

ABSTRACT

African mythology and folklore, or more precisely the areal distribution of folklore motifs, contain information on the prehistory of the continent from the epoch of the early *Sapiences* up to the time of the European contacts. Most of the motifs in our catalog (ca. 50,000 Russian abstracts of texts from all over the world at <http://www.ruthenia.ru/folklore/berezkin>; English wordings of almost 1700 motifs at <http://starling.rinet.ru/kozmin/tales/index.php?index=berezkin>) correspond not to the elementary motifs of S. Thompson but to tale-types. However, our motifs do not have variants, so every text that is claimed to have a particular motif must contain all the elements of this motif that are mentioned in its wording.

A historic interpretation of the areal patterns of motifs becomes possible if these patterns are compared with the information from archaeologists and geneticists on the chronology of the reconstructed processes. Several events are of crucial importance. One is the “Out-of-Africa” movement of *Homo sapience* that resulted in the peopling of Australia ca. 60,000 B.C. and most of Eurasia around 40–30,000 B.C. During most of the Pleistocene the populations of the Indo-Pacific belt of Asia and of the continental Eurasia were isolated from each other. This isolation resulted in the emergence of two different sets of motifs. Both of them were brought to the New World but the elements of the Indo-Pacific complex have survived mainly in South and Central America while the continental Eurasian complex is found mostly in North America. The early migrants probably reached South America 14–15,000 cal. B.C. and hardly any significant Asian groups penetrated deep into the North American mainland after 10,000 cal. B.C. If so, the similar sets of motifs recorded e.g. in the Great Plains and in Southern Siberia had to exist in Asia before 10,000 B.C. The similar sets of motifs recorded across the Indo-Pacific belt of Asia and in South America had to emerge 15–20,000 B.C. or earlier. Another important event is the peopling of Sahara ca. 8000 B.C. Sahara was practically uninhabited between ca. 60,000 and 8,000 B.C. Any motifs that are complex enough and found both in Eurasia and in sub-Saharan Africa had to be brought from Eurasia to Africa after

8000 cal. B.C. and not vice versa, if they are also found in North America and consequently had to exist in Eurasia before 10,000 cal. B.C. Motifs that are related to particular species of domestic animals could not reach sub-Saharan Africa before the spread of the animals themselves. Yet another chronological anchor are the maritime contacts between South and Southeast Asia and East Africa since the first centuries A.D. They can be responsible for the spread across Africa of a series of Asian motifs. Somewhat earlier contacts of this kind are possible but their precise age is still difficult to determine.

Myths about the origin of death are under study in chapter 1. Several motifs that form the core of the corresponding tales probably had emerged in Africa before the “Out-of-Africa” migration. Most of them can be related to the later movements of people (30,000 B.C. or so) but some motifs found mostly in Africa and Australia could already have been known 60,000 B.C. Other etiological and cosmological motifs related to the celestial bodies, atmospheric phenomena, anthropo- and sociogenesis are described in chapters 2 and 3. Some of them can also have early African origin. However in comparison with the American and Eurasian traditions, the sub-Saharan set of the cosmological and etiological motifs is poor. Motifs related to explanation of plant characteristics are especially rare.

African stories about adventures and tricks are described in chapters 4 and 5. Most of them definitely have Eurasian origins and reached sub-Saharan Africa during the recent millennia. The main flow of the Eurasian innovations was across the Middle East and the Northeast Africa but some motifs were brought to the continent thanks to the maritime contacts with the Near East, South and Southeast Asia.

The cultural development in the sub-Saharan Africa had a slow tempo in comparison with other continents besides Australia. The probable reasons were a long isolation from the rest of the world and the climate and landscapes unfavorable for an independent emergence of a productive economy, complex societies, and indirectly, new and more differentiated forms of other spheres of culture, including the mythology and folklore. As a result, most of the sub-Saharan mythological and folklore motifs recorded in the XIX-XX centuries had Eurasian origins or emerged under Eurasian influence.