

ON THE AFRICAN ORIGIN OF DIONYSOS

— Old Hypotheses and New Arguments —
A Pluridisciplinary
Study
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Aristotle's assertion according to which the origin of tragedy „should be sought at the writers of dithyrambs“¹ caused a great surge of interest in the god in whose honour these odes, or lyrical songs, had been composed. It has surpassed the mythological limits and has become a topic of research in the theatre history.

It has been implied that Dionysos, owner of impetuous force and divine ecstasy that can be attained through orgiastic rites and wine-drinking, „should embody the alien in us, the dreaded antisocial forces that could be released in us under the impulse of divine passions“.²

The area of special interest in my research is more related to the origin and cult of the god than to his psychology, the reason being the fact that the origin of the theatre has implicitly been associated to Dionysos' birthplace and to the rites that gave birth to Greek dramatic poetry and dithyrambs.

It holds a certain importance in a certain historical context.

Unlike the other inhabitants of the Olympus, having a clear — cut biography, well-defined attributes and specific forms of cult, with Dionysos all these appear rather confused and drapped in mistery.³



A vivid and energetic portrait of Dionysos, by an unknown vase painter, shows him with vine leaves in his flowing hair and wreathed around his staff. Museo Nazionale di Villa Giulia, Rome.

Firstly, even his native place is uncertain, and this uncertainty continues up to our days. Secondly, some of his qualities — such as being the god of wine — were attributed to him later, after he had been acknowledged as the god of vegetation, whereas some of the cult forms dedicated to him — such as the orgiastic processions — were much older than the god himself, and had originated from countries other than Greece.

Dionysos appears to us, therefore, as being a synthetic mythical character in whose cult there have been embodied fragments of various traditions and ritual practices that have been brought to Greece and have been assimilated by the Greeks.

There are a few places in Europa, Asia and Africa that claim (or have been given) the honour of having harboured the god's birth. The African hypothesis was the least accepted of all, and the writings of the Greek historians that backed the fact were either ignored or criticized.

The interest in this topic can be traced back to the beginning of the last century when, as a result of the European territorial expansion to other continents, there were discovered traces of other cultures, some of them having been proved to be older than the European ones. This seemed incompatible to many. It also accounts for Hegel's assertion that Africa has no history, for professor Karl Ostfried Müller's criticism of those who supported the idea of the Egyptian culture being older than the Greek one,⁴ as well as for Ulrich von Willamowitz's advice „de s'en tenir aux Grecs et de penser grec au sujet de ce qui est grec“.⁵

Research in the last 40–50 years has shown that information in ancient writings corroborated with recent archaeological, anthropological, ethnographical data leads to the conclusion that such an eventuality — the Africans origin of Dionysos — could be plausible. Some are quite timid in indorsing this opinion, others, like Cheik Anta Diop bring it up like a certainty.

In order to weigh ponder over the arguments, I consider it necessary to recall at least one of the best-known versions related to Dionysos' birth and birthplace — the Greek, classical version. At the same time, I am going to enlarge upon known facts about Dionysos and his cult which find their correspondent in other cultures as well.

Accordingly, Dionysos was the result of Zeus' extraconjugal relation with a mortal, Semele, the daughter of Cadmos, the king of Thebes. The legend goes that the jealous Hero, finding out about her husband's adventure, disguised herself in Semele's servant and advised the former to ask Zeus to present himself to her in all his divine splendour.

In spite of his irritation, Zeus made concessions and showed up accompanied by thunder and lightning.

Shocked and scared, Semele lost the baby and died in flames, hit by thunder, Zeus succeeded in seizing the six-month-old child and sewed him in his calf to save him from Hero's wrath. When the time came, Zeus took the child out and entrusted him to the nymphs „on the Nysa mountain“.

