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The Constellation of Orion and the Cosmic Hunt in Equatorial Africa

Vincent Vieira

Introduction

In the folklore of many traditional cultures of the Americas and North-Central Eurasia there is an association of specific constellations with a hunting scene, and stories related to such a hunt – the cosmic hunt mythological motif (Berezkin 2005 and references therein). One of the most common of such associations is that with the constellation of Orion, and it has been reported to be most extensively distributed over North America and Northern Eurasia (Berezkin 2005). In a common version of the Orion-based cosmic hunt, the three in-line stars of the belt are animals (e.g., cervines) being hunted. The hunter is one of the stars below Orion's belt (e.g., Rigel), and the bright, red Betelgeuse is the arrow – the bloody arrow that has hit the animal (Berezkin 2005). The other common Eurasian-American cosmic hunt motif involves the Big Dipper (Berezkin 2005). In a common version of the Big Dipper-based cosmic hunt, the handle represents the three hunters, and the cup represents the animal being hunted (Berezkin 2005).

It has been suggested that the mythological motif of the cosmic hunt may be specific to the

Americas and North-Central Eurasia, with southern boundaries in Greece, North India, and across to the southern parts of South America (Berezkin 2005). If the myth is of Eurasian origin, it would have spread to the Americas during the first migrations. Herein, evidence is presented for the existence of African cosmic hunt myths related to those of the Americas and North-Central Eurasia. The evidence is based on ethnological studies and accounts of expeditions in the early to middle 20th century, recorded in the Dundo museum archives of the Lunda region of Angola. Thus, this work extends the regional distribution of such myths and suggests an alternate potential site of origin.

The African Cosmic Hunts

Orion and the Tshokwe

In an ethnographic report on the Tshokwe people in the Lunda province, northeastern Angola (Fig. 1), it has been stated (Bastin 1961: 194) that in this traditional culture the three stars of Orion, in line, represent the animal (*kashitu*), the hunter's dog (*kawa*), and the hunter (*mutu*). Presumably the dog is the middle star of the belt triad. This dog is often spoken of as *muta*, the dog spirit associated with hunting (Bastin 1961: 193, see also below). The word *muta* is also part of the local name for the belt of Orion (*muta nyi kawa*; Bastin 1961: 194).

There is no direct statement about the animal that is being hunted in the constellation. And an account of a shaman's advice to a hunter, after an unsuccessful hunt, to attach a *muta* figure (idol) to the hunting weapon indicates only that this will help the hunter to find animals for hunting (Bastin 1961: 194), no specific animal is mentioned. *Muta* represents the hunting dog of the first hunter, Cimbundu (Bastin 1961: 194), presumably the hunter (*mutu*) in the belt of Orion. Although no figurines (idols) of Cimbundu are made by these people, his spirit can possess a hunter, especially after he consumes the meat of a specific type of gazelle, *kai* (Grimm's gazelle; Bastin 1961: 194). If there is a specific *kashitu* as part of the Orion-based myth, it may be a *kai*. Both the hunter and his wife pay tribute to Cimbundu (Bastin 1961: 194). The wooden-dog figurines (*muta*) are also associated with fertility among the Tshokwe women (Bastin 1961: 194).



Fig. 1: Map of Africa highlighting the region of study, and some traditional art examples related to the cosmic hunt from this region.

Wall Paintings of Orion and of the Hunting Dog *muta*

In the Lunda region, an ethnographic record of paintings on the walls of homes (straw-roof huts) emphasizes the importance of Orion, the hunting dog idol *muta*, and other elements of the myth. Perhaps the importance being emphasized in such traditional art is that of a successful hunt, a basic element of survival. One painting of three connected circles, stars (shown in Fig. 1; Redinha 1953b: 30A) may represent a part of the Orion constellation. The map is marked by an asterisk to indicate northeastern Lunda region of Angola (light colored territory). At the bottom is a statue of a dog (*kawa* or, in terms of hunting spirit, *muta*), adapted from Bastin (1961, pl. 141). Circle patterns, sometimes in groups of three, are common art motifs and are referred to by the locals as stars (*tonganoshi*, singular, star). Two such sets of stars are shown: the lower was observed painted on the wall of a dwelling near the Tshiumbe river and described as Orion, adapted from Redinha (1953b: 30A; also presented in Bastin 1961: 190); the upper was observed painted on a ceremonial mask and described as stars, adapted from Lima 1967 (see text for additional information).

In a pictograph also from this region of Africa, an astronomical symbol (circle with internal cross) has been painted above two hunters who are in the act of hunting an animal, likely a cervine (Redinha 1948: 88). This presence of this symbol – most likely sun or moon according to the ethnographer's

accounts – above the hunters provides another example of the association of hunting with a celestial or cosmic component among the people of this region.

The Kioko Hunter and His Dog Idol

In an account of an ethnographic expedition to the Tchihoko region of northeastern Angola, it is mentioned that at night, after a successful elephant hunt, an elder Kioko hunter faced the constellation Orion holding his dog idol (*muta*) and praised the idol by speaking towards Orion (Redinha 1953a: 21). The hunter then threw towards Orion a handful of glowing cinders from his fire. This account suggests again that one of the components of the Orion constellation is a dog; indeed, these Kioko people also identify the dog idol with the belt of Orion (Redinha 1953a: 22). The act of throwing glowing cinders may have been in praise of one of the red components of Orion – either the bright red star Betelgeuse or the prominent reddish nebula below the three stars of the belt – that is also part of the hunting myth.

