

**ORIGINAL ARTICLE****Vultures in the Cultures of the World****Sonika Kushwaha**

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Email: [sonika2107@gmail.com](mailto:sonika2107@gmail.com)Received: 18<sup>th</sup> Jan. 2016, Revised: 26<sup>th</sup> Jan. 2016, Accepted: 17<sup>th</sup> March 2016**ABSTRACT**

Throughout the ages, vultures have been revered as symbols of power and insight. The cultures of various communities not only in India but from all over the world have mentioned about vultures such as Egyptians, American Indians, Pueblo Indians, Greeks, Persians and Romans. The vulture was an important being in the everyday lives of ancient people. For many vultures may be an ugly bird with a myth that they attack livestock or even human beings but the fact is vultures are an important link in the ecosystem, feeding on the dead rotten carcasses. Our ancestors valued them and utilized their scavenging nature to dispose off the dead (humans as well as animals) and keep the surroundings healthy. Various Government departments, Scientists and Conservationists are coming together to work for vulture conservation. Conservation includes both ex-situ and in-situ measures. Since we are losing them every day, International Vulture Awareness Day (First Saturday of every September) is being celebrated all over the world to make the future generation sentient about the plight of vultures.

**Key words:** Ancient history, Vulture, World

**INTRODUCTION**

India lost millions of them..... the loss irreversible. Vultures, one of the most commonly sighted birds started disappearing from the Indian skies in mid 1990s. Today we are left with few thousands of them. Besides their economic importance and ecological role in keeping the environment disease free, vultures find important place in mythology too. Throughout the ages, vultures have been revered as symbols of power and insight. Throughout history and across many cultures, people have regarded Vultures with enthrallment and admiration. Vultures have been feared and respected, unloved and well-liked, considered dirty and clean, and associated with black magic and medicine, birth and death. Assumption about Vultures began in primitive legends, ages ago but passed over to the future generations through tales and fables. In early different myths, Vultures represent bravery and goodwill, and have powers of foresight. The cultures of various communities not only in India but from all over the world have mentioned about vultures such as Egyptians, American Indians, Pueblo Indians, Greeks, Persians and Romans.

The aim of this paper is to reflect the magnitude of the most efficient scavengers throughout the ancient times not only in India but across the world. There have been detailed studies regarding the role of vultures in Nature, this paper reflects their role in various cultures.

**METHODOLOGY**

To know the importance of the Mother Nature's Cleaners in various cultures around the World, all existing scientific and grey literature was located and reviewed on the mythological, cultural, occurrence and rituals associated with vultures within India and the World. Data was also collected during visits to various places like Orchha in Tikamgarh.

**VULTURES IN INDIAN CULTURE**

In the epic Ramayana, Jatayu, a vulture king or Giddhraj (Fig 1) is believed to have informed Lord Rama the direction in which his wife, Sita had been abducted by Ravana, a demon (Griffith, 1870). Besides this, Sampati (Jatayu's elder brother) helped in searching Mother Sita by telling Hanumanji, Angada and Jambavana who were leading the group of monkeys in search of Sampati had superior vision and 100 yojans was not a big distance for him. The bird is attributed with a keen eyesight

with long and high flights in the epic Ramayana. Griddhraj Parvat, which means the “hills of vultures” is a hill of religious, archeological and ecological importance situated in Devrajnagar village of Madhya Pradesh, India. Griddhraj Parvat is of great religious importance in Hindu mythology. It is believed to be the birth place of Sampati, the brother of Giddhraj “Jatayu” (Diwan, 1907).

Another place known as 'Griddhakuta' or “The Hill of Vultures” is located at Rajgir, Bihar. Lord Buddha used to dive into meditation and preaching on 'Griddhakuta' or 'The Hill of Vultures'. This was the site where he returned just after the attainment of enlightenment. Lord Buddha professed his law of motion or Dharma Pravartana Chakra on its peak ([www.ajanta-ellora.com/rajgir.html](http://www.ajanta-ellora.com/rajgir.html)).



**Fig.1:** Wounded Jatayu with Lord Rama

In the history of Central Indian Art, the wall paintings of Orchha occupy a unique position (Fig.2). The artists adopted long-lasting techniques in the creation of murals, based on Vedas, the Epics and the Puranas.



**Fig 2:** The wall paintings of Orchha occupy a unique position

The vultures are still seen in the antique pieces in Orchha (fig. 3). Orchha still abodes a promising population of vultures.



