

Motto: "The so-called isolation of Africa is a myth"

L.C.D.Joods (1961-1964)¹

In an interesting work of geographical popularisation, entitled "Tanganzika – The Silver Crocodile", the Romanian publicist, Mircea Fodoreanu², reproduces two African legends concerning the formation of this impressive lake, from a scientific work of the evolutionist biologist Stefan St. Sihleanu (1857-1923), from the University of Bucharest³.

So, at only 27 years after the discovery of the lake Tanganyika by the British explorers, Sir Richard Francis Burton (1821-1890), and John Hannig Speke (1827-1864), occurred at the 13th of February 1858, and at only 6 years after the famous meeting on the 18th of October 1871, on the eastern border of the lake, at Ujiji, (nowadays found in Republic of Tanzania), between the British journalist and explorer, Sir Henry Morton Stanley (1841-1904) and the Scottish missionary and traveller, dr. David Livingstone (1813-1873), Stefan St. Sihleanu published in 1877 in "The Scientific Review", (Revista Stiintifică) in Bucharest, an article on the "Equatorial African Lakes and Stanley's Discoveries"⁴.

The publication of the two legends made by Stefan St. Sihleanu stands for the first mentioning of the Black African folklore in Romanian. Here it is how the above mentioned author presented the first of the two legends, probably reproduced after H.M. Stanley, from excerpts published in the press:

"The traditions concerning the origins of this lake of major importance in Africa and the phases through which its discovery has gone, are worth presenting to the reader. Wajiji, the tribe who

¹ L.C.D. Joos: "Brève histoire de l'Afrique noire", Ed. Saint-Paul, Paris, 1961-1964; translated into Romanian under the title "Scurtă istorie a Africii negre", Ed. Politică, București, 1964

² M. Fodoreanu: "Tanganyika – the Silver Crocodile", (Crocodilul de argint), Ed. Științifică, București, 1970

³ cf. of. the biographical data from the "History of Sciences in Romania, the Biology", under the leadership of E. Pop and R. Coidreanu, Ed. Academiei, R.S. România, 1975, page 104

⁴ St. St. Sihleanu, "The Lakes of the Equatorial Africa and the Geographical Discoveries Made by Stanley" excerpts from the "Scientific Review" (Revista Științifică), New Press of the Romanian Workers, București, 1877, pages 5-6

occupies a part of the oriental coast of the lake, has two legends regarding the formation of the lake.⁵

As to the first, the place today occupied by the lake was in previous times a vast plain on which there was erected a very big town. There, a man and his wife lived in their small house. In their yard there was a very deep pit; the waters of this pit were the only source for food for these two people. The existence of the pit was held secret, and this was the tradition in the family, transcending to them. One day, the man being away, the woman disclosed the secret to another man and she lead to see the pit. In the moment when he got his hand in the pit to catch a fish, the waters of the pit suddenly rose, the earth cracked and a huge lake flooded that plain covering the whole city⁶.

This legend has also been reproduced by us in 1975, in an article concerning the comparison of the legends the formation of the lake with the real geological background, where it was shown the statement that "I have recently found in an anthology, in a manuscript dedicated to the activity of the Europeans in Burundi, in the period comprised between 1914-1918, belonging to Claudius Rabeyrins, (Official Library of Bujumbura-Burundi)⁷ the same legend as above mentioned".

Studying the work of Jean Markale (1975), concerning the Celts and their civilisation⁸, I had the pleasant surprise to come across an old Celtic poem, very similar to our African legend. This poem is said to belong to the bard Gwyddno (Livre Noir, poème 38, J. Markale: "Anciens Bardes Gallois" in Cahiers du Sud, nr. 319, p. 383), is the following, in French:

Seithenin, lève moi, sors d'ici et regard
la verte ligne de bataille des flott
La mer a recouvert la terre de Gwyddno.
Maudite sait la jeune fille
qui a libéré après avoir gémi,
gardienne de la fontaine, la mer redoutable

⁵ Wajiji corresponds in present day to Ujiji, (the place where H.M. Stanley met D. Livingstone), a marker place situated in the Republic of Tanzania. After the map belonging to M.D. Hertflet, A.A. Trouwborst and J.H. Scheese's (Les anciens royaumes de la zone interlacustre meridionale Rwanda, Burundi, Buha, Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale – Tervuren Belgique, Monographies Ethnographiques, nr. 6, 1962), the Ujiji are inhabited by populations speaking kirundi language (the national Burundi idiom), kiha (the Buha idiom) and by the jiji population (a name resembling the wajiji one) which speaks the local idioms.

