

Edited by Hélène Dionne

# WORLD IN THE AMERICAS

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*Translated by Joan Irving and Käthe Roth*

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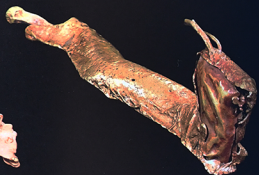
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# Mutatis mutandis. The Symbolism of Transmutation in Muisca Votive Figurines



ROBERTO LLERAS

Archaeologist, Technical Director, Museo del Oro, Bogotá, Colombia

Translated by Joan Irving, from the French translation by Louis Jollicœur

WHEN THE SPANISH CONQUISTADORS arrived in the lands inhabited by the Muisca in the Eastern Cordillera of present-day Colombia, they learned about the existence of a powerful priest or chief called Popón, famous for his ability to travel in air and thus cover great distances, like only a bird could do (Londoño, 2001). Elsewhere, the conquistadors had heard stories about beings that they would have called witches or sorcerers, who changed into jaguars to attack and devour their enemies (Pineda, 2002). These stories about shamans capable of changing into various animals, more common and terrifying than any story the Christians could have imagined, and were always attributed to a demon believed to be the source of these powers (Simón, 1626/1982).

The notion of transmutation is one of the mainstays of the shamanic vision of the cosmos. It seems to be based on the idea that all beings – humans, animals, and plants – have the same constituent elements, as the Uwa of the Eastern Cordillera of Colombia have explained (Osborn, 1990). The possibility that shamans can, as they claim, change into a jaguar, bird, bat, or snake is but one aspect of their special powers. The documents on the mythology of places such as Amazonia report numerous cases of transmutation, showing that this idea is strongly linked to creation myths (Urbina, 1998). Ethnographic studies carried out in contemporary communities reveal that the

processes of transmutation generally take place in a state of hallucinatory trance (Pineda, 2002). It is during these rituals, when shamans swallow the hallucinogens known as entheogens and begin the ecstatic flight, that their bodies and identities may change to that of a different being – a great predator, a nocturnal animal, a powerful bird, or a tiny worm, finally possessing all of the abilities of these animals, including that of being able to see the world from such new perspectives (Arhem, 1996).

This is why the traits and attributes of certain animals played such a significant role in the ritual costume of pre-Hispanic shamans, and why they continue to be much in evidence even today (Pineda, 2002). Apart from the costumes, specific objects seem to play an important role in transmutation. Poles, musical instruments, amulets, and figurines are used by shamans during trances as part of the transformation process (Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1988). It is not surprising therefore that these objects, present during the ritual of transmutation, are also an expression of that process. In general, this takes place through a complex iconography that may ultimately be broken down into several main icons that are repeated and multiplied in a variety of periods and places (Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1988).

In the pre-Hispanic metallurgy of the area today known as Colombia, the theme of transmutation appears relatively frequently, although it is manifested differently in each tradition and each style. From the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta during the Tairona period comes a quadruped form with two extremities, a frog's head and a feline's

† Group of votive figurines depicting transmutation

See also page 106.



head; from the Magdalena Valley, associated with the Tolima style, are found numerous fantastical insects and fish with birds' wings; from the plains of the Caribbean zone come numerous groups of metallurgical works featuring representations of men in the bodies of crustaceans or with frogs' legs; and from the later period of the Quimbayas of the Cauca Valley are found breastplates that mix beings such as men and lizards, to mention only a few of the most remarkable examples (Lleras, 2003). However, the theme encountered most frequently in the pre-Columbian metallurgy of shamanic transmutations in Colombia is that of the man-bird. In his far-reaching study, Reichel-Dolmatoff (1988) identifies numerous expressions of the man-bird icon in the metallurgical iconography.

The Muisca votive figurines produced in the Eastern Cordillera between 600 and 1550 CE constitute one of the most varied and expressive assemblages in terms of iconography. The figurines may be divided into eight groups: women, men, asexual anthropomorphes, scenes, animals, personal objects, domestic objects, and other indeterminate objects. Among the first three groups, some of the figurines are distinguished by the objects they are holding, their costumes, and their postures. Some of the scenes feature one or several persons in specific situations and frameworks. Among the animals, there are different species, especially, snakes and jaguars. The objects include numerous utensils and weapons, as well as various ornaments (Lleras, 1999).

The distribution, chronology, associations, technology, and significance of this unusual collection of votive figurines were thoroughly examined in another article (Lleras, 1999). Here I will limit myself to examining the aspect of transmutation reflected in four series of figurines from different archeological

contexts, that is, from different sites and no doubt different eras in the Muisca period. The common denominator linking them is their votive function within each group and the fact that they belong to the same style of metallurgy. The variety of these figurines confirms that the ideas of transmutation upon which such forms of representation are based did not arise in isolation but instead developed in a vast spatiotemporal framework.

