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Prehistoric cultural diffusion reflected in distribution of some folklore motifs in Africa

This study is based on the author's electronic catalogue of world mythology and folklore (http://www.ruthenia.ru/folklore/berezkin). The catalogue contains more than 45,000 abstracts of texts (unfortunately in Russian) arranged according to ethnic groups or small areal clusters of groups (824 in March 2012) and to motifs (1670). Maps of world distribution of particular motifs and the English wordings of motifs are available at: http://starling.rinet.ru/kozmin/tales/index.php?index=berezkin. With new publications processed and the number of the selected clusters and motifs increasing, the system becomes ever more sensitive to tendencies in distribution of motifs. Because basically all the texts with citations are available in web and a large part of the data were also presented in my big publication in English (Berezkin 2010b), I do not cite here most of the sources of texts which are too numerous for a short article. The readers interested in details are encouraged to address me directly by e.mail (berezkin1@gmail.com).

The catalogue was created not with the purpose of simply registering narrative units, but in order to accumulate data relevant to research on early migrations and prehistoric cultural contacts. Initially the problem of the peopling of the New World was a focus of the studies. After about 2003, when the materials from Western Eurasia and Africa had been included, both earlier and later periods of human history could be addressed.

Though the very first human myths were probably created in Africa and brought to other continents with the "Out-of-Africa" migration of early Homo sapiens (Berezkin 2009a; 2009b; 2010a; 2010b), many, if not most of the stories recorded in Tropical Africa by missionaries, ethnologists and linguists can have Eurasian and not African roots. Here I'll address a series of the relevant cases.

The only etiological theme that is well represented in the African mythology is the explanation of how and why people lost or not acquired their ability to revive.

Among all the motifs that explain the mortal nature of man in African myths, the "muddled message" is the most widespread. About one third of all African stories that treat such a theme are based on this episode. However, unlike other "mortal" motifs with probable African roots, the "muddled message" is relatively rarely known in the Indo-Pacific world. It is completely absent in Australia and almost absent in Indonesia, Oceania and Eastern South America. At the same time, it is moderately often found in Northern Eurasia where other "mortal" motifs with transcontinental distribution are not common (fig. 1).

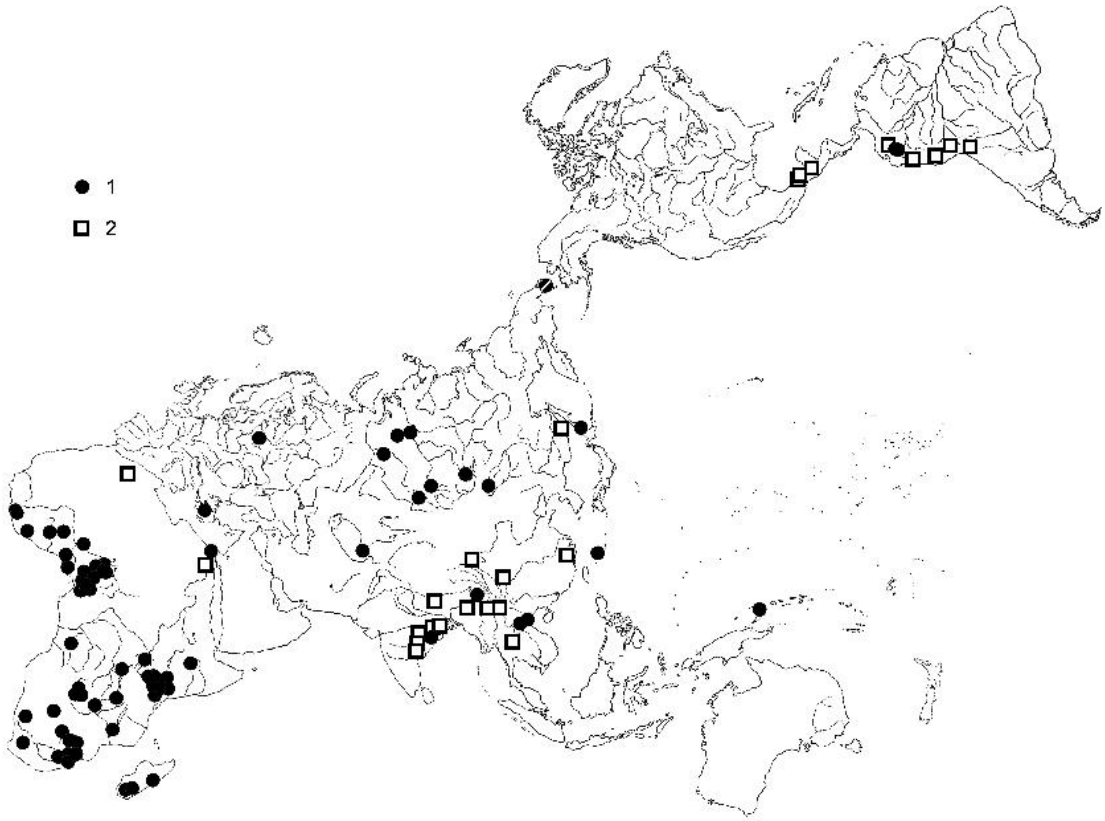

Fig. 1. The "muddled message". Person is sent by god to bring instructions or certain objects but distorts, forgets or replaces them. 1. Because of this people become mortal (do not revive after death). 2. This has other unpleasant consequences for humans or for a certain species of animals.