**Fig. 3:** Antiques with vultures

The Egyptian Vulture was also considered to be a good bird in India. There is a story about two birds that visited the temple of Thirukkalukundram (hill of sacred vultures) daily for centuries: they would appear at 11 o'clock in the morning, and were ceremonially fed sweet rice and other delicacies by the priests (fig 4). According to a myth, the two birds used to be sages cursed by Shiva to live as vultures, and were visiting the temple in penance. Egyptian Vultures used to be rather common in India; what makes this case so special, however, is that it was always a pair of vultures that would visit the temple - never more. Although it is true that two birds were indeed regular visitors to the temple and photos exist of them, we can easily suppose that they were multiple generations of vultures and not incredibly long-lived individuals (The Neophron Vultures of Thirukkalukundram).



**Fig. 4:** Egyptian vultures being ceremonially fed sweet rice and other delicacies by the priests

#### **VULTURES IN OTHER CULTURES OF THE WORLD**

In ancient Egypt, Queen Cleopatra is often depicted carrying a staff adorned with a vulture's head—a symbol of wisdom. For the Egyptians, vultures were deities, emblems of motherhood, giving life

and then later taking it back. Persians accorded them royal status because of their size and the elegance with which they glide, and the Romans used them to represent military strength.

Among the San and other cultures in Africa, these huge, high-flying birds with their well-developed powers of observation have been explicitly accorded with Clairvoyance and mystical or magical properties. The Pueblo Indians saw the vulture as a sign of purification and the Greeks considered it to be a symbol of transformation, as old decayed flesh was removed new life emerged.

As its name suggests, the Egyptian Vulture was the sacred animal of the ancient Pharaohs; its appearance is immortalized in the Egyptian hieroglyphic alphabet as the letter A. Since the ancient Egyptians thought that all vultures were female and were spontaneously born from eggs without the intervention of a male, they linked these animals to purity and motherhood. In actuality, both genders happen to have the same appearance, the only difference being the larger size of the female. Nonetheless, they were held sacred to the mother goddess Isis; they were also elevated to the rank of deity in their own right as Nekhbet, patron of Upper Egypt and nurse of the Pharaoh (Fig 5). The priestesses of Nekhbet wore garments of white vulture feathers, and the goddess herself was often portrayed as a vulture-headed woman, her wings spread to provide protection, a circlet in her claws - the *shen*, symbol of infinity. Her cult was in fact linked to the eternal cycle of death and rebirth because of the vulture's role in the food chain as a scavenger and its supposed parthenogenesis; Nekhbet was venerated as the mother of mothers, who existed from the beginning (Nekhbet, the white vulture Goddess).



**Fig. 5:** Nekhbet

Egyptian vultures in general were held in high regard by ancient Etruscan and Roman culture, where they were considered messengers of the gods. Their attempts to detect the tides of good and bad luck involved a particular form of divination, called augury, based on reading the flight of birds. One such instance of augury appears in the foundation myth of Rome, when Romulus and Remus were arguing over which hill the new city would be built on and who was to be king; they decided to settle their argument by observing the flight of vultures. The high regard in which the Egyptian Vulture was held seeps through time to its modern Italian name, "*capovaccaio*", which means "master of cows" - a name given because of the bird's tendency to fly together with cattle (Crystalinks: Etruscans).

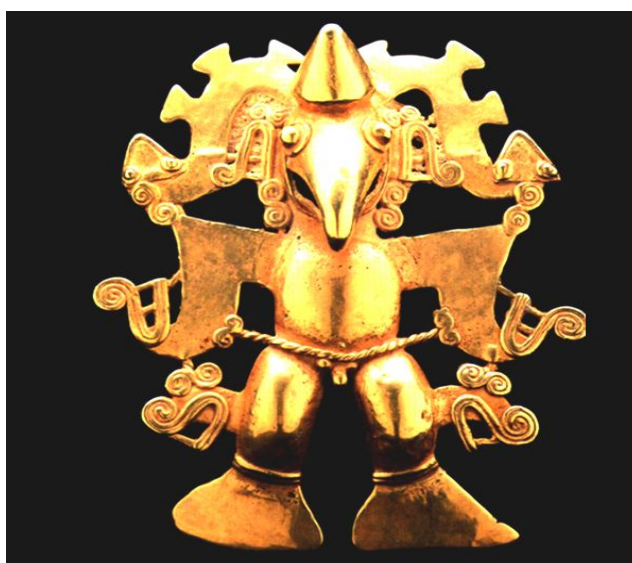
The vulture was an important being in the everyday lives of ancient people. In Pre-Columbian times, vultures were appreciated as extraordinary beings and had high iconographic status (Fig 6).