In ancient Greek art Dionysos is often pictured as a long-bearded man, clad in festive clothes, with an animal skin on top of them. He

often holds a horn with grapes in one hand, and a wine stalk resembling a stick in the other. The stick ends in a pine cone, symbol of the phallus with signifies regeneration and abundance. The stick was part and parcel of the orgiastic processions in which Dionysos was followed by the satyrs (dancers, singers) with bushy tails, sometimes men-goats, and half-naked women — maenades — waving green branches.

I shall outline that in the cult of Dionysos there often appears the goat, and the god himself has been assimilated with a he-goat (or he bears the mask of a goat) or even a bull, symbols of fertility and regeneration at all ancient peoples.

II

Although Herodotus clearly narrates that Zeus carried Dionysos sewn in his calf „to Nysa, that lies beyound Egypt, in Ethiopia“ (II, 146), the predominant versions on Dionysos origin (in current encyclopaedias as well) support a Thracian source,⁶ as well as one from Asia Minor.⁷

To endorse the former hypothesis, Adolf Rapp⁸ has gathered much information from ancient writings. In other writings — among which I can mention those of Otto Gruppe's — there has been asserted that,

On the archaic *paiera* in the British Museum we see depicted two scenes: one to the left the sacrifice of an ox, a *Bouphonia*, the other to the right a festival that centres round a goat, which perhaps we may venture to associate with a *tragoedia*. Some of the figures round the goat hold wreaths, and it may be that the splendid animal in the midst of them is the tragic prize. Behind the goat-scene, and evidently part of it, is a primitive mule-car.



in fact, the Thracians have played a rather insignificant part in the cult of Dionysos. Consequently, the author does not pay much attention to the Thracian territory, and in he does, it is only to opine that the famous orgiastic processions in Thracia, invoked in order to accredit the god's Thracian origin, may also support the adverse argumentation, namely, that the Thracians were ready to receive a cult that suited them and which they practised enthusiastically and frantically.

„It is beyond doubt“, concludes Gruppe, „that the Greek colonists have transplanted Dionysos in Thracia“.⁹

More recently, the Bulgarian researcher Valeria Fol, who has specialised in prehistoric ethnological studies, has minutely examined a certain rite that periodically takes place in Strandja, a locality at the Greek-Bulgarian border. She has concluded that she has all the necessary elements to identify the rite with a scenario referring to the birth, death and resurrection of a divinity, Kouker-Kalogueros, from the Greek-Bulgarian folklore. Consequently, the writer agrees to the opinion expressed by some other researchers who consider the deity as being the personification of Dionysos Zagreus.¹⁰

In my opinion, this may certify the preservation of certain old Dionysiac rites up to our days, but not the Thracian origin of the god, as the abovementioned writer seems to suggest.

In another version, there has been asserted that, having crossed the Aegean Sea, Dionysos came to Greece from Frigia (Asia Minor), from the Thracians who had emigrated there a long time ago.

This assertion is based on the fact that the god's celebration would begin with his triumphal arrival on board of a festively-adorned ship. For lack of more palpable arguments, this hypothesis is regarded with restraint by many researchers.¹¹

There is another version that sustains the Hittite origin of Dionysos: „The Mycenaean god Di-wo-ny-sy (Dionysos) may have derived of Telepin, the Hittite god of vegetation, especially of the vine“.¹²

In the ancient conceptions, the above-mentioned hypotheses enjoyed less attention than Nysa, the mythical place where Dionysos was supposed to have been born and raised.

The ancients focussed their attention on Nysa because the place accounted for the origin of the deity's name, „Dio-nysos“, „the divine Nysos“, namely the citizen of Nysos endowed with divine attributes or „Zeus, citizen of Nysos“.¹³

In historian Terpendro's conception, Nysa has not been a place name from the beginning but the name of the nurse of Dionysos who, in order to honour her, has given her name, Nysa, to the Indian locality.

Mario Understeiner¹⁴ explains the fact that this version appeared later, as a result of Alexander the Great's expedition in Asia, on which occasion the emperor's soldiers discovered the settlement with this name.