The different global distribution between the "muddled message" and other widely known "mortal" motifs is well seen if we compare the areas of the "muddled message" and the "shed skin" (fig. 2). The areal distribution of the latter is typical for those stories about the origin of death which probably originated in Africa, spread to the Indo-Pacific Asia and later to America (cf. fig. 3, the "call of god"). The global areal distribution of the "muddled message" is more peculiar.

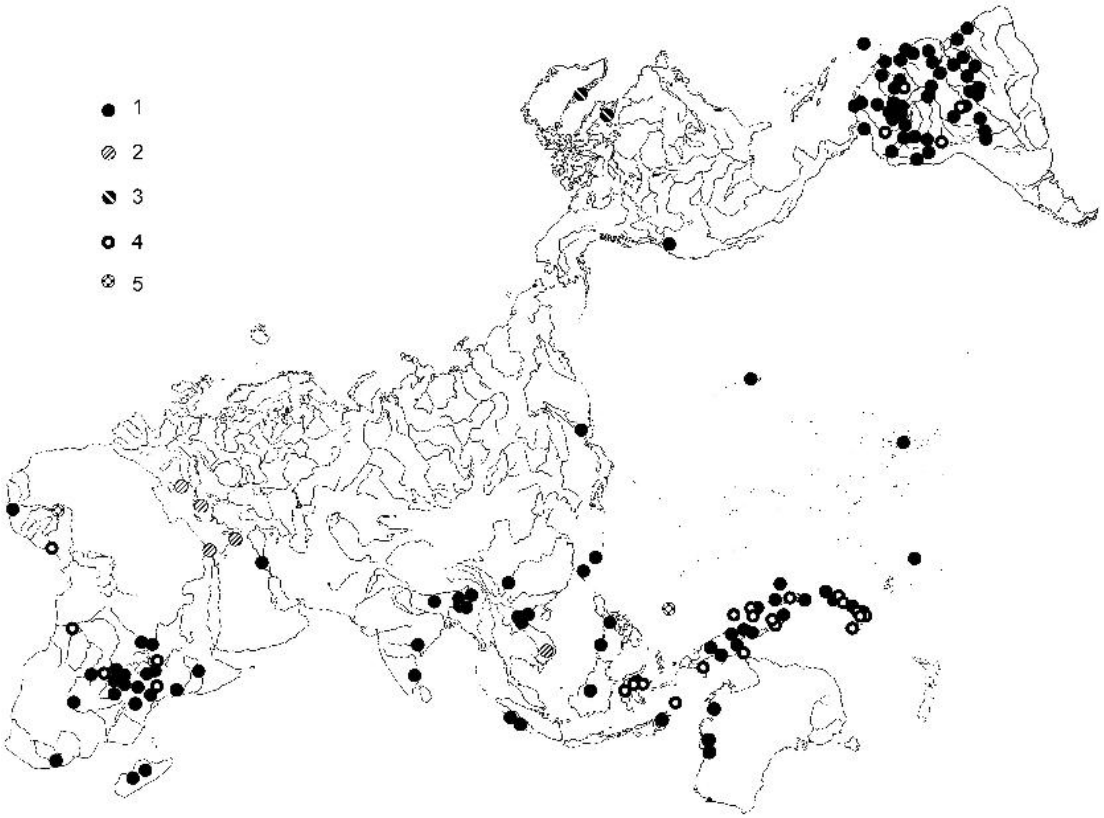

Fig. 2. The "shed skin". Those who can change their skin become young again. 1. People lost opportunity to shed skin and rejuvenate. 2. Snakes are immortal because they shed their skin (no etiology of death). 3. A particular person only sheds his or her skin becomes young. 4. People do not shed their skin anymore and become young because certain person was bothered during rejuvenation or was not recognized by his family in his new guise. 5. As in (4) but rejuvenation is not related to the change of skin.

Fig. 3. The "call of god". People are mortal because they did not hear or answer a call of a being who had promised them immortality (or did not pronounce his name) or answered a call (pronounced the name) of a being who had brought death.

Across Africa itself, the "muddled message" and the "shed skin" also demonstrate different areal patterns.

The "muddled message" is more widespread. There is good areal correlation between distribution of this motif and the "hare as a trickster" (fig. 4). The hare is the most typical and well known sub-Saharan African trickster so it is logical that both motifs are found across the same territory of the West, East and South Africa. Both are mostly absent in the forests of Congo Basin that were probably occupied by the Pigmies before the spread of the Bantu. Should we attribute this fact to the influence of the substratum or to other factors, but the tendency is certain. As about the "shed skin", in the 19th century it also was popular among the Bantu people of Eastern Africa and almost absent in Congo. However, unlike the "muddled message", it was very rarely found in West and South Africa. In West Africa, as much as I know, we

have only two cases, the Ewe and the Kono. Because it is absolutely improbable to attribute them to the influence of the Bantu, we can conclude that originally the "shed skin" could have just as wide distribution in West Africa as the "muddled message" but disappeared there being replaced with other stories. As about the South Africa, the Khoisan inhabitants of this area are not familiar with the "shed skin", so this motif appeared with the Bantu. Among the latter it is also found not often being recorded only among the Zulu. A possible responsible factor is, like in Congo Basin, the influence of the substratum. It can be added that the "shed skin" is not recorded also among the Khoisan of Tanzania (Sandawe and Hadza) though the data on their mythology is too scarce for important conclusions.

