Cosmic egg and Pelasgian realm

A distributional study in Comparative Mythology
Wim van Binsbergen
2011
### Attestations of the myth of the cosmic egg world-wide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location and period</th>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[Dahomey (Benin)]</td>
<td>Van der Sluijs 2004;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Xhosa (Rep. South Africa)]</td>
<td>Van der Sluijs 2004;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Yaka, Congo]</td>
<td>Devisch 1988</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Zulu (Rep. South Africa)]</td>
<td>Van der Sluijs 2004;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Angola, Sub-Saharan Africa, modern]</td>
<td>Rodrigues de Areia 1985</td>
<td>Egg in divinatory set represented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Bali, modern]</td>
<td>Brinkgreve 1997</td>
<td>Implied in sacrifice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhism</td>
<td>Newall 1967</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dogon, Mali</td>
<td>Van der Sluijs 2004; Fernandez 1967; Griaule &amp; Dieterlen 1965; van Beek 1992; Zuesse 1975; Horton 1967;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Druids, Ancient</td>
<td>Moorehead 1885</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt, Ancient</td>
<td>Chevalier &amp; Gheerbrant, 1994; Cottrell 1989: 168; Gardiner 1994; Devitt 2005,</td>
<td>Great Cackler; Thoth hatching; 467: ‘In Dyn XIX or before F51 [but 180 degrees rotated] changes into the egg H8 and subsequently X01+H8 becomes a generic det. for goddesses.’; egg especially Hermopolis [ = Thoth , Ogdoad, not Nine] ;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region/Culture</td>
<td>References</td>
<td>Notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fang (Gabon)</td>
<td>Van der Sluijs 2004;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland, Ancient</td>
<td>Cottrell 1989: 217; Puhvel 1971,</td>
<td>217: egg: also Finnish mythology; Luonnotar, daughter of the creation god, mated with bird, produced egg; from this egg: heaven, earth, sun, moonb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece, Ancient</td>
<td>Chevalier &amp; Gheerbrant 1994; Cottrell 1989: 168; Fontenrose 1980; Minar 1963; Kerenyi, apud Robinson 1948; Pollard 1948; Cornford 1934</td>
<td>Dioscuri, Helena, Hera [fertilised egg from Kronos]; and from pre-Socratic philosophers onwards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Hawaii]</td>
<td></td>
<td>The god Paka’a, inventor of the sail? Cf. Cretan Minos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India, Ancient</td>
<td>Cottrell 1989: 186 ; Penner 1966; Newall 1967</td>
<td>186: Vinata, mother of Aruna (dawn) lays two eggs, Aruna comes from the broken egg, hence is only half (Luwe)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran, Ancient</td>
<td>Russell 1993; Zaeheer 1940</td>
<td>Mithras, Zervan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Japan, modern]</td>
<td></td>
<td>This is an uncertain attestation, however, often implied or mentioned in passing in literature on East Asia and Buddhism; also Bon continuity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>Song, Sun-hee., 1974,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>Straïpsys &amp; Klimka 1971,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandaean, Ancient</td>
<td>Kraeling 1933,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nanai people, Amur,</td>
<td>Sem –n.d.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Siberia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[New Zealand]</td>
<td></td>
<td>Uncertain attestation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pangwe (Gabon),</td>
<td>Van der Sluijs 2004;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Reference(s)</td>
<td>Notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Neolithic great civilisations of the Mediterranean, South and East Asia, and Africa</td>
<td>Loeb 1956, Baumann 1955; von Sicard 1956</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Sahara, Neolithic fertile]</td>
<td>Lhote, H., 1959: Fig. 47</td>
<td>Strong suggestion of Primordial Egg depicted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syro-Palestine, Ancient</td>
<td>Cottrell 1989: 223, 143; West 1994; Magness 2001; Schmidt 1921,</td>
<td>223: Mot (Canaan) lord of death, born from primal egg from Air and Chaos; Baal is invited by Mot, dies in the underworld; Anat brings him back, killing Mot; ogre motif; perhaps Og, riding the Ark, is a variant of the cosmic egg; Enoch text as mediated through Ancient Slavic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tahiti, Oceania</td>
<td>Cottrell 1989: 164</td>
<td>Taároa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Thailand]</td>
<td>Heinze 1977</td>
<td>Implied in sacrifice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tibet, Ancient</td>
<td>Richardson 1968, Snellgrove 19XX</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yoruba (Nigeria, Benin)</td>
<td>Lowie 1937</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
mytheme of cosmic egg attested (or merely implied, or uncertain: □ )
Discussion

