mexico pueblo of Santa Ana, the priest in charge of the irrigation ditch prays and makes offerings to Water Serpent.¹⁸

Di Peso's theories may well explain the knowledge concerning a water serpent among the native peoples along what is now the central portion of the Arizona-Sonora border. Another explanation is that these beliefs are a part of the general belief system associated with the Uto-Aztecan language family, and need no elaborate theories of trade and proselytization to explain their presence over the entire area occupied by Uto-Aztecan speakers. Either of these suggestions would go far to explain the presence of water-serpent lore among the native peoples of our region.

The individuals who have told me about la corúa and the culebra de agua, however, are not Indians but Mexicanos. How did the beliefs make the leap from one culture into another, unrelated tradition? There seem to be at least two possible answers. In the first place, many of my informants claim local Indian ancestry. It is perfectly possible that some knowledge of this creature came into local Mexican culture from native Sonoran and Arizona traditions. There is another possibility. Spaniards mated with Indian women in Central Mexico from the early sixteenth century on, and many families must have carried knowledge of some of the deities of traditional Mexican religion, not as a serious challenge to

16. Ibid., 548–55.

17. Elsie Clews Parsons, *Pueblo Indian Religion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1939), pp. 184–85.

18. Ibid., 295n.

the Christian belief system, but, like the knowledge of la corúa in contemporary Arizona and Sonora, simply as additional bits of information in a complex mestizo world view. If these families came to the region that is now Sonora and Arizona, they would have brought their knowledge of the Water Serpent along with them. And so the corúa may have entered our region in the wake of the Spaniards. No matter how they may have gotten here, the traditional associations between snakes and water in the Pimería Alta serve as reminders that the cultural region we call the American Southwest has been for centuries not the Southwest at all, but rather the far Northwest.

Similar water serpents appear in contemporary folk belief in other parts of Mesoamerica. In Tlayacapan, Hidalgo, people tell of *acoatl* or Culebra de Agua (Water Serpent), a dangerous water spout which "hangs down from the heavens like a snake, lashing and blasting the earth with wind and rain."¹⁹ In Tecospa, Mexico, the Aztec name of the leader of the rain spirits is *Yeyecoatl*, or "Wind Serpent." His Spanish name is Culebra de Agua.²⁰ Far to the south in Mitla, Oaxaca, Elsie Clews Parsons collected a belief reminiscent of the corúa of the Pimería Alta. A female serpent named Mother of the Water lived in the Lake of White Water. When the serpent was accidentally killed, the lake dried up.²¹

A central Mexican belief in an animal that seems to combine aspects of la corúa with aspects of the sucking monster legend referred to above is given in Fray Bernardino de Sahagún's monumental *General History of the Things of New Spain*, a compilation of information he collected from surviving Aztecs in the years just after the conquest of Mexico. Of the *acoatl* or *tlilcoatl*, Sahagún's informants said:

It is a water-dweller; it lies in the mud: cylindrical, thick—a fathom in girth; long, very long, extremely long. It is large-headed, big-headed; bearded; black, very black; glistening; fiery-eyed; fork-tailed. In craggy waters, in water caverns [it makes] its dwelling-place. Its food is fish. It is one which attracts people with its breath; it drowns people. When the *acoatl* sees its victim, "It follows one, runs, slithers, goes like the wind, flies, coils itself, hisses, blows; it

19. John M. Ingham, "Mary, Michael and Lucifer: Folk Catholicism in Central Mexico," *Latin American Monographs*, no. 69. Institute of Latin American Studies (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), p. 112.

20. William Madsen, *The Virgin's Children* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1960), p. 113.

21. Elsie Clews Parsons, *Mitla, Town of Souls* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1936), p. 223.

strikes one, attracts one with its breath, drowns one; it swallows things; it swallows one whole; it coils itself.”²²

These few examples by no means exhaust the Water Serpent lore of twentieth-century Mexico. Rather, they serve as evidence that such lore, similar to that of the Pimería Alta, is widespread throughout contemporary Mesoamerica.

La corúa stands apart from European Christian cultural tradition in a curious and possibly revealing way. Christianity has its own potent serpent symbols, which are neither neutral nor benevolent. It is difficult to detect in the passive corúa, silently guarding its springs and dying when its fangs are hidden, any trace of the ancient Enemy of Mankind who played such a destructive role in the Garden of Eden. Whatever la corúa is, however it came to be embedded in our regional culture, it is a creature of the New World rather than an importation from the Old.

Although knowledge of la corúa is certainly a part of our regional cultural scene at the moment, it seems to be tenuous and confined to the oldest generations, especially in Arizona. I suspect that its time remaining with us will not be very long. For most people in the urbanized 1990s, water comes out of pipes rather than from springs, and stories of the big serpent that guards the water sources have become increasingly irrelevant for the younger generations. Ten or twenty years in Arizona, perhaps double that in Sonora, and the written word may well be the only place to go for traces of this particular link with our distant past.²³ ❖

22. Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, “General History of the Things of New Spain.” Trans. from Aztec into English, with notes and illustrations, by Charles E. Dibble and Arthur O. Anderson. *Monographs of the School of American Research and the Museum of New Mexico*, no. 4, pt. 12 (Santa Fe: The School of American Research and Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 1963), Book II:70.

23. *Beliefs and Holy Places* concludes with this reprise:

“I would like to end this book as I began it, on a note of personal reflection. As I thought about the various legends and beliefs that I was discussing, I kept being drawn back to la corúa, the oldest, most shadowy figure in our story. For me, the great snake whose only response to being molested is to die has become a potent symbol of nature in general and the Sonoran Desert in particular. Not made with humans in mind, the desert, like the corúa, exists in its own place, for its own purposes. As we tamper with the details of our fragile desert ecosystem, we are increasingly discovering that this tampering has results beyond our initial imaginings. We may not be going around killing huge legendary water snakes, but we are in the process of pumping groundwater faster than it can be replaced, dumping toxic chemicals where they can seep into the water table, and removing natural vegetation which checks erosion. Nature is not vindictive. It will not lash back at us, any more than the legendary corúa of the Pimería Alta retaliates against those who kill it. But it is reactive. As Richard Morales expressed it in 1983, kill the corúa and you lose your water rights.”