**Fig. 6:** The Aztec vulture vessel is one of the pots in the new Pre-Columbian Mesoamerican Pottery Gallery

According to the Kogi today, “No one hates this animal, because it does not do anything bad” (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1985, II:132). Its presence in art and origin myth reflects its positive and transforming character. Both the vulture’s natural history and its mythic roles indicate its importance and its connotations for Classic Maya and other Precolumbian peoples (Fig.7). One of the first most notable characteristics of Gold Pendant of a Shaman, a dynamic figure is the long, gently curving beak. This might be interpreted as an eagle or a King Vulture. It is a soaring, shamanic bird, associated with highness and brightness. It is a transformer of death and sacrificial offerings. It is related to agriculture, for which the rulers were responsible. Vulture is a civilized being of many talents (Elizabeth P.Benson, 1993).

In ancient Egypt, Queen Cleopatra is often depicted carrying a staff adorned with a vulture’s head—a symbol of wisdom. For the Egyptians, vultures were deities (Fig. 8) emblems of motherhood; giving life and then later taking it back ([www.cosforums.com/cosarchieve/printthread.php](http://www.cosforums.com/cosarchieve/printthread.php) Egyptian Mythology).



**Fig. 7:** Gold Pendant of a Shaman Wearing an Avian Costume collected during Pre-Columbian (700 AD to 1200 AD)



**Fig. 8:** Africa Architecture temple wings: Ancient Egypt middle east vultures Egyptian mythology carvings hieroglyphics

#### **CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF VULTURES AT PRESENT**

Disposing the dead by exposing them for excarnation is a funerary practice of the Zoroastrian community in India, the Parsees. Like the Parsis in India, Tibetans too practice “Sky burial” where human corpses are offered to the vultures or Dakinis (Sky Dancer), the equivalent of angels. They believe that vultures were created to devour corpses and that this form of disposal, limits the defiling of the earth; air; and water; that are sacred to the Parsees (Pain *et al.*, 2003). Parsees practice a form of sky-burial in which the dead are carried by the corpse-bearers and placed on top of a sacred structure called a “Tower of Silence” (Modi, 1922), (Fig 9).



**Fig. 9:** A corpse being carried by the corpse-bearers inside the Tower of Silence in Bombay

The corpse is completely stripped of its flesh by about 100 - 120 vultures (Satheesan *et al.*, 1990) within an hour or two, and the bones of the denuded skeleton, when perfectly dried up are placed in the well, where they are reduced to dust. This form of burial reflects their basic belief that neither the living nor the earth should be contaminated by the dead but remain pure (Joel, 2005). There are Parsees in Iran, Iraq, and India, still holding on to this ancient belief, and to the

westerner, their burial ceremonies are quite extraordinary (Mistry, 1991). A similar death ritual is practiced by Tibetans who believe that sky-burial transports the spirit of the dead safely to heaven (Niema, 1980). Exarnation sites or charnel grounds are usually located near monasteries. Drigung Monastery is located on a steep hill in the Meldor Gungkar county of Central Tibet (Logan, 1997). After death, the corpse is cleaned and wrapped in white cloth. A 'body-cutter' dressed in long white aprons unwraps the corpse and within a few minutes the dead man's organs are removed and set aside for later, separate disposal. The cutters give a signal calling the vultures and the flock rushes in, covering the body completely, their heads disappearing as they bend down to tear away flesh (Logan, 1997). The vultures are enormous birds with virtually featherless head, so as not to impede the bird when reaching into a body to feed. Men pull out what remains of the corpse which is usually only a blood stained skeleton and pound the bones reducing them to splinters. This is mixed with barley flour and then thrown to the waiting crows and hawks. Remaining vultures grab slabs of softened gristle and greedily devour them. Within half an hour, the body has almost completely disappeared and what remains of the skeleton is abandoned at the burial site (Logan, 1997). In some parts of the country vultures are now so scarce that cremation is being used as an alternative to this traditional celestial burial.

## CONCLUSION

For many vultures may be an ugly bird with a myth that they attack livestock or even human beings but the fact is vultures are an important link in the ecosystem, feeding on the dead rotten carcasses. Our ancestors valued them and utilized their scavenging nature to dispose off the dead (humans as well as animals) and keep the surroundings healthy. Various departments (Forest Department, Agriculture Department, tourist Department, Education Department, archaeological Department), Scientists and Conservationists are coming together to work for vulture conservation. Conservation includes both *ex-situ* and *in-situ* measures. Since we are losing them everyday, International Vulture Awareness Day (First Saturday of every September) is being celebrated all over the world by various Government and Non-Government organizations to make the future generation sentient about the plight of vultures.

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