⁶ St. St. Sihleanu, q. ibig

⁷ V. Bologna "The legends of the lake Tanganzika" in the review "Magazinul", nr. 947, November, the 29th, page 9

⁸ J. Markale, "Les celtes et les civilisations celtiques", Editions Payot, Paris, 1975, pages 23-25

Maudite soit la jeune fiile
qui a libéré après avoir lutté
gardienne de la fontaine, la mer dévastatrice.⁹

Explaining this poem, J. Markale shows that: "The story is clear, the flood seemed to have occurred from a well that had overbrimmed. That well was guarded by a young girl who was raped by the drunken king Seithenin. The careless behaviour of the warder triggered the catastrophe"¹⁰

The motive of the overflowing from the poem attributed to Gwyddno was found by J. Markale in Ireland too, in the old manuscript from *Leabhar na h Vidre*¹¹ (Fol. 39-41, Standish O'Grady; *Gilva Gadelica* 1892, tome I, 233-237; tome II, 255-259). In this manuscript a similar legend is presented, in which the carelessness of a woman designated to keep ward of a magic well in Ulster, provokes its overflowing, drowning so the whole country and the king Ecca. Only the daughter of the king a girl, called Libane, survived for a whole year in a room covered by the waters of the lake Neagh, changing then into a salmon. After three hundred years she reincarnated and was called Muirge, that is "Born of the Sea".

Dealing with the hermeneutic significance of these legends, J. Markale notices that: "The well that overbrims as the well that makes you cry is a sexual symbol for fecundity. The woman warder of the well identifies herself with the well so that the pit symbolises the vagina. Once it is raped (fecundated) it gets fertile. This stands for a sufficient proof to demonstrate that the myth of the flood must not always be considered as a myth of the punishment and destruction".¹²

Another significant legend is dedicated to the well of barenton from the Paimpont-Brocélandie woods in the Ille-et-Vilaine region, in the neighbourhood of the commons Tréhorenteuc, Concoret and Mauron (France), to invoke rain. It is said that, when water was shed on the porch in the front of the well, rain started to fall immediately. On the occasion of the precessions knightly tournaments used to take place as that one mentioned by Chrétien de Troyes, in which the winner of the contest, Yvain, son of Uryen, had to marry the widow of the knight he had killed in the battle. "The widow was a true warder of the well and completely identified with it"¹³.

There is another legend with a similar content regarding the disappearance under the waters of the sea of the Breton town Ys, in the

⁹ J. Markale, q. page 23

¹⁰ J. Markale, q. page 23-24

¹¹ J. Markale page 24

¹² Ugo Maraldi, "Ys la ville du châtimeant" in "Ecolesia", Paris, nr. 59, February, 1954, pages 115-117

¹³ R. Vulcărescu, "Dicționar Etnologic", Ed. Albatros, București, 1979, pages 78, 217 and 384

4-5 century A.D. The resume of the legend is the following, (after an article by Ugo Maramldi, 1954, who presents the variant published by the French astronomer C. Flammarion, after an old Breton chronicle).

In the 5th century A.D., the christian king Gradlon was ruling over Ys and he had a daughter called Dahu, a libertine and cruel spirit. Not far from the town lived a hermit, St. Guénolé, which is believed to have founded the Landevennec monastery and to have died in 527. Giving a free rein to her passion, Dahu made prisoner her father and committed to death a prince who was in love to her, but whom she did not want to. As the city was situated on a river, and it was defended from the sea by a dam, it was necessary to open the gate of the dam every year, to let the waters of the river sluice. The opening of the gate was observed as an important habit, that could not be carried through unless it was preceded by appropriated rituals and prayers. St. Guénolé warned Dahu not to open the gate without carrying out the rituals in the presence of her father, whom she had thus to set free from captivity. Otherwise, the saint foresaid great misfortunes. But Dahu did not subdue to this, threatened to death the pious monk and opened the gate without the performing of any ritual. All of a sudden a frightening storm burst out. Gigantic waves rose menacing the sinful city. King Gradlon freed miraculously by St. Guénolé, rushed to the palace to save his daughter, whom he loved in spite of all her mistakes. He managed to take her on the saddle of his horse and began to gallop towards land. But the sea grew furious around him and the king heard out of the storm a terrible voice calling at him "Gradlon, if thou do not want to perish, abandon the demon you carry into your arms!" In answer Gradlon shielded her more closely into his arms. Then, two enormous arms shaping of the night took her from his embrace. Only then had the storm calmed down. But when it was dawn again people realised that the town Ys died under the sea. It had been swallowed by the ocean forever, together with its monuments, royal palace and all its riches¹⁴.

