



The Legend of the Serpent of Water

Hñähñu People - Mexico

There on the mountain called *R'anxu* on the northern rim of the Mezquital Valley lived an enormous snake. It was called *K'enthe* (the serpent of water) because it was said to bring to the region. About three hundred years ago it was seen by some people stretched out on the top of the mountain. In those years it rained a lot and there was an abundance of the whatever the people planted: corn, beans, squash, potatoes; peaches and other fruits.

The people who first discovered the snake were probably hunters. The snake they saw was just there and no one knew where it came from.

The people who had seen it told others, and one day a lot of people met to climb the mountain together and see exactly where it was. When they arrived, they noted that the lands around were very productive, and they began to offer it the first of their harvest squash, green beans, ears of corn, quelites (greens), squash flowers, and fruit... They gathered these things to fill a big basket, and a group of people took it along with some children. When they saw the serpent, they thought was too big. Where it was coiled up it looked like a big bull lying down.

The people had said earlier now that we are going to take it something, perhaps when it sea men it will become angry and attack us. It would be better if we take along some children. Let's hope that they will not have any fear and it will not attack them.

So the group took the path to the mountain walking quickly. But when they climbed and arrived in the thickest part of the forest where

they knew the snake had been seen they started to walk more slowly. They didn't want to frighten the snake so it wouldn't get angry and attack them.

Those who had gone on the hike said that they were near where the snake had been seen before coiled up near the top of the mountain of *R'anxu*. There they stopped and spoke. From here on, only the children will carry what we have brought near to *k'enthe*, the serpent of water. The children went on, left the offering of food, and returned with no problem. The snake must have liked what they took; it didn't find anything to them.

Three days later some people returned to see if the snake had eaten what had been left. They didn't find anything, just the empty basket.

They brought the basket back to use again for an offering of food the same as the last time: corn beans, squash, potatoes and chayotes (when these vegetables were harvested) and many other fruits and vegetables that were plentiful in those times. Some times when they took the offering of food they saw the snake, and sometimes not.

When the snake was not there, they just left the basket in the place where they had last seen it coiled up, but when they returned to pick up the basket, they always found it in the first place the offering had been left.

During many years they left this food offering for the Serpent of water, or *k'enthe*. People from other places had heard about that mountain and its snake, and they came to see if it was true what they had been told about the enormous serpent that lived on that mountain called *R'anxu*.

The news had reached the ears of some persons called *hechiceros* (shamans) who spoke *náhuatl* (the language of the Aztecs) from the north in Tierra Caliente. This is an area where there is a mountain called the *Cerro del Toro* (Mountain of the Bull) because there is a formation in the snake could be found.

They were told that it lived on the top of the *R'anxu Mountain*. And yes, they found it and were very pleased, saying that it was a serpent of fertility, the same that they knew by that name.

Now since these people were *náhuatl* shamans, they knew that where this serpent lived there was always good rain providing good crops and abundant vegetation. These shamans said among themselves that they would return another day take that snake away with them.

They returned to their community and informed their people that, in truth, the serpent of fertility existed. As is known, these shamans are very intelligent. They met and planned how they would be able to take *k'enthe* to their own community.

It is said that it took a year before they returned to carry out their plan. The most intelligent shamans arrived the day they took the serpent away. This is why nobody noticed how they came and went away at the time. It is only said that these shamans gathered up some of the huge snake was accustomed to coil up.

After they had the earth, it suddenly began to rain very hard. Then a lightning bolt struck right near where the snake was coiled.

That huge snake was frightened, stretched itself out to its full length, and began to rise up into a black cloud along with those shamans who had come to take it away. The cloud began to move towards the north containing to stay there on its own mountain. The cloud took it away.

The cloud passed over the Cerro de la Cruz (near Nicolas Flores). There the shamans dropped two handfuls of the earth they had taken from where they found the snake.

The cloud continued straight north without stopping the heaving rain, lightning, and thunder. Then it arrived at a gap between two mountain ridges called Puerto Oscuro. Also, there they dropped two handfuls of the earth.

But this time the cloud turned to the east and headed straight for the *Cerro del Toro* (near Tlanchinol). It is said that is the mountain where those shamans got down.