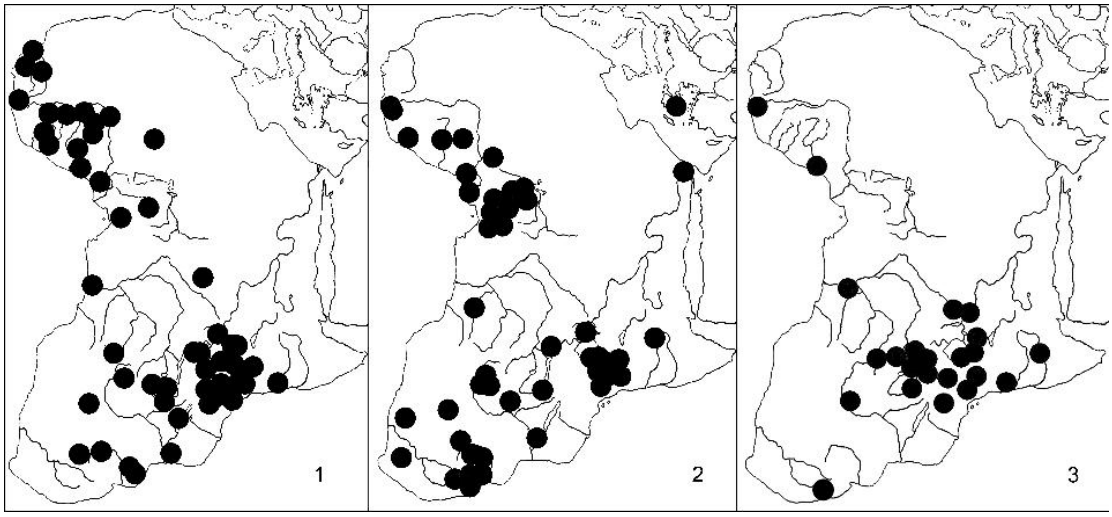

Fig. 4. 1. The hare is a typical trickster in corresponding traditions (more than hundred motifs related to deceptions and tricks are considered). 2. The "muddled message", African area. 3. The "shed skin", African area.

Not only the areas of the "muddled message" and the "trickster hare" largely coincide but the hare is also the protagonist in a series of the "mortal" stories based on the "muddled message" (fig. 5.5). The stories recorded among the Khoisan people of South Africa and the Hausa of northern Nigeria are practically identical.

Hausa. The Moon sent the hare with a message to the people that they should be like the Moon who regularly dies and revives but the hare told them that they should die

forever. The Moon wanted to him the hare with an axe but only got to split his lip. The hare scratched the Moon's face, hence the lunar spots (Abrahamsson 1951: 7-8).

Khoikhoi. The Moon sent the chameleon to tell the people that they should die and revive like the Moon. The chameleon forgot the message and came back, so the Moon sent the hare who told the people that they should die forever. The Moon cut the hare's lip. Or the Moon sent an insect with the promise of immortality but the hare came first and told the people they should die. The hare scratched the Moon's face, hence the lunar spots (Abrahamsson 1951: 28-30).

If the ancestors of the Hausa and the ancestors of the Khoisan belonged to one and the same cultural sphere, it was many thousands years ago when the linguistic and cultural map of the continent was very much different from the present one.

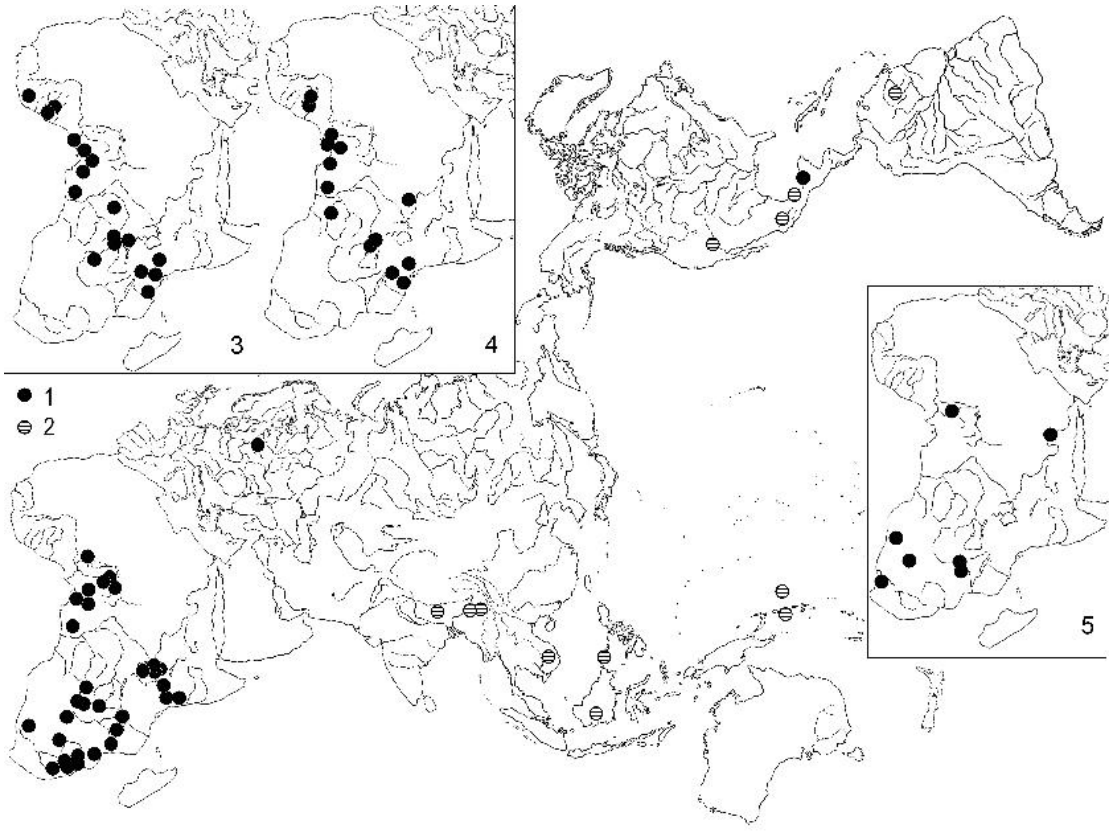

Fig. 5. Animals responsible for the introduction of death. 1. Lizard and/or chameleon in stories based on the "muddled message" motif. 2. The same but in other stories. 3. Dog in stories based on the "muddled message" motif (only African area of the motif). 4. Sheep and/or goat. 5. Hare.