The comparative reading of the two texts:

- The African legend concerning the formation of the lake Tanganyika and
- The fragment of the Celtic poem attributed to the bard Gwyddno reveal the striking similarity between the form, structure and content of the above mentioned legends.

So, structural and comparative analysis of these two folkloric texts, so very similar though the product of totally different civilisations, which due to their spatial and temporal data could not have influenced each other, might be rendered schematically as following:

¹⁴ R. Vulcărescu, *ibid*.

Comparative structural analysis

	Gwiddno's poem	The African legend
the heroine	the young girl	the married woman
the nature of the interdiction	to remain a virgin to keep ward of the well, in order to avoid the catastrophe	to keep the secret of the well rich in fish, their only source of food, avoiding thus the catastrophe
the infringement of the interdiction (in V.I. Propp's meaning)	the young girl was raped by king Seitenin	the secret was betrayed to a stranger who introduces his hand to catch fish
the result	the well overflowed flooding the earth: shedding into the sea	
the significance	sexual symbol for fecundity (after J. Markale)	

Out of the above described scheme, besides important similarities there effect three differences, though unessential structurally, but meaningful as for the specificity of each legend.

The first difference consists in the legal status of the two heroines: a married woman, in the African legend, and the young girl in the Celtic poem. The difference could be explained on the basis of the natural and socially different condition, knowing that in Africa young girls reach earlier the age of marriage.

Another difference between the two texts, which derives from the first is regarding the scope to which the two characters are meant to fulfil their duty, in order to avoid the catastrophe; that of keeping the secret of the well rich in fish, the unique source for food, for the African heroine, and respectively, to guard the well, remaining thus a virgin, for the Celtic maid. This dissimilarity has also causes of social and geographical origin, determined by the bleak necessity of assuring the food that for African was their first task.

The third difference, conditioned in fact by the two mentioned before, is sin or the mistake done by the heroine, which is the cause that leads to the catastrophically overflowing of the well. The mistake done by the young Celtic girl is that she was raped by the secret of the well and the fact that the stranger introduced his hand into the well to catch fish.

Coming back to J. Markale's remark regarding the hermeneutic significance of the Celtic poem, according to which the young girl, identifying herself with the well, being violated, got fertile,

provoking the overbrimming of the well, we can notice that the African legend proves to have a greater power of transfiguration in that, that the infidelity of the woman is discreetly substituted by the act of introducing the stranger's hand into the well, to catch fish.

We are thus in the situation to notice besides the thematic and structural parallelism, the fact that the African legend is superior to the Celtic poem, as far as the artistic transfiguration is concerned, being by far more abstract.

What remains still fascinating, asking for further explanation is the arresting similarity between the two folkloric productions, bearing in mind the unlikely possibility that one of them could have played the least influence upon the other. These similarities, parallelism, analogies coincidences or no matter how we should call them, cannot be explained through the classic ethnographical theories of the ethnographical and folkloric parallelism, or by means of hyperdifusionism, synchronism, etc.

The comparative study of the ethnographical and folkloric elements seen as components to the folk culture that has put into bold relief since long the existence of some similitudes or coincidences of morphological, structural or ideatic origin, has lead since the 17th century to the theory of the folkloric parallelism, a theory that was reconsidered and developed by the American ethnograph, Lewis Henry Morgan (1818-1881) and who imposed it as empirical means to compare the folkloric elements. This theory explains the existing similarities throu the convergence of the effects generated by the same causes difficult to be admitted, in our case, under geographical and social aspect, as it has been mentioned, due to the spatial and temporal totally different characteristics.¹⁵

Closer to the possibility of an accurate explanation of such folkloric parallelisms, is the highly reputed historical of myths and religions, George Dumeyil (b. 1898), who in his vast work dedicated to the Indo-Europeans heritage, merging harmoniously the structuralism with the historism, considers that the human civilisation expresses on all its levels a unitary structure, referring to three functions different from one another: the magic-juridical one, the warlike one and the sexual one¹⁶.

