

## ASIATIC INFLUENCES

### ON PRE-COLUMBIAN CULTURES\*

There is now no doubt that cultural contacts took place between the peoples of Asia and America during the Middle or Late Paleolithic Age. In the course of one particular period, between 20,000 and 40,000 years ago, there came from Asia, in successive waves, the first groups who were to populate the American continent.

What still remains a mystery—the “enigma of the Indian race,” is the origin of a second generation of “homo americanus,” the founder of the high cultures. From the 1st millennium B.C. onwards, some Central American tribes evolved with unexpected speed towards a superior level of culture, creating class distinctions, a priest-hood, religious creeds, an artisan class producing artistic works of great value, and a body of knowledge almost scientific in character. This development sprang from a basic culture which was possibly even inferior to that enjoyed by peoples in other parts of the world. This prompts several questions.

Were these great American civilizations the result of specifically independent innovation or were they influenced by other

\* (Report on work in progress).

Translated by Rosanna Rowland.

continents, in particular Asia? In the case of the latter hypothesis, when, how, and to what extent were communications effected? What was the nature of these contacts? To what extent did the Asian cultures succeed in influencing the spiritual development of pre-Columbian America?

The answer to these questions "constitutes one of the most important theoretical problems in archeology" (B. Meggers), and "an exciting challenge" (L. Pericot).

Here we wish to offer a synthesis of the most significant theories and evidence provided by researchers, and clarify the present position of investigations. We shall confine ourselves to the consideration of Eastern Asia and its specifically cultural aspects.

#### FIRST DISCOVERIES AND HYPOTHESES

The 16th and 17th Century writers already formulating the hypothesis of the Asiatic origin of the American peoples, concerned themselves very little with the problem of cultural influences, probably because of their limited acquaintance with Oriental civilizations. The problem was first raised towards the middle of the 18th century.

In 1761 the Frenchman De Guignes published a translation of the text of the 7th Century historian, Li Yen, according to whom five Buddhist monks had set out in the 5th Century from Ki-Pin (Samarkand), and had discovered a country named Fu-Sang,<sup>1</sup> 40,000 li (22,000 kilometres) east of China. After a detailed discussion of Li Yen's account, De Guignes concluded by identifying Fu-Sang with America (Mexico).

This was the beginning of a controversy in which scholars from various countries participated and which continued for more than two centuries, without any unanimous conclusions being reached.

Some, such as Klaproth, G. Schlegel and Beuchat, maintained that Fu-Sang must be Korea or Japan; others such as Quatrefages, G. Leland, M. Gordon, and E. P. Vining, strove to corroborate

<sup>1</sup> For information on the bibliography of the double significance attributed to the term *Fu-sang*, see: H. Cordier, *Bibliotheca Sinica*, Paris, 1924, vol. V, pp. 2653-2658.

## *Asiatic Influences on Pre-Columbian Cultures*

De Guignes' conclusions with new evidence.<sup>2</sup> Another path was opened up by Alexander Von Humboldt, who was the first to provide evidence of a more scientific nature, by direct contact with the traditions and habitat of the indigenous Americans. In his most important work,<sup>3</sup> he emphasized "surprising analogies" between the religion, the art and the customs of the people of Central America and the religions or cultures of India, Tibet and China.

Because of its vast erudition, its minuteness of detail, and its accuracy of description, Humboldt's work had a great influence. Indianology is still in its infancy however and certain observations require analysis in greater depth.

Lenoir, Lassen and D'Eichtal worked along the same lines.

### POLEMICS, FIRST CONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE AND EXTRAVAGANT CLAIMS

At their first International Congress, held at Nancy in 1875, the Americanologists could not but take these studies into account; but those who raised objections betrayed a negative and sceptical attitude, well-reflected in these words of Dr. Dally, President of the Paris Anthropological Society: "No-one has presented any argument which proves the connections between the Old World and the New; we must therefore, for the time being, consider them non-existent. To all appearances, the religions of Mexico and Peru have no relationship with those of East Asia. The Americans are neither Hindus, nor Chinese, nor Phoenicians, nor Europeans: they are Americans."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The idea of *Fu-sang* still lives on, as can be seen from the article by Yung-hua King: "Fu-sang (quizá México) en el libro 'Shi-zhou-ji,'" in *Estudios Orientales*, vol. VIII, no. 1, Mexico, 1973, pp. 42-51. The author mentions other Chinese texts, earlier than those cited by De Guignes, and seems to have forgotten the story of the Buddhist expedition. In his work *Fu-sang-gwo Kao-zheng*, Changsha, Commercial Press, 1941, Zu Qian-zhi is sympathetic to the theory identifying it with Mexico, despite the fact that the term *Fu-sang* has been used to mean Japan in literary texts dating from after the T'ang Dynasty.

<sup>3</sup> A. von Humboldt, *Vue des Cordillères et des monuments des peuples indigènes de l'Amérique*. Paris 1816. 2 vols. Spanish Translation: Madrid 1878.