At this moment it stopped raining and the cloud began to disperse over that mountain. The shamans took the remaining earth they had brought with them from the mountain where they had abducted the serpent of water (which they now call the serpents of fertility), and molded it on the ground in the form of a cross. With this the snake could not

return to its place of origin. This is how the snake came to live in the *Cerro del Toro* with the people of this region and their powerful shamans.


And now it is known that the two places where they had dropped off the two handfuls of the earth, there started to be better harvest. Still years later, where they arrived with the serpent fertility, everything that is planted grows in abundance and there is a great variety of vegetation. This is because this is where are frequent rains due to *k'enthe*. And now in the area of the *R'anxu* mountain (actually it is called the Cerro de Banxú which is *oyamel* in hñähñu) where the serpent of fertility used to be found there is notably less rain and the harvests are less and less over time. It is a rare year when there is a really good harvest and less due to the big change in the climate years ago when the serpent was removed.

Also the variety of vegetation that used to be is less due to the big change in the climate years ago when the serpent was removed.

But in the place where it is said that the serpent of fertility was taken, there are still large quantities of everything that is planned.

The only sign left for the inhabitants in the area of the Banxú mountain of the serpent of water is the flash lightning that is seen in the night in the direction of the *Cerro del Toro* or when the when the light sound of thunder called '*temblor de agua*' (trembling of water) is heard in the afternoons of the year, especially of the light rains that do still occur in the summer and autumn. □

Story told by Leonardo Antonio and transcribed by Jorge Antonio (2007).

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Rä B'ebe Rä K'enthe

Hñähñu - Mexico

Nuni ha rä t'ohö R'anxu mi t'enä mä yab'u ge ja mi b'uhn'i n'a rä däta K'leñä mrä thuhu rä k'enthe.

N'a rä pa, bi thandi mi b'oni ha made rä ndehe rä t'ohö R'anxu, nub'u bä thandi de un'u yä m'ot'a huähi de gä detha, yä ju'u yä mu, yä ixi mä r'a yä peni un'u mi ja mä yab'u.

De un'u yä pa de nu'u to bä handi hingi fädi te mi pehni pe zäge ua mrä o mia mēfri, nixi nuä rä K'leñä bä thandi hinto bi bädi hanja o ham'u bi zohni'ä o ha brä ñ'ehe rä zu'ue'ä.

Pe nu'u to'o bä handi rä müdi rä bi xipa mar'a yä jä'i, nub'u n'a rä pa bi munts'i ndunthi yä jäi, pa ma bä handi habu xa mi b'oni nub'u bä handi n'ebi da nguenda yä jä'i, bi gamfri ge ngu mrä hogä zu'ue (hingi fädi hanja bi da nguenda) ngetho hinto xki hianda n'a rä K'leñä ngu'ä ngu'ä rä ndäta, mi kamfri ge nulä K'leñä mi b'uhni ha rä t'ohö ngu mi ka rä y'e hange mi hogi gatho nu'u te mi pot'ä yä jä'i.

Nub'u ñ'engä yä jä'i ma gä häntuähu te dä zi, nub'u bi müdi bi thätsua nu'u te mi hogi rä müdi ha yä huähi ngu yä t'umu yä xidju yä manxa, yä K'ani, yä domxu, yä peni. Gatho nthäntsi bi ñu n'a b'ots'e bi ma n'a hängu yä jä'i ko r'a yä bätsi. Koä bi mbengä yä jä'i nub'u bi mä'a bä thandi ximrä däta K'leñä, nuni ha mi b'oni xki mpants'i ua mi b'enga n'a rä däta ndämfri.

Nub'u bi ñ'engä yä jä'i nubya xkrä mäha te gä hätsuahü. Mä dä tega ma r'ihihü dä zajü, ma n'a xahño gä tsixü r'a yä bätsi. Xähmä nuyü hingo dä pidi njabu hindä nkue hinte dä nkue hinte dä y'otkahü.

Nu'bu bi gu'u rä t'ohö ya getbu bi tsoni bi müdi bi y'o r'a ma njante ha yä däta mboza de nuä rä t'ohö habu ya mi fädi mi b'ui nuä rä zu'ue mine dä 'uini, pa hindä pidi hindä pontua rä kue b'u dä yats'i yä njohni.