Besides the hare, two other animals, the lizard and the chameleon (who is also lizard but a special one), are usual protagonists of the "muddled message" stories in Africa. In Asia and Melanesia they fulfill such a role too though in other tales (fig. 5). Besides the hare, the lizard and the chameleon, there are three other popular protagonists of the "muddled message" death stories in Africa, i.e. the dog, the sheep and the goat (fig. 5.3, 4). All the three cannot be of the African origin because they were domesticated in Asia and even in North Africa could not appear before Holocene. The earliest sheep bones in Kenya date to the IV millennium B.C. (Lane et al. 2007: 78).

As it was just told, the hare is the most typical and widespread sub-Saharan African trickster. He is even more popular than the spider not to say about other beings. The fox, the jackal and the coyote are the main tricksters in Northern Eurasia and in North America (all the three species are biologically similar and easily replace each other in tales). However, the fox and the jackal appear again in South Africa that is far away from the legitimate northern homeland of these trickster (fig. 6). The archaeological data help to answer why it is so. The people who possessed sheep, goats and cattle began to migrate from Kenya into the Rift zone at about 4300-3000 B.P. (Lane et al 2007: 78; Robbins 2006: 82). They moved along the tsetse free corridor and their different groups reached South Africa 2000-1600 years ago (fig. 5; Plug, Voigt 1985; Smith 1992: 134-135).

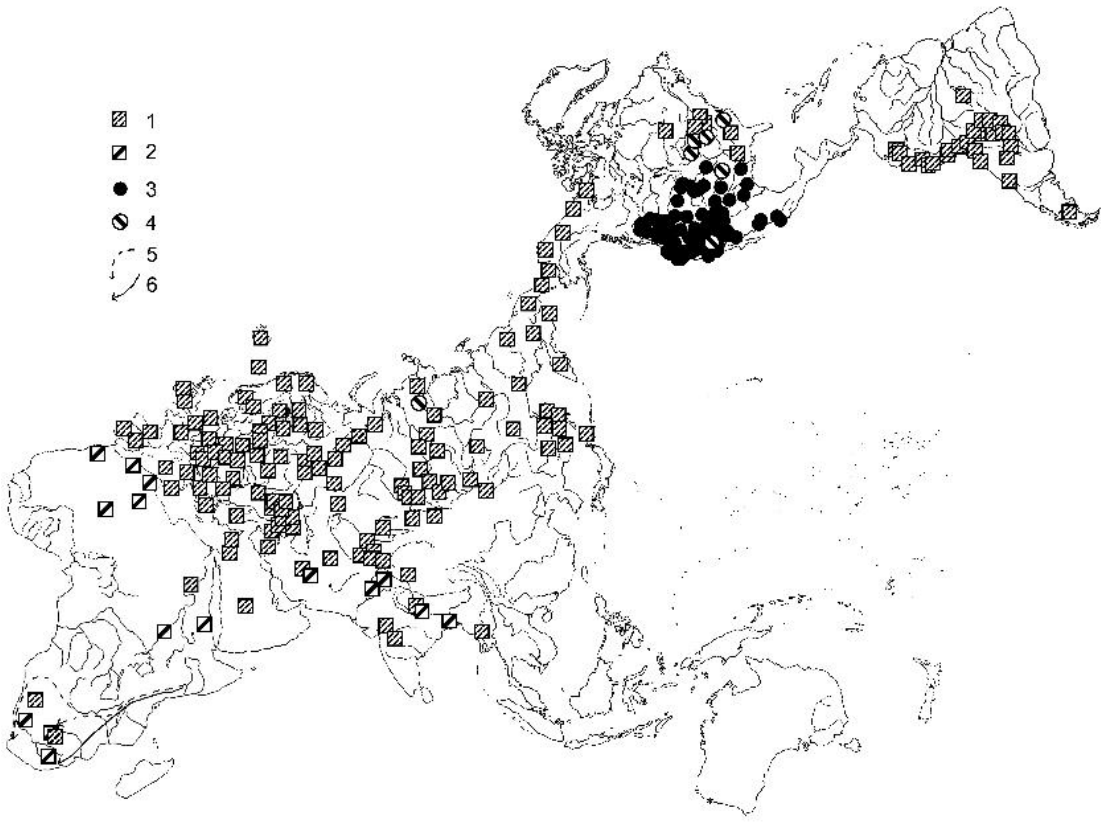

Fig. 6. The canine animal as a trickster. 1. Fox. 2. Jackal. 3. Coyote. 4. Wolf or dog. 5. The spread of the sheep and cattle ca. 2000 B.P. 6. The spread of the 1800 л.н. (Smith 1992, fig. 1).