<sup>4</sup> *Compte-rendu de la première session du congrès International des Américanistes*, Nancy, 1875, V.I, p. 141. In the same volume see also: Foucaux M., "Relations qu'ont pu avoir ensemble, au commencement de notre ère, les

Despite these negative conclusions, investigations continued, principally in the fields of linguistics and ethnology.

The first real proof of historical contacts between India and America was presented towards the end of the 19th Century, and has remained valid to this day. An article by Edward Tylor focussed attention on the resemblances between the game of *patolli* in Mexico and that of *pachisi* in Hindustan.<sup>5</sup>

They use a cruciform checker-board. The two teams face one another, each with six small pebbles and two pieces of bamboo which are used as dice. They have to move over each of the squares making up the cross, and since these number 104 (twice 52), the game is related to the calendar whose main cycle was 52 years. This board-game, with its chronological and cosmical character, is well-known in India and South-East Asia.

At this time, the reaction of North-American specialists towards the problem of Asiatic influence was particularly negative, the reason for which Brinton, in 1900, expressed thus; "It is safe to say that to this day, we know of not a single dialect, no work of art, institution, myth or religious cult, plant or animal, tool, weapon or symbol whatever in use at the time of the discovery of America, which might have been imported from Asia or any other continent of the Ancient World."<sup>6</sup>

The "to this day" lasted some fifty years, and only little by little did this scepticism make any concessions and accept new advances. These became necessary, especially with the emergence of an historico-cultural school, investigating "cultural spheres of influence" (Kulturkreislehre).

It was at the XXIIIrd Congress of Americanologists (New York, 1930), that the influence exerted by Asia on the earliest pre-Columbian civilizations was accepted. The North American specialists, Ales Hirdlicka, Waldemar Bogoras, and Jockelson, confined themselves to discussion of Northern Asia. Only Beyer Herman, in a brief but well-documented statement, drew any

Bouddhistes d'Asie et les habitants de l'Amérique," (pp. 131-141); and Lucien, Adam: "Du Fou-sang," (pp. 145-164).

<sup>5</sup> E. B. Tylor, "On the Game of Patolli in Ancient Mexico and its Probably Asiatic Origin." In: *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. VIII, pp. 116-131, 1878.

<sup>6</sup> D. G. Brinton, *On various supposed relations between the American and Asian races*, Philadelphia, 1900, p. 52.

## *Asiatic Influences on Pre-Columbian Cultures*

conclusions from the discovery in Mexico of statues of obese gods, with closed eyes, seated in the Buddhist posture and wearing an expression of exalted joy.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, one of the best known American anthropologists, A. L. Kroeber, expressed the general opinion when he wrote in the 1948 revision of his classic manual, *Anthropology* (page 310): "up to now, no specialist in American archeology has conceded the possibility of major influences from the Old World having featured significantly in the development of pre-Columbian history. The various theories which endeavor to 'explain' how the Mexican and Peruvian cultures derive from China, India or Oceania, have all been proposed by non-American specialists or by wishful-thinking enthusiasts."

Among these "enthusiasts" can be mentioned the archeologist Harold S. Galdwin, whose book shows a degree of exaggeration that might encourage a far too ambitious kind of diffusionism.<sup>8</sup> To explain the influence of Asia upon America he goes back to a voyage of Alexander the Great's fleet. On the death of the famous conqueror, in about 323 B.C., the captains of this navy, which had been assembled for the conquest of Arabia, decided to leave their ancestral land and set sail for the East.

During the ensuing voyage, the fleet dropped anchor in the East Indies, Indonesia, Melanesia and Polynesia, where mutual cultural exchanges took place, finally reaching the shores of Central and South America; there the travellers settled, thus giving the necessary impulse to the development of the first American civilizations.

In the light of such exaggerated claims, one can better understand the reactions of the isolationists.

### THE HEINE-GELDERN SCHOOL AND EVIDENCE FROM THE ARTS

A genuinely new stage in the study of Asian influence on America was entered at the XXIXth International Congress of Americanologists, held at New York in 1949.

<sup>7</sup> H. Beyer, "A deity common to Teotihuacan and Totomac cultures." In: *Proceedings of the XXIII International Congress of Americanists*. New York, 1930, pp. 82-84.

<sup>8</sup> H. Galdwin, *Man out of Asia*, New York, 1947. The works of Elliot Smith,

On this occasion, the Austrian ethnologist Robert Heine-Geldern and the North American archeologist Gordon Ekholm, arranged an exhibition of objects and drawings in order to demonstrate the possibility of cultural contributions from Asia to the American cultures across the Pacific. Both authors illustrated the exhibition with provocative evidence which aroused a lively interest, marking the birth of a new era and a new technique in the study of Hindu/Buddhist influences on the pre-Columbian cultures. "With these events," wrote Imbelloni, "there opened for the researchers of North America, a door which, until then, had been sealed tight."<sup>9</sup>

It was not so much a question of searching for isolated instances of comparison, using often hasty and subjective methods, but rather of establishing parallels of structure; that is to say, of assembling together a whole pattern of related observations, of studying and analysing the character of non-utilitarian objects which were the expression of the artistic impulse. Thus, aesthetic insights were adduced to reinforce more explicit evidence, enhancing the possibility of reaching more definite conclusions.

