

Milk-suckling snakes in contemporary eurasian folklore: A biological interpretation

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RESUMEN: Este artículo examina el folclore euroasiático sobre las llamadas "serpientes lactantes", es decir, la creencia de que estos reptiles se alimentan de la leche materna durante la noche. El motivo específico de su supuesta lactancia se presenta como una creencia persistente con amplia distribución geográfica y temporal, cuyos orígenes podrían remontarse a las culturas indoeuropeas de la Edad del Bronce. Estas narrativas están documentadas en diversas regiones, desde India y Europa hasta contextos más recientes en España, Bangladesh y México, y persisten en la cultura popular contemporánea. Entrevistas realizadas en la provincia de Málaga (España) incluyen testimonios de personas que afirman haber presenciado serpientes mamando directamente de los pechos de las mujeres o calmando a los bebés colocando la punta de su cola en la boca del niño. A pesar de la firme convicción de los informantes, tales creencias carecen de fundamento biológico. El artículo propone una explicación científica basada en patologías reales de los reptiles, en particular la estomatitis, que produce secreciones orales anormales, así como trastornos de la muda que afectan a la cola o necesidades de termorregulación. La combinación de estos síntomas, junto con la presencia ocasional de serpientes en los hogares rurales, puede haber sido malinterpretada como un comportamiento de lactancia.

Snakes (Serpentes [Ophidia], Squamata) are a highly diverse group comprising nearly 4000 extant species, representing over 12% of terrestrial vertebrate diversity (Macri et al., 2023). Owing to this diversity, snakes are widely distributed and occupy a broad range of habitats. Perhaps for this reason, together with the fact that many species are venomous or attain large sizes, snakes have played a prominent role in the mythologies and legends of numerous unrelated cultures. Examples include Apophis in Egyptian

mythology, Python in Greek mythology, Kaliya Nāga in Hindu mythology, Jörmungandr in Norse mythology, the Feathered Serpent in pre-Columbian Mesoamerican mythology, and the Rainbow Serpent in Australian mythology. Nevertheless, the role of the snake varies across traditions, most often embodying evil, although not exclusively.

Within this context, the origin and persistence of cross-cultural folkloric beliefs concerning snakes that suckle milk from lactating women remain difficult to

explain. Such beliefs have long been noted by scholars and exhibit a wide geographical and temporal distribution (Ermacora, 2017; López-Grande & Correas-Amador, 2018; Ermacora, 2025). In many of these narratives, snakes are said to enter domestic spaces stealthily at night to feed on milk.

This article reviews and explores the folkloric roots of these narratives worldwide and discusses, from a scientific perspective, possible biological mechanisms that may account for their origin.

Legends of milk-suckling snakes

According to Ermacora (2025), folkloric accounts of milk-suckling snakes may be traced back to Indo-European cultures, that is, Bronze Age nomadic populations (ca. 4000–1000 BCE) originating from the Eurasian steppes, whose traditions have persisted over time. Historical examples are documented in India (Ermacora, 2025), Egypt, and Europe (Ermacora, 2017; López-Grande & Correas-Amador, 2018), and also in Latin America, although in this latter region such narratives appear to have been introduced following European contact (Ermacora, 2025). During the Middle Ages, numerous references to these stories appear in Christian, Arabic, and Byzantine texts (Ermacora, 2025). These narratives span from antiquity to the modern era, with contemporary examples reported in Bangladesh (Ermacora, 2017), Spain (López-Grande & Correas-Amador, 2018), and Mexico (López-Grande & Correas-Amador, 2018), among others. Today, during the festival of Nag Panchami in India and Nepal, milk is ritually offered to snakes. Moreover, modern popular culture has reinterpreted this motif; for instance, in the science fiction series *Raised by Wolves* (2020–2022), produced by

Ridley Scott, a juvenile alien serpent feeds on fluids from a female-like android referred to as “Mother,” representing a contemporary allegory of the milk-suckling snake.

The temporal persistence and broad geographical distribution of this belief, deeply embedded in both ancient and modern cultures, suggest the existence of feedback mechanisms that sustain it beyond mere oral transmission for at least 6000 years.

Málaga: A case study

Interviewees were selected from our close social environment, including relatives, neighbors, and acquaintances, as they were previously known to possess knowledge regarding milk-suckling snakes. Interviews conducted with Mariana Barrionuevo Fernández (born June 2, 1947, in El Tarajal, Málaga) indicate that her mother reportedly discovered a snake in the bedroom while she was an infant. It was believed that the snake suckled directly from the mother’s breast and inserted the tip of its tail into the infant’s mouth to prevent the baby from crying. According to local accounts, neighbors concurred that the snake fed on the mother’s milk during the night, and the interviewee remains convinced of the event’s veracity.