Not only the fox/jackal itself but also some particular trickster stories seem to be brought during these migrations. One of them is about the animal who threatens to cut down the tree of a mother bird (squirrel) unless she will throw down to him one of the nestlings (squirrel children) or eggs. Another bird or animal lets mother bird know that the person is unable to realize his threat (fig. 7). Across most of Eurasia the protagonist of the story is the fox. This tale (no. 56A according to ATU system, Uther 2004: 50) is very typical for Europe, Northern and Southwestern Asia and North Africa but is not known neither in East and Southeast Asia nor in the New World. The latter fact means that its spread took place after the time when the last groups of the Siberian ancestors of American natives had moved to the New World.

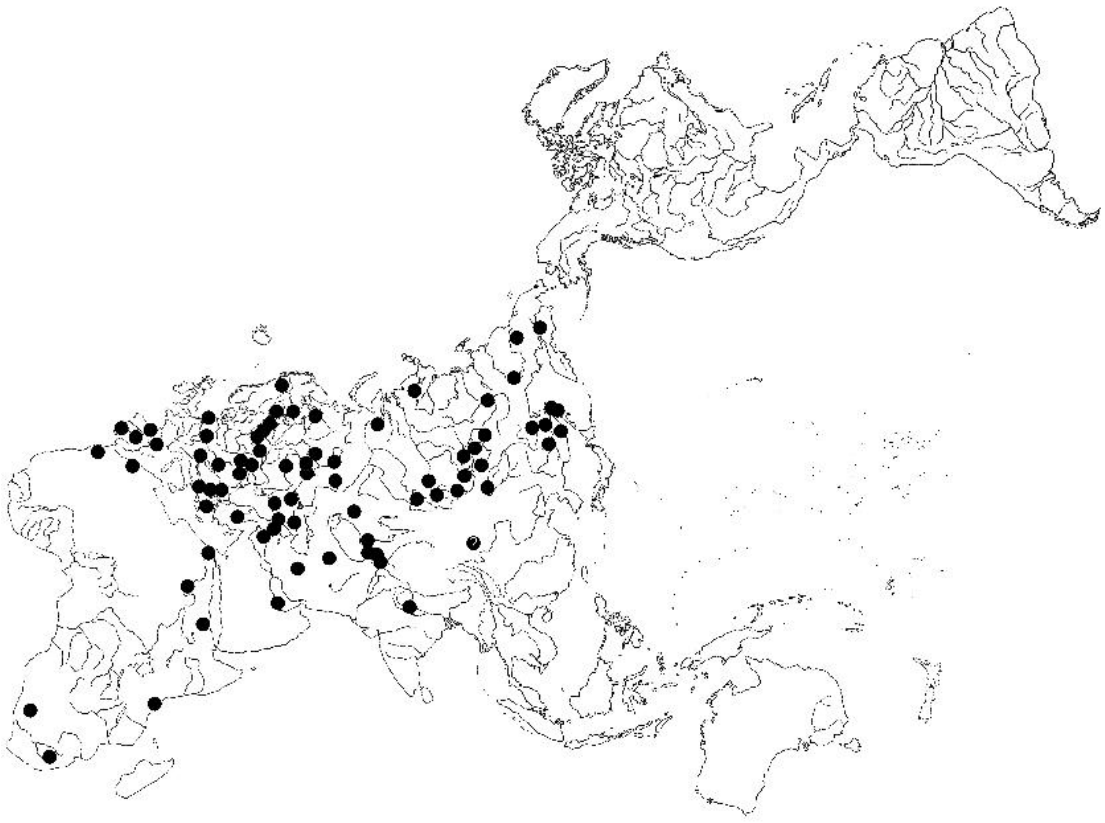

Fig. 7. Trickster threatens to cut down the tree and eat young birds.

In the Suahili tale the trickster who pretends to be able to cut the tree is the hare that is quite predictable for East Africa. In the Khoikhoi and Sutho tales, however, the protagonist is the jackal.

If the Kenya cattle breeders who began their southward movement were familiar with the stories about sheep, goat and dog responsible for the introduction of death, we would find such stories now among the Khoikhoi and the Bantu peoples of South Africa. However, in South Africa only traditional African participants such as the chameleon, lizard and hare are found. The logical conclusion is that the domestic animals were introduced into the African (at least the East African) tales about the etiology of death not before 3000 B.P.

I already directed the readers' attention to the fact that the "shed skin" and other "mortal" motifs which great age and African origin look plausible, are absent or rare in West Africa, i.e. on the territories where the chameleon, lizard and hare as the protagonists of the "muddled message" also are unknown. The westernmost case of

the chameleon, lizard and hare as the wrong messages are in the Hausa folklore. All the stories recorded in West Africa are about the sheep/goat or dog. Both the "shed skin" and some other African "death motifs" like the "call of god" (fig. 3) and the "originator of death the first sufferer" are absent among the bearers of the Mande and Atlantic languages. At the same time the stories with clear Eurasian roots are here more numerous than in other areas of the sub-Saharan Africa. It seems that West (and especially the westernmost) Africa was subject to more intensive influences from the north than Central and even East Africa. Here is an example.

The motif of water of immortality being spilled on plants and not on humans is typical for South Siberia and is also absorbed into the Novel of Alexander the Great (fig. 8). The only African versions that I could find were recorded among the Kraci (the Akan language family) and in Liberia (the precise group not reported). The Kraci story tells that Wulbari sent a dog to bring the life elixir to the people but the dog began to gnaw a bone and did not put attention how a goat spilled the liquid on his "people", i.e. the grass. Since then people die and the grass grow again every year (Abrahamsson 1951: 6). In the Liberian story people send a cat to the wizard who possessed the water of immortality. On his way back, the cat goes to bath putting the elixir on a tree stump and the liquid was soaked in it. That's because the cut down tree gives fresh shoots but people die (Bundy 1919: 408).