Heine-Geldern, who died in 1967, dedicated his life almost exclusively to the study of the affinities between the characteristics of Hindu culture and the symbols and iconography of Central America. Unfortunately, he was never able to integrate his various findings into a single theory, but he left us numerous articles, published in different journals.<sup>10</sup>

founder of the heliolitic school, should be seen in the same tradition (notably: *The influence of ancient Egyptian civilization in the East and America*, Manchester, 1916); the same goes for a recent work by D. Singhal: *India and world civilization*, Michigan, 1969.

<sup>9</sup> Imbelloni J., *La segunda esfinge indiana, antiguos y nuevos aspectos del problema de los americanos*. Buenos Aires, Hachette, 1956, p. 328.

<sup>10</sup> Among the most important are: "The Origin of Ancient Civilizations and Toynbee's Theories," In: *Diogenes*, no. 13, 1956; "Representation of the Asiatic tiger in the art of Chavin culture; a proof of early contacts between China and Peru." In: *Proceedings of the XXXIII International Congress of Americanists*, San José, Costa Rica, 1959, vol. 1, pp. 117-119; "Chinese influences in Mexico and Central America. The Tajín style of Mexico and the marble vases from Honduras." In *Proceedings of the XXXIII I.C.A.*, San José, vol. 1, pp. 195-205; "Un nouveau parallèle entre l'Amérique du Sud Précolombienne et l'ancienne Asie Sudorientale." In: *Miscellanea Paul Rivet*, Mexico 1954, vol. 2, pp. 219-226; "Traces of Indian and South Asiatic-Buddhistic influences in Mesoamerica." In: *Proceedings of the XXXI I.C.A.*, Mexico, 1964, vol. 1,

## *Asiatic Influences on Pre-Columbian Cultures*

These are the salient conclusions that can be drawn from his research:

1) The certain transplanted from Asia to Central America of a diversity of cultural forms. This influence was a decisive factor in the development of the great Mayan and Aztec cultures.

2) These contacts took place in the 1st millennium B.C. They were initiated by various groups from the coast of Southern China, and were continued by members of the Dongson culture of Indonesia from 400 B.C. onwards. The contacts continued during the 1st millennium A.D. in two periods: from the 1st century to the 6th century, and from the 9th century to the 12th century, up to the dissolution of the political power of the Cambodian Khmer dynasty in 1219.

3) These were not chance contacts, but the result of organized expeditions. In the 2nd Century. A.D. there existed regular maritime trade between Indonesia, the Malay Peninsula and Indochina. The bulk of this traffic seems to have passed through the ports of Cambodia; and it is with the culture of this region that the most striking similarities are evident.

4) These expeditions served the missionary aims of Buddhism. Buddhism has always fostered an intense proselytising effort. In the 3rd Century B.C. King Asoka sent missionaries not only into Syria, but also to Ceylon, Burma and Cambodia. This activity was intensified at the beginning of the Christian era. Buddhism arrived in China in the 1st century, penetrated to Korea in the 4th century, and to Japan in the 6th century. History mentions the feat of a Chinese Buddhist, Fahien, who, in about 400 A.D., sailed from India to Java, and from Java to North China on the open sea, in a vessel capable of carrying more than 200 persons. We also have the previously mentioned account of the missionary expeditions of the five monks from Samarkand who reached Fu-Sang in the 5th Century, although this name must refer to Japan rather than to America.

Because of these religious aims, it was not merchandise that

pp. 47-54. In collaboration with G. F. Ekholm: "Significant parallels in the symbolic art of southern Asia and middle America. In: *Selected papers of the XXIX I.C.A.*, vol. 1, Chicago, 1951, pp. 299-309.

was transported to America, neither iron, nor the alphabet, already developed in South East Asia, but rather architectural styles and religious symbols. In fact, the most striking parallels appear much more in the spheres of religion and art, than in technology and material culture.

Missionary zeal was not, however, the sole motivation behind these expeditions. Heine-Geldern mentions the search for gold, jade and precious metals, the thirst for adventure, and the desire to escape from society and the constraints of one particular social climate. These are the very impulses which in the 15th Century impelled the European discoverers of the New World.

Heine-Geldern reached these conclusions from a study of a series of Southern Asiatic characteristics, specific forms of which reappear in the Mexico/Maya area.

First, there is the lotus flower. In Asia, as in America, the lotus constitutes the principal decorative element in large relief panels. In both regions the shape of the plant acquires the same liana-like undulation, and the buds, leaves and flowers are arranged and stylised according to a single artistic conception of a highly unnaturalistic character.

On the same panels appear representations of human figures and sea-monsters of an identical type.

“According to what known law of psychology,” wonders Heine-Geldern, “could the ornamental motif of the lotus flower and stem have been used in the same way in India and Central America, given, moreover, that the plant stylised in so singular a fashion, issues identically from the jawless mouth of a sea-monster?”

