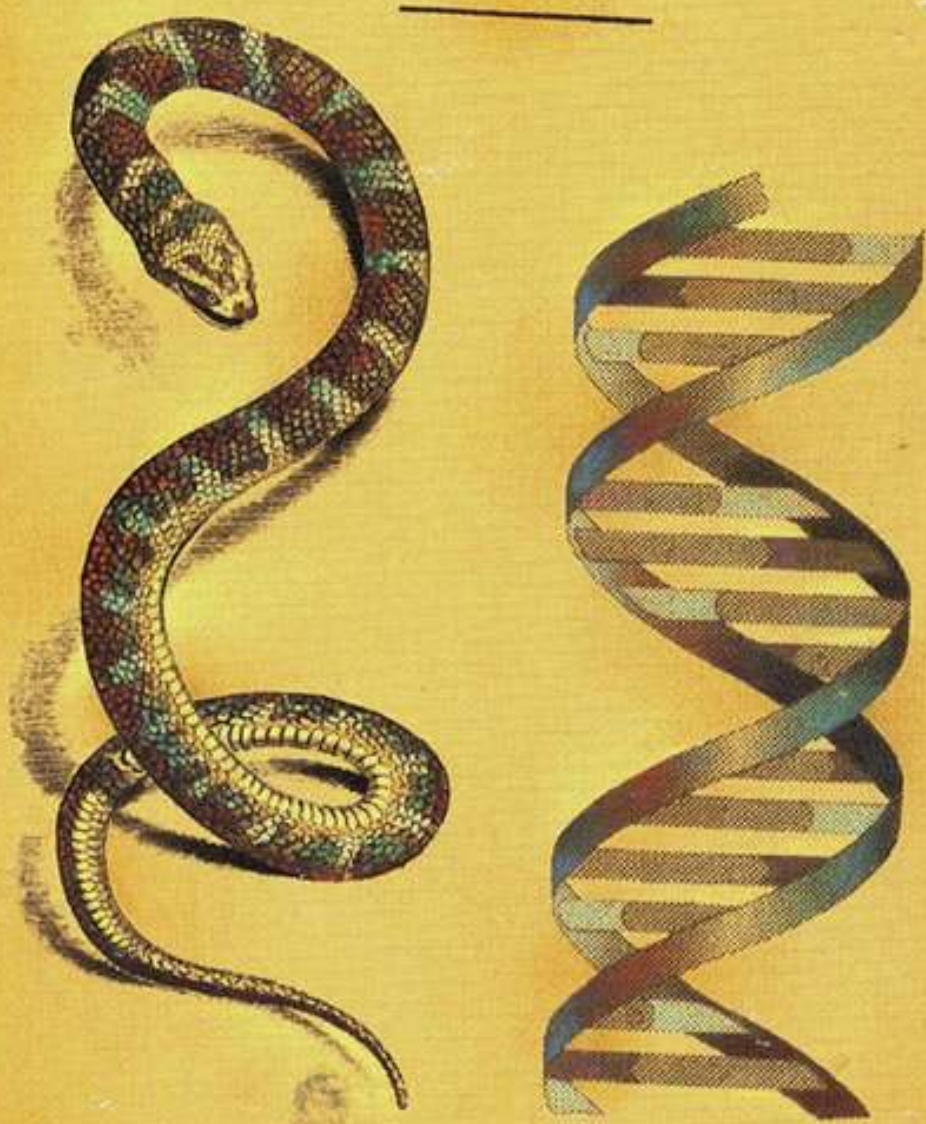


THE COSMIC
SERPENT



— DNA —
AND THE
ORIGINS OF KNOWLEDGE

Jeremy Narby

Praise for THE COSMIC SERPENT

The Cosmic Serpent reads more like a mystery novel than a standard anthropological study. I was particularly impressed by the honesty of the account, the cross-disciplinary nature of the argument, and the courage and reasoned conviction with which the author makes his argument.

Much is written lately about "indigenous knowledge," especially in the field of traditional plant and medical knowledge. The vast number of indigenous societies in the Amazon region have received much fame recently in this area because of their knowledge and use of hallucinogenic materials. Modern pharmaceutical companies are especially interested in this knowledge, and many indigenous leaders and organizations have spoken about the need to protect their intellectual and cultural property rights, as well as to capture some of the economic benefits of such knowledge.

Jeremy Narby's book places the discussion of indigenous knowledge in a deeper philosophical and cosmological framework, arguing for an epistemic correspondence between the knowledge of Amazonian shamans and modern biologists. The argument which Narby makes mines and reinterprets many of the sources in anthropology and biology on the subject. Some may argue that what Narby has found is mere chance or metaphoric correspondence, while others will appreciate the subtleties and truth value of the argument.

—Shelton H. Davis, Senior Sociologist
World Bank

There is superstition in avoiding superstition, as Bacon once remarked, and I honor Jeremy Narby for finding his way through the numerous thickets that scientific reason has left behind in its attempts to turn plain

truths of experience into the superstition it avoids. *The Cosmic Serpent* deals with the visionary experience that comes from taking ayahuasca, and Mr. Narby finds the claim that a plant means what it looks like is no superstition but a fact of experience: moreover, that the images of snakes and ladders that accompany the experience refer not only to the appearance of the ayahuasca vine but to that of the DNA spiral. To affirm this likeness he marshals the evidence of molecular biology and leaves the reader with the stunning intimation that the ayahuascan view of the world is none other than the scientific view seen from another perspective, that of selfhood rather than of no self at all.

Self is one topic that science is always superstitiously avoiding, and its biological origin has been called a veritable enigma. Narby's book is a most intriguing and informative essay in restoring self to its proper place in the scheme of things, and makes the enigma look more like an open secret. It confirms my belief that the new paradigm we have come to expect will have the heart of the old one to give it life, and I see the book's cosmic serpent as the herald of this wonderful moment.

—Francis Huxley, social anthropologist
Author of *The Way of the Sacred*

THE COSMIC SERPENT

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Note on the translation: The author wrestled the text from French into English with the assistance of Jon Christensen.

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