Fig. 8. Water of immortality that should be given to people was spilled on plants who become evergreen, capable for regeneration or bear fruits. 1. The motif is linked to the "muddled message". 2. Other variants.

If African versions of the stories that combine the "life elixir" with the "muddled message" came from Asia, how and when the Asian versions themselves had emerged? We can make an assumption that the "muddled message" was brought to Northern Eurasia very early directly from Africa (through the Middle East) and not from the Indo-Pacific areas of Asia where most of the other transcontinentally known "mortal" motifs are widespread. One of the reason to think so is the existence of a Lithuanian story that is completely identical with the African ones. God sent a snail to tell people that they should live forever and a lizard to tell that they should die. The lizard came first, so the people die (Kerbelute 2001: 102). No story recorded in the Indo-Pacific part of the Globe contains all the elements of the Lithuanian one but many Bantu texts do with the only difference that in Africa the protagonist is the chameleon and not the snail (Abrahamsson 1951: 22-23). The Lithuanian myth looks like the last remnant of early tradition. During millennia and especially after the

spread of productive economy the Asian stories experienced profound changes and in this new form were brought back to Africa.

Now return to the cat from the Liberian myth. In the role of the irresponsible messenger, the cat looks like a very late replacement of some more authentic personage and is an additional evidence of the recent northern and ultimately Asian influence on the West African traditions. Another such an evidence is the distribution of the "obstacle flight" motif.

The "obstacle flight" episodes of any kind are not popular in Africa. The typically sub-Saharan "escape and pursue" episode is the "waters make way" ("Pharaoh's drowned army"): when person comes to the water body, waters make way to him or her so the persons reaches the other bank walking on the dry ground and the pursuer usually drowns. Here again only Congo Basin is an exception (cf. fig. 4). I do not exclude that this motif could be brought to South Asia by the early Homo sapience (fig. 9).

Fig. 9. "Pharaoh's drowned army". When person comes to the water body, waters make way to him or her so the persons reaches the other bank walking on the dry ground. The pursuer who tries to follow the fugitive is usually drowned.

The Atalanta type is the simplest version of the "obstacle flight" known mostly in Bantu-speaking Africa and among the Khoikhoi, though not among the Bushmen (fig. 10).

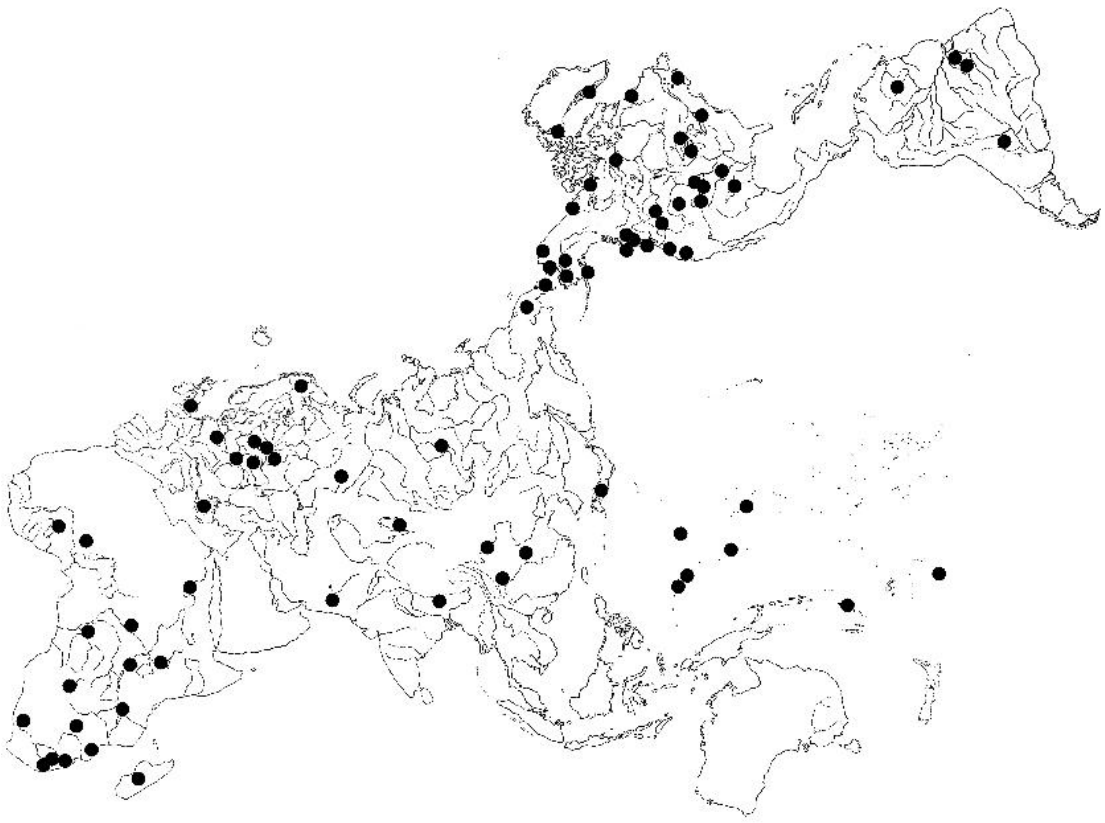

Fig. 10. "Obstacle flight, Atalanta type" (K231 in Thompson 1955-1958). Objects are thrown back which the pursuer stops to pick up while the fugitives escape. The objects themselves do not block the pursuer's movement.