Similar parallels hold for decorative and symbolic forms:

- Images of squatting human figures surmounted by gods.
- The Tree of Paradise, with the devil’s countenance on the upper part of the trunk, (both found in classic Mayan art).
- The *makara*, a mythical sea-monster from Hindu/Buddhist art, with the body of a fish or reptile, without trunk or tusks, holding a human being in its mouth.
- Snake-like divinities.
- The snail issuing from a flower; the remarkable phallic symbols of Uxmal, Labna, and of the Chichen-Itza era, similar to



## *Asiatic Influences on Pre-Columbian Cultures*

the symbolism of Hindu/Buddhist art. Certain of these decorative motifs appeared in the religious city of Amaravati, on the South-East coast of India, in the 2nd Century A.D., and in the course of India colonization spread through the Malacca Peninsula, Indochina and Indonesia, whence they passed to America.

The following parallels are evident in the architecture:

- The decorative use of columns on facades.
- Galleries, lined with a colonnade on one side and relief panels on the other.
- Statues of Atlantes supporting stone tablets.
- Stepped pyramids.
- Balustrades decorated with snakes.
- The posture of human figures in sculpture and Mayan reliefs, with one knee bent horizontally, and the other vertical. The representation of figures seated upon tiger-shaped thrones has numerous analogies in India, as can be said of thrones decorated with lotus leaves, or the figure of a god holding a lotus flower (at Palenque and other Mayan sites, as in Hindu/Buddhist art).

In demonstrating these correlations, Heine-Geldern revived some previous suggestions, but he supported them with facts of a more scientific nature, drawing diverse elements into a single synthesis. He explained his final conclusions thus: "Such a close relationship, even down to the smallest details, excludes the possibility of purely accidental similarities. These native cultures (of America) could not have been as radically altered as they in fact were, without the more or less permanent migration of a large number of individuals or small groups.

This whole process may be compared to that which led to the formation of the Indian colonial cultures in South East Asia: the introduction of a foreign civilization into a more primitive native culture, by the arrival of small immigrant groups, subsequently absorbed by the local population. As a result, a new civilization is born, which, in spite of its own genuine innovations, and despite any particular previous characteristics, nevertheless enables us to identify features common to both cultures; the foreign and indigenous roots from which this culture derives."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> R. Heine-Geldern: "Cultural connections between Asia and pre-Columbian America," In: *Anthropos*, vol. 45, n. 1-3, 1950, p. 351; and: "The Problem

Other works in the same vein include those of Gordon Ekholm, M. Covarrubias, J. Naudou, C. Sauer... each of whom attempted to explore one aspect or another of the themes broached by the Viennese scholar, adding new details.

We will merely cite the specific contribution of J. Naudou, who embarked upon a comparative study of the Amaravati-style friezes and the Temple of Jaguars at Chichen-Itza. Naudou remarks that the decoration of ancient Central American monuments presents a familiar appearance to the specialist in Indian culture.

In the style of the Amaravati period (1st to 3rd century A.D.) are found two sea-monsters (*makaras*), mouth open and elongated like an elephant's trunk, at either end of the frieze. The two *makaras* seem to be looking towards the centre where there is the head of a monster, called *Kirthimukha* in India and Kkala in Java. The *makaras* are wreathed in foliage.

The American friezes present the same arrangement. "Such an accumulation of similar characteristics," concludes Naudou, "could not be fortuitous. It seems natural to decorate a frieze with a garland of flowers and fruit, but it is far less so to place it around a fish with a monster's head, its mouth like an elephant's trunk, and with fish issuing from it. There exists, therefore, a strong probability that the friezes on the Temple of Jaguars were inspired by an Indochinese or Indonesian work of the 9th or 10th centuries."<sup>12</sup>

The research undertaken between 1955 and 1965 in Valdivia and Machalilla (Ecuador), by E. Estrada, Betty Meggers, and Clifford Evans, can be seen in the same light. They found the remains of pottery and ceramics dating from the third millennium B.C.: vases and bowls bearing incisions made by shells, rope, or the fingers: lines scratched on, the rims lightly fluted or thickened into small undulations, with the aid of an implement that delicately imprints concave or convex forms.

of Transpacific influences in Mesoamerica," in: *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, ed. R. Wanchope. Austin, 1966, vol. IV, p. 293.

<sup>12</sup> J. Naudou: "A propos d'un éventuel emprunt de l'art maya aux arts de l'Inde extérieure." In: *Akten XXXIV Int. Cong. Am.*, Wien, 1962, p. 346. See further: G. E. Ekholm: "Is American Culture Asiatic?," in: *Natural History*, LIX, n. 8, 1950, pp. 344-351; and "Transpacific Contacts," in: J. D. Jennings, E. Norbeck (ed.): *Prehistoric Man in the New World*, Chicago Univ. Press, 1964, pp. 485-510; Covarrubias M.: *The Eagle, the jaguar and the serpent. Indian art of the Americas*. New York, 1954.