Apart from the tempting issue to formulate a theory about the universality of the archetype, the structures of myths and in general the conceptual unity of the mythological elements belonging to the various culture and people, Mircea Eliade (b. 1907), uses in his whole

¹⁵ M. Eliade, "Aspects du mzthe", Editions Gallimard, Paris, 1963, edition 1975, page 71

¹⁶ A. Mario "Romainian Aspects and Europeans Realities – The Journal of an Intellectual", Ed. Albatros, București, 1878, page 45-46

work characteristic examples, uncommonly diverse, taken from all existent civilisations. Thus, he makes use of the mythological and folkloric elements of the Amerindians, Vedic Indians, Africans and even of the solitary inhabitants of the Pacific Ocean atolls, substantiating structurally the archetypes he had deciphered as a result of long hermeneutic studies, meant to explain the genesis of myths and of the religious phenomenon, generally.

Strictly referring to the myth of the flood, Mircea Eliade is of the opinion that: "The myths concerning the flood are the most numerous and nearly universally known, but extremely rare in Africa"¹⁷. The mentioning of the African legend heritage is this field.

We consider the notion of panchronism as a possible explanation of the above mentioned similarities and coincidences, as far as this notion was put forth by the Romanian literary critic and hermeneut, Adrian Marino, who roughly defines it as "a universal phenomenon of the simultaneous creations and inventions, without direct influence, which is, in some cases, unlikely to be thought of. Within very distant and diverse cultural areas, there come into being the same types of cultural phenomena, the same literary ideas, etc... Thus one might speak of polygenesis, that nobody could claim exclusively and which has not a precisely determined origin..."¹⁸. It is worth mentioning that Adrian Marino notices that "Two creators in analogous historical, social and ideological contexts can produce parallel creations that may ultimately converge and be put under the same aesthetic single categories (trend, style); they become in this way synchronically to each other and not epigons"¹⁹, but in our case we doubt a true syncronisme, as we cannot precisely date the two folkloric works.

The notion of pancivilisation has, after R. Vulcănescu, four different significations²⁰ (the unity of the civilisation; the scheme of the human civilisation and its relationship with the environment; the extension of some secondary aspects of the human civilisation to some superior animals and the synthesis of the principal material processes that lead to the discovery of new styles and methods of work), the first of which "expressing the human character of the civilisation regardless of the degree of its development", being able to explain thus the possibility of similar elements in human societies no matter how remote and diverse they might be in time or space. R. Vulcănescu also mentions that "The pancivilisation approaches the components between them, by what in the most general in them, and

¹⁷ A. Mario, q. page 47

¹⁸ R. Vulcănescu, q. page 244

¹⁹ R. Vulcănescu, q. page 245

²⁰ R. Vulcănescu, *ibid.*

makes them differ at the same time as model of life, by what is particularly ethnical in them"²¹; this enables us to explain the striking likeness between two legend, as well as the difference, caused by the local specific.

The panculture, an ethnological concept announced even from 1750 by the French philosopher and enciclopedist A.R. Jacques Turgot (1727-1781), and then developed by the American ethnologist George Peter Murdock (b. 1897), in 1945, expresses the generally human character of culture, regardless of the degree of development in society, which contains grounds for science and archetypes of culture. R. Vulcărescu, on defining this concept, shows that: "The panculture considers as a primary condition to all man's spiritual activities the level of psychological unity of the human species, that regardless of the degree and type of man's development, the peculiar forms of his activities are unitary. It also takes into consideration that the generally human peculiarities of the spiritual activities depend on the range of human intellect and are due to co-perception in bissiciation" as G.P. Murdock states it; but he is his "classifications based on the generalised resemblance of the universal aspects of culture, does not distinguish the particular significance of these, their differential problematic"²². Of the above mentioned we can state that the striking resemblance between the African legend and the Celtic poem (both having as model the myth of the woman warder of the well and thus of fecundity), can be considered neither a fortuitous coincidence nor a folkloric parallelism based in convergence, generated by similar natural and social causes, because these are completely different.

Thus we consider that this case of Celto-African folkloric convergence may stand for an example characteristic for the emergence of stroking similar forms, determined by the generally human unity of the spiritual preoccupation, as a result of the primary, constituting elements of the legends, beliefs and rituals and of the other manifestation of the archaic life."

²¹ R. Vulcărescu, page 367

²² V.I. Propp (1895-1970), "Morfologia skazkii", 1928, Romanian Edition, Ed. Minerva, București, 1970