Ya nu'u to'o xki hyandi bi mā ge ya getbu ma da tsoni ha nzäntho mi b'oni, nub'u bi gohi bi m'ai bi mā ge nubya nzoke nu yä t'ukä bätsi go ge'ubi thogi ma bä tsokua ma ts'u getbu ha ra beni rä K'enthe. Nub'u yä bätsi bä pengi xhño. Zäge nu'ä rä K'enthe bi ho nu'u te gatho bi thätsui hänge hinte bi y'ot'e o himbi nkuë njani gantho bä pengi xahño.

Nub'u rä hñupa bi mengä r'a yä jä'i pa mā bä handi b'u embi bi zi nu'u te bä tsokui bä handi ge ya mi otho nu'u te xki tsokui, nsokse nuä rä b'ots'e mi jani.

Nub'u bä ha nuä rä b'otse pa bi thätsua man'laki ngu nu'u xki thätsua rä mudi, o ora ya mi hogi yä dethä, yä ju, yä mu, yä r'ok'a, yä xamu nduthi mar'a te gatho mi hogi de nu'u yä jeya b'u ge r'a yä pa ora te mi thätsui r'ab'u mi jo'o.

Nub'u hi mi tsudi mi tsokua ha xä rä beni nu'u te mi thatsuabi pe nuä rä b'otse, xtä mani yä jä'i dua hä, nuä ya mi tsudi nuni habu rä mudi bä tsokuni.

Njani ndunthi yä jeya bi t'ini nu'ä rä K'leña de nu'u yä jeya mi fädi ge ja mi b'uhni nuä rä K'enthe, mar'a ya me yabu bi bädi n'ehe, bä ehe ebi hyandi bi bädi b'u xi majuani nu'ä mi ode mi mangä yä jä'i de nuä rä däta K'leña mi hma b'ui nuni ha rä t'ohö R'anxu.

Njani bi bä'ä r'a jä'i yä thuhu yä ndeznä mya me pahai (njani fädi t'embibye nu ha bä ehe nu'u yä jä'i u) getb'u n'a t'ohö rä thuhu doro t'ohö. Njani n'a rä pa nu'u yä jä'i, bä ehe e bi ñ'ani te ma t'ohö habu mi b'ui nuä rä K'enthe.

Nub'u bi sipi ge mi b'u ha rä ndehe rä t'ohö R'anxu. Nub'u bi thogi mā bä K'ätsi hanbu bi sipi mi b'ui. Bä handi, nuyu yä jä'i bi johya nge'ä b'estho bi bädi ge nuä n'a mrä hmuk'ña njani mi hut'u, koa ge nu'u mya bädi mya puni jä'i hange mi pädi ge nu ha mi b'ui nu'u ya K'leña mi tena ra y'e mi hogi nuä rä za te dä hmot'i xä mi ja yä nk'ant'i nzändho.

Nub'u bi yengä yä ndeznä, nege nuni dä za gä penju n'a rä pa e gä tsixu. Nub'u bi menga yä hai pa bä ma, ge hä majuani mi b'ui nuä rä hmuk'ña.

Koa yä ndezna fädi ge yä dänga bädi, nuy'u bi munts'i ha ut'a yä mfeni xaño pa ha bi japi e bi zixa nuä rä K'leña pa ha yä hai.

T'eñä ge bi tho n'a nje_ya pa bä pengi e bi zitsi, njamfri ge bä ehe nu yä p_uni jä'i nu'u ma n'a mi ja yä mfeni pa nuä rä pa e bi zitsi. Hange hinto bi b_o rä ndok'ñä himbi b_o rä kue hinte bi y'ot'uabi.

Nsokse hmä ge nu'u yä ndeznä bi go ts'u rä hai ha mi b'onga ma mpants'i nu'ä rä ndok'ñä, ngu xä ka uadi bi go nu'ä rä hai ua ha gä bot'ä ndunthi n'a rä m'ogui ha mi b'onga ma mpants'i rä K'lenthe bi müdi bi uäi nts'edi b'estho bi da n'a rä yot'ahuei xä getbu ha mi b'onga rä k'lenthe.