## *Asiatic Influences on Pre-Columbian Cultures*

“Words cannot adequately express the degree of similarity between the first Valdivia period and that of the Jomon culture of Japan (beginning in the third millennium B.C.), write the discoverers, and only photographs can do justice to the significant resemblances. Not only the technique, but the very motifs of the engraved relics, are identical. In many cases one finds examples of a decorative technique of such similarity, that they could have come from the same pottery. Nevertheless, there are differences which testify to an adaptation and evolution—above all in the use of finger-impressions.”<sup>13</sup>

One cannot but be impressed by a study of the thirty plates showing the archeological remains of the two cultures under comparison, which were published by the Smithsonian Institution in a luxury edition. The authors believe that to explain such similarities, one has also to accept the existence of contacts between Japan and Ecuador.

Japanese canoes (and we have archaeological proof of their existence prior to the third millennium A.D.) could have been carried in an easterly direction by one of the most powerful Pacific currents, the Kuro-shivo. It would have taken several months to cover the distance between Japan and Ecuador (9,450 miles), but this would not have been impossible for primitive men, used to living by fishing.

On landing in the New World, the survivors would have made contact with a people living in conditions similar to their own and integrated into this new community.

“The new arrivals introduced the art of pottery, and most probably new religious practices, which are reflected in certain figurines. Other new ideas might also have been introduced, but there exists no tangible evidence to this effect” (p. 168).

The same researchers discovered in the Esmeraldas Province (Ecuador) a whole range of elements dating from the 2nd century B.C. with no precedent in the local culture, but which show marked similarities with South-East Asian types: houses with frescoed facades and double or saddle-shaped roofs, curving upwards at each end; statuettes seated in Buddhist posture, but with the legs uncrossed, with Phrygian or conical caps, necklaces

<sup>13</sup> B. Meggers, C. Evans, E. Estrada; *Early formative period of coastal Ecuador. The Valdivia and Machalilla Phases*. Washington, Smithsonian Institution 1965, pp. 160 & 168.

and rings; multi-barelled flutes and necklaces of similar decoration.<sup>14</sup>

These observations would seem to prove that other groups from South-East Asia reached the shores of Ecuador towards the end of the first millennium B.C.

#### RESEARCH IN PHILOSOPHICAL AND RELIGIOUS FIELDS

The research previously cited was primarily concerned with the field of art. Certainly there is a direct link between art and religion, but the similarities between the religions of Asia and Central America are less obvious.

Heine-Geldern: "There is no doubt that a simple and unbiased comparative analysis of Aztec and Mayan religions will uncover many characteristics of ancient Buddhist or Hindu influences, or of both. To give but one example: the conception of hell and of the punishments inflicted upon sinners is so similar to those of Buddhist and Hindu beliefs in both outline and detail, that one is led inescapably to postulate an historical relationship."<sup>15</sup>

Unfortunately, Heine-Geldern did not develop this line of enquiry. Among those who did venture into this field, can be mentioned Paul Kirchhoff, Angel Garibay, Dennis Louy, and Samuel Marti.

The German anthropologist, Kirchhoff, started from the calendars enumerating the gods and animals associated with each day of the month, which are found both in Asia and Central America.<sup>16</sup>

In these records, the gods and their related animals are grouped into four sets, according to three basic functions (or types): those gods who order the universe (guardians of the cosmic order, associated with the cow, the female buffalo, the dragon etc); the divinities symbolizing the great forces of nature (wind, water,

<sup>14</sup> E. Estrada, B. Meggers: "A complex of traits of probable transpacific origin on the coast of Ecuador," in: *American Anthropologist*, vol. 63, no. 5, 1961, pp. 913-939.

<sup>15</sup> In: *Selected papers of the XXIX Int. Cong. Am.* Chicago, vol. 1, p. 307.

<sup>16</sup> P. Kirchhoff: "The Adaptation of Foreign Religious Influences in Pre-Spanish Mexico." In: *Diogenes*, no. 47. See also, by the same author: "The diffusion of a great religious system from India to Mexico. In: *Actas y Memorias del XXXV Congreso Int. de Am., Mexico*, 1964, vol. 1; pp. 73-100.

## *Asiatic Influences on Pre-Columbian Cultures*

fire, related to the hare, the rabbit, the cock, the bull, the lion...); and the gods of fertility (rain, dance, song, copulation, medicine, symbolized by the snake, the tiger, the elephant and the monkey...).

All these lists have one factor in common: gods and animals follow one another according to a certain order, reflecting the three kinds of divinities mentioned: that is to say in the order I - II - III, I - II - III, I - II - III, I - II - III. The four lists of each type are variations on the same basic theme. J. Imbelloni observes that a most "unlikely ingenuity" would have been necessary for such a similarity of separate inventions to have been purely coincidental.<sup>17</sup> And Kirchhoff concludes: "Given that all the lists have an identical structure and include a great number of common details, it is inconceivable that they could have originated independently. The resemblances can only be explained in terms of a common history."