It seems that the more complex versions with transformation of thrown objects into powerful obstacles developed in Eurasia. As about Africa, here they are mostly known along the same tropical belt where the dog, sheep and goat play part in the "muddled message" tales. Rare South African cases (the Khoikhoi and the Kosa) could be explained with the same cattle breeders' migration as the fox/jackal trickster motif (fig. 11).

Hardly later than 10-12,000 B.P. very developed standard versions of the obstacle flight emerged in Siberia. In these tales a whetstone and a comb are always mentioned among the objects, the whetstone turning into a mountain, and the comb into a thicket (Kroeber 1923: 198-199). We can estimate the approximate age when this version could appear. The tales that contain the corresponding details reached the North American Northwest Coast and Plains but not other areas of the New World. If they were known in South America, *terminus ante quem* would be ca. 15,000 B.P. and if not known at all even in North America, *terminus post quem* would be ca. 8-10,000 B.P. Their westward diffusion to Europe took place much later because no cases had been recorded in the early written sources and only the Atalanta type is present in the Ancient Greek myths.

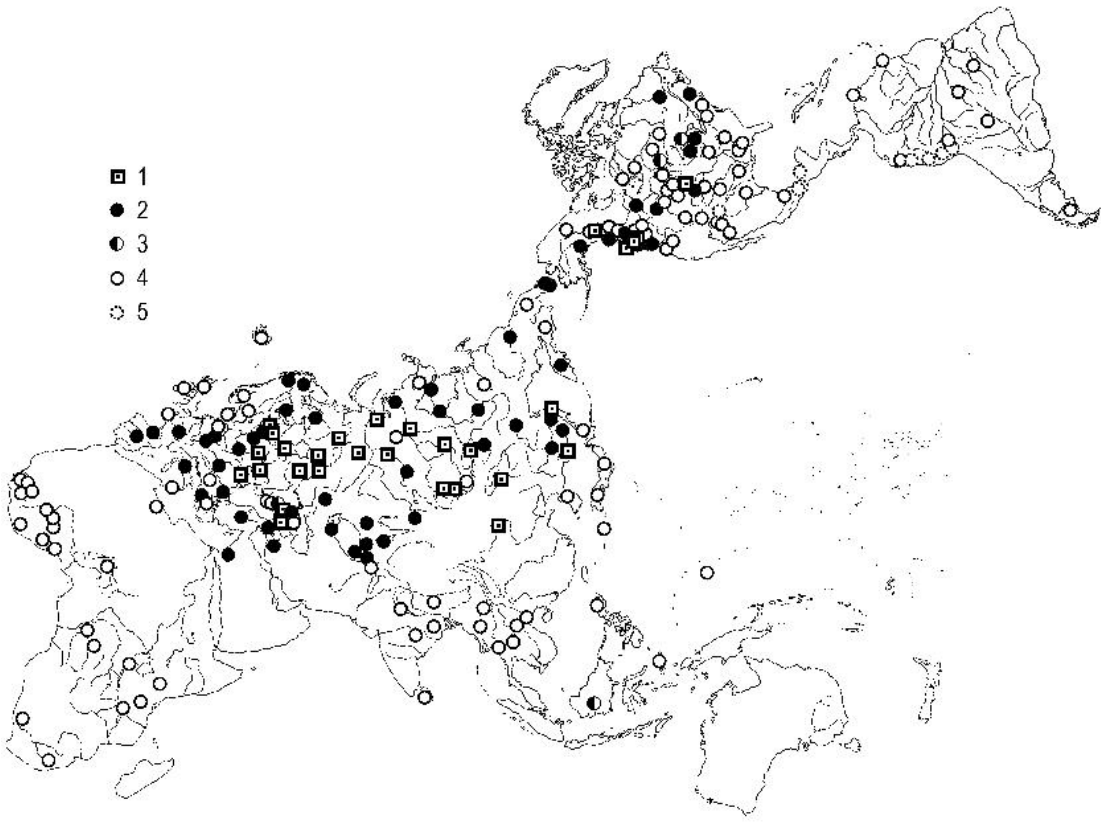

Fig. 11. "Obstacle flight", classical versions. Running away from dangerous being, person throws objects that turn into mighty obstacles on the way of the pursuer. In particular, a whetstone turns into mountain and a comb into thicket. 2. The same but either the whetstone or the comb are thrown. 3. The same but only comb is mentioned and it turns not into thicket or forest but into something else. 4. Neither whetstone nor comb are mentioned. 5. Variants (2) or (3) in those American Indian texts in which the "obstacle flight" was most probably borrowed from Europeans.

Most if not all African adventure stories with anthropomorphic protagonists can have Asian origin. Most of them diffused from the North but some others were probably borrowed from the Asian traders who visited systematically the African coast of Indian Ocean during the last 1500 years and possibly earlier. The motif of "extracted from ogre's finger" serves an example (fig. 12). In Africa stories that contain such a motif have a very restricted distribution in Kenya and the nearby countries. The Asian cases are typical for the Caucasus and Central Asia. I do not know Persian, Arabic or Indian cases but there is a chance to find them because not all relevant collections of fairy-tales are still consulted. In any case, some of the African and Asian texts share a large series of similar episodes so there is no doubt about their common origin.

Fig. 12. "Extracted from finger". Ogre swallows people, is killed but the people are not found in his or her belly or are found dead. Only when the ogre's finger is cut off, the hero finds inside it a remedy to revive the people or the swallowed up (the hero himself) come out alive from the finger of the ogre.