Ya ndezna

Nub'u nuä ndok'ñä bi ntsu hange b'estho bi ntunts'i bi njuts'i pa maña ha rä m'ogui ko n'e nu'u yä p_uni jä'i to'o e bi zits'i, nub'u bi müdi bi thogi nu'ä rä gui xki boh_o pa mahufi ko nuä rä ndok'ñä mi nk'uent'ihma ha mbo rä gui pe ya hinte b iza bi y'ot'e, ra gui bi zits'i.

Nuni rä gui mar i thogi ha n'a rä t'oh_o rä thuhu ponza t'oh_o.

Nuni ja mä ri dohni n'a kä'y_e rä hai nuä xki hyäxa yä ndeznä.

De gehni bi thogi mänjuanthu nu'ä rä gui, rä y'e hi mi tsaya ko yä huei yä ngany'e maritho ha ngu ts'u n'a rä mo'mhai ha di nthe yä t'oh_o rä thuhu gothi b'exui n'ehni ja mä ri thohni ma'n'a Kay'e rä hai. Pe nubya nuä rä gui bi b'ahni pa mboxhyadi pa di mä mänjuantho pa ha rä doro t'oh_o. T'enä ge ja nuä rä t'oh_o'ä yä ndezna xki y'ut'a yä mfeni ge ja gehni ha mi n'e dä tsot'ä nuä rä hmuk'ña pa nu'u.

Nub'u nu'ä rä gui bi tsongä ha xä rä ndehe rä doro t'oh_o, Nubia nu'ä rä gui bi m'ai bi müdi bi gäi pa njabu nuä rä ndok'ñä b iza bi m'onga ha rä hai, ko n'e yä ndeznä.

Nub'u bi m'a rä y'e n'ehe rä gui bi müdi bi m'edi ha nu'ä rä t'oh_o, nub'u nubya nu'ä rä hai bi bongi, yä ndezna bi gohi ma mpants'i nu'ä rä K'lenthe pa njabu ya himbi za bä pengi ha mi 'bui hma, njani ya ja bä m'ui ha rä doro t'oh_o ko nu'u yä me pahai yä dänga ndeznä.

Njani ma paya, fädi ge ha bi müdi bi zogi ts'u nu'ä rä hai nu'ä xki hyäxä nu'u yä jä'i, nubya fudi di hogi yä mot'i, pe ma ts'u ri mani ha ri tsonga rä hmuk'ñä, nuni ja gehni, ge nuä r aza te dä mot'a yä jä'i di hogi xahño xä bi ja nuä rä yä nk'ant'i nzäntho, n'e nubya ja bi jani nduthi yä y'e.

Nubya getb'u ha rä t'ohō R'anxu ha mi b'u^hma rä K'lenthe mapaya rä thuhu B'anxu (oyamel) bi mudi bi ma yä y'e yä mot'i n'andi ri uni n'a t'uki, hustho yä jeya di hogi ts'u, nub'u xä mi uäi ndunthi n'e yä nk'ant'i mi j ama häm'u ya otho, ri puni ko nuä rä mpadi bi nja.

Pe nuni habu bi tsonga rä k'lenthe, ma mpaya bi unga xahño nuä rä za te mot'i.

Ngetho bi ts'xä nuä rä k'lenthe ha mi b'umha pa habu jamfri bi ts'its'i, hange nubia t'ena ge nsokse bi zogi rä yä seña pa nu yä mengu ndetsi ha mi b'ui nu yä mfexhni o rä hyats'i yä huei bi hn'eki degä nxui pa ha ri go rä doro tohō o nu yä ntuthe dint'ode degä nde pa ha bi b'ä nuä rä tohō, nuyū thogi ora andi da uäi ndunthi xoge ra jeya o made pa nuyä zāna ora xä uäi ndunthi yä xaie. □

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Comments

The Hñähñus, whom the Nahua peoples – the Nahuatl-speaking peoples – called 'Otomi' (Cortés Rivera, 2007), are the fifth largest indigenous people in Mexico with a population of around 700,000.