For Kirchoff these similarities constitute the most convincing proof of Asian influence on America.

The specific contribution of Angel M. Garibay concerns the fields of religion and philosophy.<sup>18</sup> The Mexican researcher condemns the lack of seriousness with which the problem of cultural contacts between Asia and America has been so often treated. Parallels are drawn without care being taken to adduce proof. "Men in similar conditions," he writes, "naturally tend to respond in the same fashion. For this reason, rush baskets, hand-barrows and vases, have been invented in various parts of the world, without there having been any contact between them. But when it comes to much more elaborate and precise conceptions of the universe, any similarity that emerges calls for consideration and deserves studying" (p. 120).

In particular, conceptions of time and space in the Hindu and Nahuatl civilizations show resemblances that allow us to make certain inferences.

In the course of his research, Garibay finds "many Hindu texts comparable to those of the Nahua tradition," and draws the conclusion that "the relationship between the conceptions of

<sup>17</sup> J. Imbelloni: *op. cit.*, p. 334.

<sup>18</sup> A. M. Garibay: "Semejanza de algunos conceptos filosóficos de las culturas Indù y Náhuatl." In: *Cuadernos Americanos*, Mexico, vol. 103, no. 2, pp. 120-144, 1959.

the cosmos and of time provides points for comparison," although he was unable to prove any direct derivation (p. 136).

In a monograph, Dennis Wing-son Lou<sup>19</sup> examines the relationship between the Chinese dragon and the plumed serpent of the Nahua-Mayas. In both civilizations, both are considered to be the principal ancient gods. They are linked in an identical manner to the myth of creation by the four seasons and four spheres. They may live in the mountains, the sky, and in the water. They may both comprise a single divinity, or four, or even more.

Lou discovers even more surprising resemblances between the Chinese god of thunder and the Chac of the Mayas in their external representation and their religious functions. The analogies extend to minor divinities such as the goddess of rain, personified as the frog, to the sun and the moon, and the rites consecrated to them.

"All these correspondences," concludes Lou, "comprise only a small number of the many elements of similarity between the Indians and the ancient Chinese, even down to the smallest details of religious symbolism. It is surprising to meet with such a striking similarity of conceptions, and it would be unsound to attribute this to simple coincidence" (p. 26). Lou suggests the possibility of migration from China towards Central America, during the first millennium, and gives various arguments for this based upon the sea-faring knowledge of the ancient Chinese.

In a recent study of hand-symbolism in Asia and America, S. Marti highlights other analogies of a religious and mythological character.<sup>20</sup>

He mentions the *Vajra* or sceptre representing lightning, and the insignia of radiating arrows, invariable attributes of Vishnu and Quetzalcoatl; the symbolism of the bell, or female principle, otherwise named "the original matrix" or phenomenal world, the cult of the hills associated with rainfall, personified in India as Avalokitesvara, "the lord who descends from on high," and in America by Tlaloc; the sacrifice of children, generally weaklings, to the rain-gods practised for thousands of years in

<sup>19</sup> Dennis Wing-son Lou: *Rain Worship among the Ancient Chinese and the Nabua-Maya Indians*. Taiwan, Chinese Academy, 1957.

<sup>20</sup> S. Marti: "Manos simbólicas en Asia y América." In: *Cuadernos Americanos*, vol. 159, no. 2, 1970, pp. 146-166.

## *Asiatic Influences on Pre-Columbian Cultures*

China and the similar custom of frightening off evil spirits during an eclipse with shouts and various noises; the small dogs, stuffed with food, that figure in funerary rites and sacrifices to the rain-gods; the tree of life, or the Cosmic Axis; the offering of incense (copal), flowers and birds in the cult of Quetzalcoatl as in Buddhist rites; the phallic cults and religious coitus; the symbolism of the pearl, jade, the oyster, the snail and the horns of the snail; the theme of chalchihuitl or precious stone, the spiral, the Greek border, the rosette, the lotus and serpentine patterns.

"It is difficult," concludes Marti, "to accept all these facts as mere coincidences or parallelisms, given that they are based upon cosmological, philosophical and religious concepts and ideas which in Asia go back to greatest antiquity" (p. 161). He adds moreover, other correlations taken from the fields of art and music.

### THE PRESENT SITUATION

It is interesting to examine the reactions of anthropologists and archaeologists, when faced with the conclusions of the Heine-Geldern school.

They are not universally accepted. Among the most notable opponents are: A. L. Kroeber, A. Caso, Martínez del Rio, H. C. Taylor, D. Fraser.<sup>21</sup>

The counter-arguments are based upon the remoteness of Asia, and the difficulties of crossing the Pacific in primitive craft. Furthermore, the similarities appear to be superficial and insufficiently compatible with the whole context of ancient Central American culture. The common characteristics often appear in the region that supposedly imported them before they appear in Asia. In other instances there exists far too great a discontinuity—an inexplicable lapse of time.