It is true that some scholars have connected Nysa to nearer places, such as Greece (the Parnassus), Crete and Euboea (see Euripide's *Bacchantes*). Nevertheless, the most have placed it in remote regions that stretch from the Caucasus to Spain, and from Persia to Morocco.

In my opinion, the so-called „African variant“ on the origin of Dionysos deserves greater attention than it has generally been given, not only because it constituted a preferential theme for the most famous historiographers of ancient times, but also because further studies, interdisciplinary research and discoveries have not refuted it.

III

The oldest mentioning of Dionysos' name appears on a Linear B table in Crete (approximately 1400 B.C.) so that it is obvious he was earlier known there than in Greece. We might conclude that the deity is either a local production, or that he came from Asia Minor or Northern Africa.

Herodot inclined towards the last alternative, „Almost all divine characters have come to Greece from Egypt“, writes he, as, with a few exceptions, „all the other deities have always existed at the Egyptians“.¹⁵

Herodot goes on and shows that, at the beginning, the old inhabitants of Greece did not have any name for the different deities they brought sacrifices to: „It was later, after a long time, that the Pelasgians learnt, brought from Egypt, the individual names of the gods, with the exception of Dionysos, whose name they learnt much later“.¹⁶

Herodot thinks that Dionysos and his cult was introduced in Greece by Melampous, doctor and fortune-teller, advisor of the king of Argos: „Melamou is, in fact, the one who has made known to the Greeks the person of Dionysos, the sacrifices brought to him, and the procession of the phallus“... „the most veridical for me is the fact that Melampous has learned about Dionysos from Cadmos of Tyr and those who have come with him from Phoenicia (where the Egyptian cults were known) to the place called Boethia“.¹⁷

Herodotus' theories on Dionysos in the Vth century BC are relevant for my subject, particularly as the opinions of „the father of history“ are not singular. They express similar standpoints largely spread at that time.

Further research has revealed that the person of Dionysos, the mystery and legends surrounding his origin and personality continued to be in the centre of the historiographers' attention. This was a normal state of affairs as his cult had already spread in the Greek and Roman world, as well as outside it.

Among the historiographers that are closer in spirit and value to Herodotus, we may mention Diodorus of Sicily (approximately 90 B.C.—20 B.C., known as Diodoros Skelotes in Greece). Indefatigable traveller on almost the whole African Coast, minute researcher in the Roman archives for 30 years, he wrote intensively about Dionysos in his studies on world history.

Going over the pages devoted to Dionysos, we can ascertain that, at about half a millenium after Herodotus, the belief in the African origin of the god is far from being diminished: „Some of the oldest Greek mythographers gave Osiris, the well-known Egyptian god, the name of Dionysos“.¹⁸

As to the birth of the Greek god, Diodorus sums up the existing data and brings up two versions according to which, 1 — Dionysos was born in India, 2 — Dionysos was born in Greece from the same father, Zeus (or Jupiter), and different mothers: Ceres and Semele.

Diodorus describes the second birth of Dionysos (the mother: Semele) in almost the same terms as Herodotus: „After the birth, Jupiter took the child to Nysa, who is between Phoenicia and Nile“¹⁹ where he was raised by nymphs, „and he was named Dionysos, a name derived from his father's, and the place where he had been raised“²⁰

An additional argument in favor of the African origin of Dionysos is Diodorus' assertion, which I have not met at any other historian, that Cadmos of Thebes (Greece), Semele's father, „was in fact a native of Thebes in Egypt“²¹

The Satyrs are given an African origin by Diodorus too: „It is said that, when in Ethiopia, Osiris met the satyrs, a species of people covered with hair... Osiris liked gaiety, songs and dances... Seeing that the satyrs were on the point of singing, dancing and turning somersaults, he held them back“²²

In the biographies dedicated to Osiris and Dionysos there can be found common elements that back up Diodorus' statement concerning the absolute identity of the two gods. There follow some examples, illustrative of this state of affairs.

It has been said that Osiris taught the Egyptians to work the land; Dionysos, as the god of vegetation, invented the plough.