Archaeological and historical studies suggest that the Hñähñus inhabited the highlands of central Mexico as early as around 4,000 BCE. However, some authors think it likely that they were in the area of the Transversal Volcanic Axis of Mexico as early as the eighth millennium BCE (Pueblo Otomí, 2022). Today, most people of Hñähñu origin are located in the Mexican states of Hidalgo, Mexico and Querétaro.

From early times, these people inhabited the area where the fabulous complex of Teotihuacan stands, and this has led some researchers to suspect that the Hñähñu may have been the founders, or at any rate an important part, and possibly the builders, of this monumental multi-ethnic city which flourished between the 2nd and 7th centuries CE. They are also associated with the construction, between

the 9th and 11th centuries CE, of another important city in the region: the Toltec city of Tula.

However, it is the fall of Teotihuacán that perhaps had the greatest impact on the future of the Hñähñu People given that, shortly afterwards, large groups of Nahua people began to arrive in central Mexico, displacing the Hñähñu from their established areas of settlement.

Although the ‘Legend of the Water Serpent’ seems to place the story between the 17th and 18th centuries, perhaps we can see in it the remnants of centuries-old tensions which existed between the Hñähñu and the Nahua peoples. This is insofar as we see that the Hñähñu blamed the Nahua for the theft of the serpent and, with it, the loss of fertility and abundance in their lands.

The truth is that, for a long time, the belief that the Hñähñu People were a marginalised people has existed. Furthermore, they have been seen as a people who have been exploited by the other peoples with lived alongside them mainly by the Nahua and, later, the Spaniards. But, perhaps the latter is the only fact that is true, given the damage perpetrated on native peoples during the colonisation of America by European nations. In fact, López Aguilar (2010) comments that:

It would seem that the process of disqualification, and the look of contempt [towards the Hñähñu People], began with the Spanish conquest. This highlighted the fact that their miserable state was part of liberal, modernising and very late ideas for the documentary narrative. It is possibly one of the founding myths of the Mexican Revolution. (p. 170)

This points to the fact that, regardless of the Hñähñu’s situation before ‘the arrival of the Castilians’ in around 1520 – as the *Codex Chimalpopoca* (ibid.) says – what seems quite certain is that, with Spanish colonisation, the Hñähñu People went into decline, resulting in poverty and marginalisation. It is known that the Hñähñu population was decimated by migrations allowed, or directly forced, by the Spanish in many places, and also due to epidemics brought by the Spanish during the invasion (Moreno, Garrett and Fierro, 2006).

Finally, it is important to note the loss of culture and traditions the Hñähñu population suffered as a result of the introduction of Christianity. It should also be pointed out that the Hñähñus adapted, up

to a point, to this religious imposition. However, old sacred traditions, far from the sight of the Franciscan and Augustinian friars, continued to be practised. As Moreno *et al.* (2006, p. 9):

Although they publicly practised Christianity, the beliefs surrounding the forces of nature and their representations remained alive. Over time, a syncretic religiosity was formed, taking elements from both worldviews and resulting in a kind of Mesoamerican Indigenous Catholicism.

Once again, we find a strong animist, ecological, spiritual component, very common among native cultures all over the planet. This is a form of spirituality that the so-called 'civilised' European nations took upon themselves to uproot everywhere in order to replace it with the Judeo-Christian anthropocentric worldview. This was despite the attempts of Francis of Assisi, in the 13th century, to embrace a loving encounter with nature.

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Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 5e: Manage the use of renewable resources such as water, soil, forest products, and marine life in ways that do not exceed rates of regeneration and that protect the health of ecosystems.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: Earth, Our Home.- The resilience of the community of life and the well-being of humanity depend upon preserving a healthy biosphere with all its ecological systems, a rich variety of plants and animals, fertile soils, pure waters, and clean air.

Preamble: Earth, Our Home.- The global environment with its finite resources is a common concern of all peoples.

Principle 7: Adopt patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction that safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being.

Principle 10: Ensure that economic activities and institutions at all levels promote human development in an equitable and sustainable manner.

Principle 10a: Promote the equitable distribution of wealth within nations and among nations.