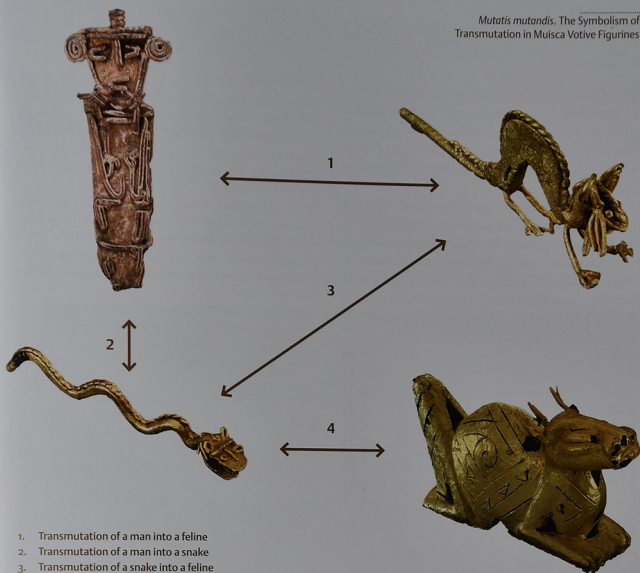
The four series are made up of figurines that, through transmutation, link the following: 1) men and felines, 2) men and snakes, 3) snakes and felines, and 4) snakes and deer. Each series is made up of pairs of figurines, each exhibiting its own traits and representing the extremes of transmutation and a variable number of figurines with acquired traits representing intermediary stages in transmutation (for example, the deer with the traits of a snake and the snake with the traits of a deer in the deer-snake transmutation series). The following diagram helps us better understand the nature of each series as well as the links between them.

The existence of multiple series of representations of the process of transmutation between men and animals reveals that the subject of shamanic transmutation is much more complex than the literature in anthropology has indicated. To elucidate upon the symbolism of this grouping, it might be useful to re-examine the animals represented in Muisca mythology as well as the significance of ritual among the Muisca.

When they addressed their people, Muisca chiefs were accompanied by felines – jaguars, or to be exact pumas – representing symbols of authority (Londoño, 2001). The chiefs even had names associated with felines (Pineda, 2002). The Muisca people also had a creation myth with a snake association: it relates how a woman and a child, who had emerged from the Iguaque lagoon, came back as snakes after having put people on Earth (Simón, 1626/1982). Only chiefs could eat the meat of deer (Simón, 1626/1982). The term for a deer in the Muisca language, *Boy chica*, is the same as that used to describe the great civilizer, the lord of agriculture.

The three animals with which man is associated in the Muisca transmutation series have specific qualities that put them into a special





category of shamanistic animal likely to become the object of transmutation. But this alone does not explain the existence of these series. Clearly, they represent a specific selection of the transmutations possible in Muisca thinking. On the one hand, several important elements are missing: the man-bird transmutation is not found among the votive figurines in these series; for some reason, it is generally expressed in costume. The bear, the other shamanistic animal whose skin was used by priests (Londoño, 2001), does not appear in the metallurgy. On the other hand, there are some striking inclusions, notably, the snake-feline and snake-deer series expressing transmutations that exclude men.

In contrast to what we might imagine, man is not the central axis of these series of transmutations. Two of the series revolve around the feline.

More important still is the snake, which is central to three series. The deer, on the other hand, is present in only one series. And some potential series are not found: the deer is not transformed into a feline, and man is not transformed into a stag, or vice-versa. If these are the rules of transmutations and the possible links between them, what do they reveal about the mythological and symbolic bases of these processes?

These iconographic series on transmutation probably refer to the permanency of a mythical era when mutations between species were the norm. It was during this era that Bachue became the snake and Bochica, the deer, taught people how to weave robes. This was also a time when man was just one species among many and therefore not at the centre of the cosmos, but rather on the same level as felines and snakes. If we accept this



theory and take into consideration the very nature of the offering, in essence, a plea to maintain the balance of the cosmos (Lleras, 1999), we have a plausible explanation for the appearance of these iconographic series on transmutation in the votive figurines.

These series must have represented offerings intended to re-establish the perfect equilibrium of the beginning of time. By re-creating the multiple transmutations between men and animals through these iconographic series, the metallurgists were evoking the symbolic and religious dimension of the era to which everyone longed to return. Thus did transmutation acquire its true meaning. It was not a process open and accessible to anyone, shaman or not. Transmutation changed that which had to change, enabling a return to the original laws that no longer held sway in the real world. This explained sickness, crop failures, attacks by hostile neighbours. The re-creation of the original transmutations, which might have taken place in the dawn of some cold and forgotten lagoon, opened a door to the ancient world about which there was so much to learn.

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### Group of votive figurines depicting transmutation

Muisca, 400–1700 CE  
Museo del Oro, Bogotá, Colombia, Inv. 001975  
Photograph: Clark Manuel Rodríguez/Museo del Oro

#### From left to right and top to bottom:

- Votive figurine in the form of a snake  
L: 8 cm, Inv. 001975
- Votive figurine in the form of a feline with human face  
H: 5.7 cm W: 10 cm, Inv. 00115
- Votive figurine in the form of a man  
H: 5.7 cm W: 2.2 cm, Inv. 002036
- Votive figurine in the form of a man with a snake's body  
H: 11.3 cm W: 1.6 cm, Inv. 006353
- Votive figurine in the form of a snake with arms  
L: 17.3 cm, Inv. 023624
- Votive figurine in the form of a stag with a snake's body  
H: 1.5 cm L: 5 cm, Inv. 002314
- Votive figurine in the form of a feline  
H: 2.3 cm L: 5.8 cm, Inv. 006303
- Votive figurine in the form of a feline with a snake's body  
Inv. 033055
- Votive figurine in the form of a stag  
L: 4.5 cm, Inv. 033078