Osiris is said to have been killed by his brother Seth, jealous of the god's glory. He had been torn to pieces that were scattered around the whole Egypt. Isis, the wife and sister of Osiris, managed to gather the pieces, glued them together, thus resurrecting him through her supernatural powers.

It was out of jealousy as well that the Titans cut Dionysos to pieces and ate him. This made Zeus angry, so he sent his lightning against the Titans, turning them to ashes in this way. Dionysos' heart was found intact, and a new God, Dionysos Zagreus was re-created out of it.

It is known that the cult of animals has constituted an essential part of the Egyptians' religion. One of the first cult-animals that have been attested as such was the bull Apis. He was associated with many gods among whom there was Osiris as well. Under this form, the cult Osiris-Apis was widespread in Egypt.

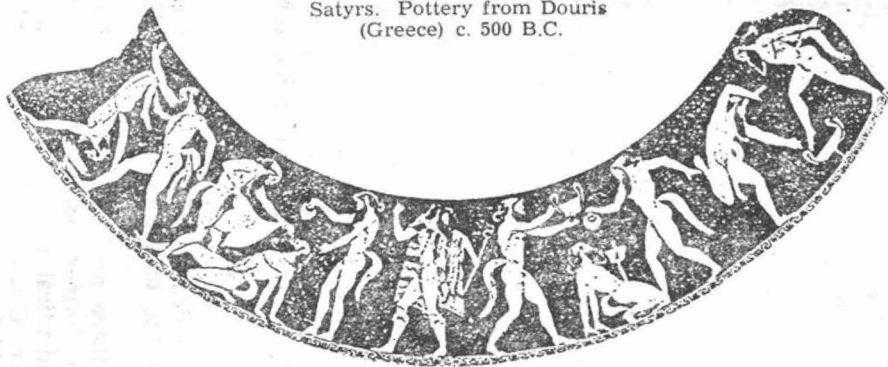
I have already mentioned that in Greek mythology Dionysos was usually represented as a ram or a bull.

„Dionysos was a bull-god, god of annual renewal, imbued with all the urgency of nature. Brimming of virility, he was the god most favoured by women“²³

The likeness is so striking that it is difficult to reject the filiation between the cult of Apis in Egypt and the cult of Dionysos — the bull in Greece, via Crete, where all the vestiges of the Minoan civilisation suggest the existence, held in high esteem, of the cult of the bull as the symbol of the virile force.

The propagation of the cult seems obvious. Martin Bernal writes: „This cult has been associated with „winding wells“ since the Old

Satyrs. Pottery from Douris
(Greece) c. 500 B.C.



Satyr in prehistoric Sahara? Rock-
painting. Central Sahara, Plateau
Iherir, c. 3500 B.C. (Photo: G.C.).



Kingdom, hundreds of years before the first Cretan palaces were constructed".²⁴

The cult of the bull, derived not only from Apis but also from old ritual practices, became eclipsed by that of the goat/ram beginning with the second millenium B.C.

„In Egypt, the cults were associated with both Amon (Amon-Ra, the Sun) and Osiris, and in the Aegean with Zeus and Dionysos, who were seen as their Greek equivalents...“

...„It is striking to note that in Greece, tragedy, which was essentially religious, was associated with both Dionysos and the goat, tragos“.²⁵

In fact the cult of the sun was associated with old zoomorphic superstitions that had been practiced since prehistory. There have been preserved painting on pottery, in mortuary chambers, etc., a series of images both of bovine and caprine animals (images of the god Amon) with the solar disc between their horns. Even without this association, the goat was considered a sacred animal that was part of different rituals. Herodotus, describing his journey to Egypt, writes about the coupling between a woman and a goat during a sacred rite in Medeea. This reminds us of the various representations of Athena with a goat, and the relations of the goddess with the animal. The same things were narrated about Hero and Artemis.

Taking into account the dithyramb itself, the similitude goes even further. Around 500 B.C. the dithyramb was a sort of dance to music in the honour of Dionysos, whose birth was being celebrated. Its original, sacral meaning consisted of a ritual during which there was eaten bull meat with the aim of establishing a communion with the god.