The unaccountable appearance of certain elements in Central America could be explained by the fact that several stages of

<sup>21</sup> A. Caso: "Answer to Paul Kirchhoff," in *Diogenes*, no. 47, 1964; Martínez del Rio: *Los orígenes americanos*, 3rd ed., Mexico 1952; D. Fraser: "Theoretical issues in the transpacific diffusion controversy." In: *Social Research*, vol. 32, no. 4, pp. 452-477, 1965.

development yet remain to be discovered, bearing in mind that certain objects and various pointers may have disappeared and archaeology has yet to succeed in reconstructing them.

The remains of objects, works of art, or inscriptions, that would clearly show the influence of the Asiatic cultures, are absent. No direct proof of actual contacts has yet been furnished.

Finally, the analogies seem to be the natural product of the human mind, which, when confronted with certain similar situations, reacts in a like manner. These objections have forced specialists to be more precise in their methods of research, and to draw more sophisticated conclusions.

The diffusionists no longer reiterate those earlier arguments that Imbelloni called "fantastic lucubrations," and "the encumbrances, which discredit the good sense of Americanologists." They have become more objective and aim for a more precise methodology. They recognize the possibility of psychological parallels, and try to understand other facts in this new perspective. They do not deny the inventive powers of mankind and recognize that the native American possessed the same ability to invent new cultural artifacts for himself as the inhabitants of the Old World. Many of the cultural advances could be explained without recourse to diffusionism. But why were these discoveries made in certain places to the exclusion of others? Why and how, after a lapse of hundreds and thousands of years, with no important changes evident in pre-historical times, did particular groups so unexpectedly effect a transition which projects them onto the stage of history and civilization: all this contemporaneously and in different parts of the world. This is the real problem. The isolationists reply that this is due to a parallel adaptive effort in a similar environment; but others reply that these similar conditions generally do not prevail in America, and there is only a limited correlation between the environment and cultural level achieved. It seems more logical to look for mutual cultural exchanges.

According to the laws of acculturation, the result of contact between two civilizations is always something new. America received from Asia, but always transformed these new contributions and ideas. The pre-Columbian cultures should in no way be considered as a mere continuation of those of Asia. A perfect identity, or complete parallel, would never be found anywhere.



American and Asian stylisation are quite different, as are their beliefs.

For this reason the diffusionist theory does not deny the possibility of autonomous evolution. Imitation never constitutes a "literal" copying. New contributions always appear, and we must always bear in mind the untiring creative urge of man, his free imagination, and his faculty of adaptation.

On the subject of the lack of absolute archeological proof, it is observed that present-day knowledge and some of the remains discovered have not yet been fully analysed. Moreover, the materials that have been most readily worked (wood, skins, ceramic) have probably perished.

The absence of characteristically Asian elements does not provide a decisive argument against the contact-theory. In the process of diffusion, the receiving culture always selects and then adapts those ingredients it needs. The selection is modified by a great many factors, and will be significantly restricted if the cultural contacts take place over great distances or are merely intermittent.

There has been some success in determining the scope of navigation in ancient times, from drawing written information, and the study of rafts still used by primitive peoples. The argument from the impossibility of long sea-voyages can no longer be sustained.

The diffusionist arguments that we have so briefly outlined have appeared convincing to many Americanologists, such as L. Pericot, W. Krickberg, S. Canals Frau, O. Menghin, P. Bosch-Gimpera, Marszewskj and others who favor the theory of Asiatic influences, although with various subtle distinctions.<sup>22</sup>

The present state of discussion of this problem is well reflected in: *Man Across The Sea, Problems Of Pre-Columbian Contacts*,

<sup>22</sup> L. Pericot: "El origen del hombre americano y el primer poblamiento de América." In: M. Gomez-Tabanera: *Las raíces de América*, Madrid 1968, pp. 45-63; W. Krickberg (ed): *Las antiguas culturas americanas*, Mexico 1964; S. Canals Frau: "El antiguo Oriente y el nacimiento de las civilizaciones americanas." In: *Imago Mundi*, Buenos Aires 1954, no. 3, pp. 23-27; O. F. Menghim: "Relaciones transpacificas de América precolombina." In: *Runa*, Buenos Aires 1967, vol. 10, pp. 83-97; P. Bosch-Gimpera: "Paralelos transpacificos de la altas culturas americanas y su cronología." In: *Anales de antropología*, Mexico 1970, pp. 43-89; T. Marzewskj: "Remarques sur l'état des recherches concernant les contacts entre les peuples de l'Asie et l'Amérique précolombienne." In: *Folia Orientalia*, II, Krakow, 1961, pp. 177-204.

published in 1971.<sup>23</sup> This work is the result of a symposium of archaeologists, anthropologists, geographers and biologists from North America. It contains the texts of 27 contributions, and four commentaries. The problem is analysed here from widely ranging points of view, according to the various disciplines of the various participants.