Similarities of the African and Eurasian-American Cosmic Hunts

From Siberia down to India, and Turkey across to Mongolia and into the Americas, the Orion-associated cosmic hunt is present in the folklore (Berezkin 2005). There are several different versions among these traditional cultures – e.g., the three belt stars are animals being hunted, or three hunters, or an arrow – but all involve the three, in-line stars of the belt: Alnitak, Alnilam, and Mintaka. The African version described above also involves these three stars but seems to be of unique composition: the hunter, hunter's dog, and animal being hunted. As reported by Rasmussen (1931; referenced in Berezkin 2005: 87), the Netsilik Inuit include hunters and a dog in their cosmic hunt myth, but these are associated with the Pleiades constellation. There are also 19th century accounts of dogs or dog sledges (along with a bear as the animal being hunted) associated with Orion among some Inuit groups of arctic Canada (referenced in Berezkin 2005: 87).

Diffusion of African Myths?

Stars and other lights in the night sky are often associated differently into patterns by cultures in different continents of the world (Berezkin 2005), and similar patterns may also have different interpretations (for examples see Rogers 1998 and Berezkin 2005), i.e., different cultural associations of earthly objects (including animals) and events with the celestial constellations. Constellation patterns and their associated folklore may be useful in studying human interactions and, perhaps, migrations among and within the continents.

Parts of the ancient Mesopotamian constellations have been proposed as the sources of many Greek and Egyptian constellations of the classic (and our present-day) zodiac (Rogers 1998). In the Mesopotamian constellations, Orion was symbolic of a shepherd (Rogers 1998) and not a hunter. This Mesopotamian influence does not seem to apply to the Africa – North-Central Asia – Americas axis for the Orion-based cosmic hunt myth. The classical Greek (and our present-day) Orion was also a human figure, but a hunter, not a shepherd (Rogers 1998), and may have been influenced by both Mesopotamian and African-Asian myths. The classical Greek Orion was accompanied by two hunting dogs, the nearby constellations of Canis Major and Minor.

In such comparative mythology studies, multiple origins of related myths is always a possibility to be considered. In the context of the hypothesis that the earliest intercontinental human migration occurred “out-of-Africa” (Millard 2008 and references therein), it is also possible that the presence of an Orion-based cosmic hunt among tribes of central, equatorial Africa reflects an African origin of this mythological motif; and it subsequently spread through Eurasia and the Americas. Reverse movement – from a Eurasian origin back into Africa – is possible, but one has to consider the geographic, cultural, and linguistic isolation of these tribes. The European ethnographic studies referenced herein are likely to be among the first detailed records of these particular African tribes.

It will be of interest in future, and more general studies of comparative mythology to examine these isolated African groups or the early ethnographic records of their myths. This report presents one possible starting point for such comparative studies – the constellation-associated myths. Another potential point of interest may be that of animal-associated myths. For example, myths involving leporids, hares, and rabbits are widespread in traditional African and American (and other) cultures.

In the myths from several sub-Saharan African groups and North American first nations, such animals are presented as being very wise, and an element of trickery or deceit is also often associated with this wisdom.

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Comparative Mythology

A Conference Report

(Second Annual Conference
of the International Association for
Comparative Mythology (IACM),
Ravenstein, the Netherlands,
August 19–21, 2008)

Wim van Binsbergen and Eric Venbrux

In August 2008, the International Association for Comparative Mythology (IACM) held its Second Annual Conference at the Soeterbeeck Conference Centre (a former convent) near the small medieval town of Ravenstein. Here twenty-two scholars from five continents met during three days for intense discussions of current work on comparative mythology. The twenty-two papers to be presented and discussed were divided into four clusters: 1) the mythology of death and dying; 2) mythological continuities between Africa and other continents; 3) theoretical and methodological advances; and 4) work-in-progress. The papers will be summarized below, but let us first introduce the newly founded International Association for Comparative Mythology (legally incorporated in the State of Massachusetts, USA, in 2008).

The IACM's origin lies in the Harvard (Cambridge, MA, USA) Project on Comparative Myth, and the ensuing Harvard Round Table for Comparative Myth, which – under the inspiring initiative and leadership of Michael Witzel, one of the world's leading Vedic scholars – from the late 1990s onward organised an unbroken chain of interdisciplinary annual conferences attended by prominent scholars from all continents, belonging to such disciplines as comparative mythology, anthropology, comparative and historical linguistics, genetics, archaeology, intercultural philosophy, palaeoanthropology, Asian studies, African studies, crop sciences, ethnic studies, classics, etc. From the 2004 Round Table on, the Harvard Round Tables have paid consistent attention to Africa in world mythology. In 2005 the annual Round Table was held at Kyoto, Japan, in a joint venture with the Kyoto-based Research Institute for Humanity and Nature (RIHN), and the 7th Conference on Ethnogenesis in South and Central Asia (ESCA); in this connection the Asian dimension of the Harvard Round Table was expanded to include Australia and Oceania. The next year's meeting (May 2006) was held in Beijing, People's Republic of China, under the ti-