- My distribution map is based on only limited knowledge of global comparative mythology; more systematic approaches (e.g. Berezhin n.d.) are likely to yield a more complete pattern and fuller insight.
- However, the attestations mapped here are fully referenced, see Table of attestations above.
- The distribution shown here has much in common with that of the spiked wheel trap, which I have elsewhere shown to be an ‘index fossil’ of transcontinental continuities within the ‘Pelasgian realm’ (van Binsbergen n.d.; For my ‘Pelasgian Hypothesis’, see van Binsbergen 2010; van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011:
  - Considerable incidence in sub-Saharan Africa
  - In evidence in Egypt and Graeco-Roman Antiquity
  - Sporadic in Asia
  - Absent from the New World, Australia and New Guinea
- The distribution of the cosmic egg motif, however, differs from that of the spiked wheel trap in the following respects:
  - Cosmic Egg has attestations in Oceania
  - Half of the African attestations of the Cosmic egg are only partial or implied
  - Attestations of the Cosmic Egg in Uralic and Baltic/IE Scandinavia (Finland, Lithuania), where there are no attestations of the spiked wheel trap
  - Asian attestations of the Cosmic Egg are not in the far interior but rather in coastal regions; this may be due to chance but might also be due to overseas diffusion from outside Asia
  - Asian attestations are largely compatible with a distribution on the wings of the transmission and use of chariot technology, from 2000 BP onward, although a coastal maritime spread also seems to have contributed

The very restricted distribution of the world-egg motif makes it impossible for this motif to be attributed to Pandora’s Box (pre-Exodus Africa)
The restricted distribution is even indicative of this motif being relatively young, Neolithic or later (also the central Pacific was only populated a few ka BP, from East Asia –which in this case is the most likely path – or South East Asia)
The African attestations are not indicative of an African origin but, like the spiked wheel trap, mankanala, the unilateral mythical figure, and the linguistic macrophyllum of Niger-Congo (probably also that of Nilo-Saharan), are indicative of a rapid spread of a recently introduced feature over the culturally receptive African continent, in the context of the Back-into-Africa migration from Central to West Asia.

The attestation in Uralic Northern Europe is in line with the fact that the proposed region of origin is associated with the earliest millennia of the Uralic linguistic family; other Uralic traits, though fragmented (e.g. the royal diadem, the skull cult, shamanism, the veneration of white aquatic birds as epiphanies of the Creator Goddess associated with the Primal Waters), can be argued to have percolated throughout the proposed region of origin of the world egg motif, and from there to have sporadically reached the outlying parts of the distribution area shown above.

The extensions of the distribution into the Altaic language realm (the Nanai of extreme eastern Siberia; Japan) are in line with an eastbound diffusion from a Central to West Asian region – the steppe area is a fairly continuous culture regions with relatively easy and rapid communication east-west and v.v.

The Pangu myth is alleged to be conceived by Taoist monks around the beginning of the Common Era, and, being relatively recent, can have accommodated influences from the above diffusion streams. If this were the case, there would be no reason to assume that the Pangu myth belonged to the original heritage of Sino-Tibetan speakers in East Asia. However, the Pangu myth is to this day cherished by the Miao, Li and Yao minorities of South China, who incidentally are also associated with the Nu Wa as a mythological flood heroine. For both mythemes there are strong suggestions of a Central to West Asian connection.

Mithraic and Orphic cults in Antiquity, and their Iranian predecessors and sources, can be considered to have challenged the world-egg motif that had emerged, presumably in Neolithic times, in West to Central Asia, and that also in more diffuse form (by demic diffusion) were spreading West (into West Asia, Egypt, and both sides of the Mediterranean) as part of the extension of the ‘proto-Pelasgian’ realm.
From distribution map to tentative historical reconstruction (1)

- Mytheme of cosmic egg attested (or merely implied, or uncertain: □)
- Proposed region of origin (★), Eurasian Neolithic ‘proto-Pelasgian realm’ (A); the latter’s subsequent transformation constitutes the Bronze Age ‘Pelasgian realm’ (B)
- Proposed spread from Late Bronze Age onward
An alternative model: Sunda

• Although the proposed historical reconstruction appears to me the most plausible, and tallies with that of scores of other supposedly Pelasgian traits (cf. van Binsbergen 2010; van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011), it is only fair to indicate an alternative interpretation, in terms of Oppenheimer’s (1998) Sunda hypothesis – situating the origin of the mytheme of the Cosmic Egg in South East Asia, and assuming it to have spread, not only north and east into East Asia and Oceania, but also west, on the wings of the postulated Sunda maritime expansion in the course of the first half of the Holocene. Oppenheimer claims that the core mythologies of the Ancient Near East including the Bible thus have a prehistoric Sunda origin. I have elsewhere argued why especially in regard of myths this is very implausible (van Binsbergen c.s. 2008b), although as a general hypothesis of transcontinental influence Oppenheimer’s model has considerable heuristic value especially for the study of Africa.