Not only tales with restricted distribution in East Africa but some of the more widely known motifs seem to be introduced to the continent thanks to the eastern contacts. Two motifs that are rather often combined in one text and related to the ideas about the nature of the sky make an example (fig. 13). The first motif is the "sky pushed up with a pestle". Originally the sky was low. Pounding seeds or doing some other household work, a person pushes the sky up with a pestle (broom, etc.) and the sky moved away from the earth. Another motif is the "edible sky". The sky was of edible substance and people or animals used it for food or medicine.

I had already an opportunity to address such stories (Berezkin 2009a). Though considering them as possible candidates for the cultural heritance of the early Homo sapience moving out of Africa, I considered the possibility that they could be of less great age. Now after finding more cases at the Balkans, Middle Volga, the North and South Africa, the hypothesis of the early African origin is definitely rejected. The Balkan and Volga stories fit the typical trans-Eurasian areal pattern that most probably began to emerge after the time of Christ, at least hardly earlier than the II millennium B.C. (Berezkin 2010c: 14-20). The Khoikhoi story in which the jackal climbs to the sky to eat a cloud (Bleek in Koropchevski 1874: 14-15) demonstrates parallels with the story recorded among the Berber of southern Tunisia in which the jackal is brought to the sky to eat the Moon (Pâques 1964: 186-187). It looks like another example of trickster motifs brought to South Africa at about 2000-1800 B.P.

Fig. 13. 1. "Sky pushed up with a pestle". Originally the sky was low. Pounding seeds or doing some other household work, person pushes it up with a pestle, broom, etc. and the sky moves away from the earth. 2. "Edible sky". The sky was of edible substance so people or animals used it for food or medicine.

Unlike the potential borrowings from the Muslim traders visiting African eastern coast, "sky pushed up with a pestle" and "edible sky" are not found in Kenya or Tanzania and had to diffuse by some other way. The interpretation of the Pleiades as a hen with chickens demonstrates a rather similar pattern of territorial distribution of motifs with a plausible original core area in South and Southeast Asia (fig. 14).

Fig. 14. The Pleiades are interpreted (or only named) as a brooding hen, hen with its chickens, chickens.

The domestic chickens reached Mesopotamia from the east through Iran during the III millennium B.C. (Ehrenberg 2002: 53-54) and some time after this were adopted in Europe. Does the spread of corresponding cosmonym to Europe and Africa date to about the same or to a later time is impossible to say but the direction of the diffusion is certain.

In West Africa "the Pleiades as a hen" is widely known (Mandjak, Temne, Malkinke, Bambara, Dogons, Gbunde, Loma, Bassari, Mano, Gio, Ashanti, Yoruba, Igbo, Ewe, Jukun, Baule, Haisa, Ibibio and certainly other groups on which my data are insufficient or absent). It is quite probable that in the past the same cosmonym was used also in North Africa because it survived among the Tuaregs. Later in Maghrib as elsewhere in the Arab world the traditional names for the Pleiades were replaced with Suraya, i.e. "the chandelier", "several lamps or lights together". "Hen with her

chickens" as the name for the Pleiades is registered among the Shilluk. Because the cosmonimy of most of the people who speak the Nilo-Saharan or other languages and inhabit the territories between Nile and Chad is poorly known, we have reason to believe that the Shilluk are not a rare exclusion and "the hen" was common not only in the Western but also in the Eastern Sudan.

There is no "hen" in the Mediterranean Antique sources and the Northern Europe the cosmonym is unknown besides Denmark. During the last centuries it was registered, however, across most of the Western, Central, Southern and Southwestern Europe, including the Basque and the modern Greeks but not among the Spaniards and Portugues (Berezkin 2010d). The "brooding hen", "chicks" and similar names for the Pleiades are found in South and Southeast Asia (Khasi, some Tibeto-Burman groups of Indian Northeast, different groups of the Thai, Banar, Dayaks, Leti Island and probably Khmers) and this area of the spread of this cosmonym looks like the original one. Daniil Sviatsky, a pioneer of the cosmonymic studies in Russia mentioned the "sky hen with her chickens" as an Arab name for the Pleiades (Sviatsky 1961: 121). This cosmonym was probably taken from some rare literal source and is not registered in any Arabic folk tradition (Mikhail Rodionov, a specialist on Arabic language and culture, pers. comm., 2007). However, we know practically nothing about Arabic cosmonymy of the pre-Mohhammed age. It is highly improbable that such a special name for the Pleiades that coincides with the same cosmonym widespread across the area where chickens had been domesticated would emerge in Africa and Europe without the influence from South or Southeast Asia. Unlike in Europe and Africa, in Southeast Asia there are long stories about how and why the hen became to be association with the Pleiades, and this is another reason to consider the Asian versions as the original ones.

Many dozens of other maps that demonstrate areal distribution of folklore motifs in Africa and beyond can be commented but the materials exposed already are probably enough to support major lines of my argument. Every time when we find clear areal tendencies in distribution of stories or any other cultural elements we should search for the factors responsible for the formation of corresponding patterns. The evidence suggests that ecological, economic or social variables are rarely enough to explain them. The patterns of the areal distribution of folklore elements reflect first

of all routes of migration and spheres of cultural interaction. If so, the comparative mythology is important and indispensable tool for the study of the prehistory. As about Africa, the research on the origin of particular tales and systematic extraction of tale of the Eurasian origin from the sub-Saharan pool would help us to understand early cultural background that dominated the continent before it entered into intensive interaction with other regions.

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