Similarly, Francisco Torreblanca Bermúdez (born 1955, Antequera) reported that his grandmother, María Rabaneda Gómez, was allegedly visited by a milk-suckling snake, which fed on her at night and pacified the infant in a comparable manner. The snake was reportedly discovered by tracking its movements using flour spread on the floor. Another informant, María del Rosario Estrada Aguilar (born 1947), claimed that such snakes

were common in the past, being attracted by the smell of milk. A further testimony from Ana Gálvez Estrada (born 1966, Fuengirola) described a similar experience involving her mother-in-law, suggesting that snakes may pose a deliberate threat to infants.

Possible biological origins of these beliefs

Despite what the interviewees said, snakes lack the physiological capacity to suckle, ingest, or digest milk (López-Grande & Correas-Amador, 2018). Stomatitis is a common condition in captive reptiles, characterized by infection of the oral mucosa and surrounding tissues, including gingivitis, glossitis, palatitis, and cheilitis. It may result from bacterial, fungal, or viral infections (Peñuela & Brieva, 2007; Divers & Comolli, 2025). However, stomatitis has also been observed in wild snake populations (e.g., Cheatwood et al., 2003; Brieva Rico & Peñuela Gomez, 2007; Sharina et al., 2023).

Clinically, stomatitis involves inflammation of the oral cavity in response to traumatic, infectious, neoplastic, or metabolic causes (Mehler & Avery Bennett, 2006). Symptoms include increased salivary viscosity, mucosal pallor, foamy secretions, erythema, petechiae, abnormal mouth posture, and inflammation. Severe cases may lead to septicemia and death.

Additionally, nutritional deficiencies may lead to dysecdysis (retained shed), particularly affecting the tail, where retained skin may act as a constricting band, impairing circulation and causing tissue damage. This condition may result in swelling, necrosis, infection, or even auto-amputation. A relationship between stomatitis and retained shed has been documented (Peñuela & Brieva, 2007; Divers & Comolli, 2025).

The combination of oral secretions and tail abnormalities in snakes occasio-

nally found within households containing infants may have contributed to the misinterpretation of these observations as milk-suckling behavior, including the insertion of the tail into an infant’s mouth. The latter may be explained by the fact that such tail abnormalities often confer a roughened and swollen appearance, resembling the wrinkled morphology of a human thumb after prolonged sucking in infants as a pacifying behavior.

Discussion

Nakawake & Sato (2019) demonstrate that animal-related folktales contain significant elements of folk zoological knowledge derived from everyday observation. Their quantitative analysis of 382 narratives from the Aarne–Thompson–Uther index revealed that animal pairings and narrative motifs often reflect real ecological relationships. However, such narratives do not constitute scientifically accurate accounts, but rather culturally mediated interpretations based on partial observations.

The association between snakes and women has been widely documented since antiquity. In Judeo-Christian tradition, for example, the serpent persuades Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. Similarly, the motif of milk theft extends to livestock, such as cows and goats (López-Grande & Correas-Amador, 2018). These beliefs may be understood as misinterpretations of pathological symptoms in snakes, particularly stomatitis, erroneously perceived as evidence of milk consumption. From a physiological standpoint, snakes are incapable of suckling, lapping, or digesting milk. Moreover, snakes may have been attracted to households or stables in search of suitable thermoregulatory sites. Livestock shelters constitute important heat

sources, particularly during winter, while beds occupied by a mother and her infant may also represent significant thermal refuges in rural environments, especially at night. For centuries, in the absence of electricity, such localized heat sources would have stood out within otherwise cold rural landscapes, potentially attracting snakes seeking thermal stability. Once present in these locations, snakes would become more easily detected by humans, who may then have drawn erroneous conclusions regarding their behavior.

Finally, the negative perception of snakes in many societies has undoubtedly influenced the relationship humans have maintained with this group. For example, whereas in festivals such as Nag Panchami,

mentioned earlier, snakes are offered milk, in Western cultures there has historically been a marked aversion toward them, often portraying them as a cause of infant malnutrition. In many of the narratives surrounding so-called "milk-suckling" snakes, these stories frequently culminated in the search for—and eventual killing of—a snake. On the one hand, traditional rural houses could indeed provide shelter for snakes; on the other, a longstanding hostility toward these animals has contributed to their persecution.

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