The main conclusions to be drawn are as follows: the diffusionist theory based upon the hypothesis of disappeared continents is dismissed as no longer meriting serious consideration. That the great cultures of America might stem from precisely datable historical influences in the recent past is also rejected. The Central American civilization could not have been triggered by the arrival of the captains of Alexander's ships, or by Viking landings. The theory that America might have been the originating centre of the many correspondences found also on the continent of Asia, and which could have been part of an East-West migratory movement, was also thought to be ridiculous.

On the other hand, the majority of the participants, with two exceptions, maintained that certain characteristic elements of the American civilizations were the result not of any specifically American invention, but rather of Asian influences which played an important role in cultural exchanges on the American continent. Some suggested the idea of prolonged contacts, which in specific contributions influenced the development of art, architecture, political and social systems, technology and religion. The ecomumenism of the Old World thus reached the New World, and provoked profound changes there. Others opposed this idea of mass diffusion, with the objections already stated above.

On the whole, with the exceptions of Taylor and Hedrick, the 31 specialists participating in the symposium showed themselves to be in favor of the theory of trans-oceanic voyages—many of them resting their case on the arguments of the Heine-Geldern school. "Of course," remarked Erik K. Reed, "this cannot be a true reflection of the position among Americanologists today. But at least now, those that hold such opinions can speak freely. Thirty-three years ago, when the American Archaeological Society was founded, such ideas were certainly held to be heretical and could not be publicly discussed. In contrast to this earlier atti-

<sup>23</sup> Carroll L. Riley and others: *Man across the Sea. Problems of Pre-Columbian Contacts*. Austin, Univ. of Texas Press, 1971, p. 552.

tude there has been a marked shift of sympathy in recent years towards diffusionism and contacts from abroad as causes of the appearance of both generic and particular features" (p. 106).

These features were again studied in the course of the symposium by John L. Sorenson, who presented a comparative list of 180 common characteristics, many of them religious in nature, which he called the "body of evidence." "On the basis of this documentation," concluded Sorenson, "it is possible, and perhaps even necessary, to interpret the birth of the Central American civilization as having been dependent to a significant degree upon links with Eurasia" (p. 226). It is not simply a question of marginal influences, but rather of important modifications to the indigenous tradition, although obviously with appropriate adaptation.

The final conclusions reached by the commentators, while being sympathetic to the diffusionist theory, are rather more qualified.<sup>24</sup>

"It should be made quite clear that the present state of American archaeological studies does not permit us to attribute the birth of civilization in the New World with any certainty to the diffusion of culture from the Old. Nevertheless, it is equally impossible to prove any independent origins of the great civilizations of the New World. On the one hand, the total absence in America of objects imported from the Old World might constitute a strong argument against the diffusionist theory. On the other hand, strong grounds for rejecting the theory of autonomous development are provided by the appearance of often highly elaborated features similar to those of the Old World at the most primitive levels of Central American civilization (p. 457).

Working along the same lines, an international conference took place in Buenos Aires in May 1972 on "Cultural Relations between Pre-Columbian America, Asia, and Oceania." The conference was organized jointly by The Association for the Promotion of Asian Studies, The School of Oriental Studies, and with the co-operation of the International Council of Philosophy and Humanistic Studies of UNESCO.

<sup>24</sup> Glyn Daniel has given a very favourable critical review of *Man across the Sea*, in: *Antiquity*, vol. 46, no. 184, Dec. 1972, pp. 288-292. While being one of the moderates, Daniel considers the demonstration of links between the Jomon and Valdivia civilizations as "one of the most surprising discoveries of the last decade."

Among the principal participants were: Betty Meggers, Clifford Evans, Cyrus H. Gordon, Graziela de la Lama, Ismael Quiles, Jorge A. Taiana, Dick E. Ibarra Grasso, Orta Nadal.

Together the contributions presented at this conference give a picture of the current state of research in this field. The conclusions of the previous symposium were generally confirmed; and in addition the second meeting may be distinguished as the point of departure for new avenues of research. Work continues with a moderately diffusionist accent, with all the caution that the present state of knowledge must impose upon unqualified claims.<sup>25</sup>

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A study of the most recent publications and conferences enables us to gauge the present state of research in this field. The problem of Asia influences on pre-Columbian cultures continues. At the moment the position of the various specialists are finely differentiated. The alternatives of diffusionism or isolationism no longer appear in rigid and absolute terms. We can affirm the existence of contacts without either denying the role of originality, or the possibility of adaptation.

Nevertheless, what appears to be innovation could well be a derivation from elements previously introduced into America in the course of earlier migrations.

Much still remains to be done. Research has been largely based upon analogies drawn from the arts; in the fields of philosophy and religion, however, generalizations are the rule, with few attempts at analytic study. What have become more evident are the methodology and also the themes that will reward further work.

The success of these studies will depend upon the possibility of teamwork by experts from various fields: archaeologists, religious historians, and Indianologists. Only thus will we ever be able to grasp the precise significance of the similarities between the ancient cultures of Asia and America.

<sup>25</sup> The proceedings of this conference have not been published, but a *Selective bibliography of the influences of Asia and Oceania in Pre-Columbian America*, containing over 500 titles, has been issued. (Buenos Aires, 1972, p. 31).