• In earlier formulations of my Aggregative Diachronic Model of Global Mythology (van Binsbergen 2006a, 2006b, 2010a; van Binsbergen with Isaak 2008) – an attempt to systematically identify humankind’s oldest common heritage of mythology before the Out-of-Africa Exodus (c. 80-60 ka BP) and to account for its subsequent development until historical times – I still equated the mytheme of the Cosmic Egg with that of the Lightning Bird and included both in Pandora’s Box; a more detailed re-analysis now has convinced me that the Cosmic Egg is of a much more recent idea which rather belongs to the Pelasgian complex – probably originally so, but perhaps (Oppenheimer 1998; but cf. van Binsbergen with Isaak 2008) as a result of cultural expansion from Early Holocene South East Asia having penetrated the Pelasgian realm.
From distribution map to tentative historical reconstruction

(2) Sunda model

- Mytheme of cosmic egg attested (or merely implied, or uncertain: □)
- Proposed region of origin (★), subsequent diffusion into the Eurasian Neolithic ‘proto-Pelasgian realm’ (A); the latter’s subsequent transformation constitutes the Bronze Age ‘Pelasgian realm’ (B)
- Proposed spread from Late Bronze Age onward
Conclusion

The mytheme of the world egg, therefore, appears to have emerged in West to Central Asia (the ‘proto-Pelasgian realm’) in Neolithic times and from there spread into selected parts of Asia, Europe and into sub-Saharan Africa, perhaps largely as part of initiatory cults, of which Orphism is one relatively well documented example. Apart from the early association with initiatory shamanistic cults and chariot technology, I cannot offer an answer to the question as to what driving force was behind this expansion from the proposed region of origin. These proposed patterns of spread are in accordance with genetically established population movements, from West Asia into Europe and into Africa, from the Upper Paleolithic onward (cf. Forster 2004; and the growing literature on the Back-into-Africa movement:}
References

• Christie, A., 1968, Chinese mythology, London: Hamlyn
• Cotterell, Arthur., 1989, The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Myths and Legends, London etc.: Guild
• Demetrio, Francisco, 1968, ‘Creation Myths among the Early Filipinos’, Asian Folklore Studies, Vol. 27, No. 1 (1968), pp. 41-79
• Devitt, April, 2005, Ancient Egypt: The mythology, at: http://www.egyptianmyths.net/mut.htm


• Forster Peter., 2004, Ice Ages and the mitochondrial DNA chronology of human dispersals: a review -- One contribution of 14 to a Discussion Meeting Issue ‘The evolutionary legacy of the Ice Ages’, Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences, Volume 359, Number 1442 / February 29, 2004, Pages: 255 – 264


• Jung, C.G., 1987, Verzameld werk 9: Mens en cultuur, Rotterdam: Lemniscaat; Dutch tr. van Mensch und Kultur, Olten: Walter, 1985
• Kerényi, Karl, 1945, Die Geburt der Helena samt Humanistischen Schriften aus den Jahren 1943-45, Zuerich: Rhein Verlag
• Puhvel, Martin., 1971, ‘Songs of Creation among the Fenno-Ugrians around the Baltic’, Folklore, Vol. 82, No. 1 (Spring, 1971), pp. 1-24
• Rappenglueck, Michael A., 1999
• Rodrigues de Areia, M.L., 1985,
• van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 2006b, 'Further steps towards an aggregative diachronic approach to world mythology, starting from the African continent’, paper read at the International Conference on Comparative Mythology, organized by Peking University (Research Institute of Sanskrit Manuscripts & Buddhist Literature) and the Mythology Project, Asia Center, Harvard University (Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies), May 10-14, 2006, at Peking University, Beijing, China; in press in: Duan Qing & Gu Zhenkun, eds, Proceedings of the International Conference on Comparative Mythology, Beijing 2008; preprint at: http://www.shikanda.net/ancient_models/Further%20steps%20def.pdf