The conversion of the „classical“ dithyramb into the literary one that led to the birth of tragedy was a long, evolutive process in wich there are gathered contrastive and disparate elements. It was a joint procedure to which different peoples and races from Europe, Asia and Europa contributed culturally. Among others, it is H. Jeanmaire that reminds us of the similitude between the Greek dithyrambs and the ritual dances from Egypt, Libya, Ethiopia, Nigeria that can not be ignored.²⁶

IV.

In my opinion, the hypothesis of the African origin of Dionysos is part of a larger framework that regards the origin of culture itself, with reference to the Mediterranean.

In explaining the origin of culture there are two main theories: „local development“ and „diffusion“. The former asserts that similar circumstances and motives bring about identical effects in their substance in two places far from each other. Consequently, similar cultural events, the same beliefs, rituals, could have appeared in different places in the past, without any causal relationship. The believers in „diffusion“ maintain that there is first a unique centre from wich culture then spreads in different ways in different directions, not necessarily throught the migration of people who serve as a carrying agent (which remains the main process), but also through contacts among

neighbouring settled groups (something similar to the spread of Christianity or Islam).

While we support the opinion that there may have been local developments, the diffusion phenomenon cannot be ignored. The migration of peoples is a fact: it was much stressed in prehistory, and it has continued right up to the present. The migratory groups took with them only their material possessions but also their spiritual ones. Carrying their own culture, these groups did everything possible to keep it. More over, they often tried to impose it on the native inhabitants. In contrast, when the migratory group was comparatively small, it was often assimilated by the natives. Sometimes a part of its culture survived, being taken over by the local inhabitants. In this way much later on, the appearance of a ritual is attributed to the natives, when in fact it was „imported“. Analysis of matters in prehistory and protohistory shows us that the spreading of culture through migration occurred over incredibly vast distances and tremendously long periods of time.

The object of this introduction is an attempt to determine to what extent, the cultural phenomenon in Northern Africa (Egypt, particularly) was or not an isolated event.

In order to permit a discussion on this topic, and to define the time and space in which this culture appeared, developed and died, we have to emphasize that the traditional model of the Sahara as we know it must be abandoned forever. Research in the last three or four decades shows without doubt that some 10 000—12 000 years ago the Sahara had a definitely different climate which permitted the development and continuity of normal life. Formal proofs resulting from archaeological determinations and modern measuring attest that at the beginning of the VII-th millenium B.C. the Sahara had favourable ecological conditions for the setting up of the first sedentary civilisations in our studied area: it is specified that from 7.300 B.C. to about 4.000 B.C., Central Sahara was part of the same cultural complex of the Mediterranean basin which stretched from Mesopotamia to Mauritania (some go further in saying „from the Hindus to the Atlantic“). Moreover, it has been increasingly asserted (e.g. James Brunson) that the settlers in Central Sahara „participate in migration to the island of the Mediterranean and Aegean as well as mainland Greece“²⁷ and that in ancient times the Mediterranean and Saharian regions were culturally related.

Between 2,400 and 2,300 B.C., a cataclysm, probably earthquakes which caused the land to subside and large scale destruction, shook the old civilised world in Mediterranean basin. The excavations of the teams led by Claude Schaeffer along the coast have confirmed the vague records in this respect.²⁸ The rhythm of the Sahara's desolation increased and the migratory movement of the local populations which had begun much earlier, became more urgent after this event. J.D.S. Pendlebury speaks about an immigration from Africa to Crete and farther, to Continental Greece.²⁹ This idea is shared by Sir Arthur Evans, the greatest authority on the old Minoic culture.

As we have stressed above, these changes in location implied a transport of culture. What were the most wide-spread beliefs, rituals and customs that these migratory people took with them? The following

quote from J. Brunson also encompasses other researchers opinions: „Religious rites and ceremonies associated with stag/goat cults bear some significance to these migratory peoples“.³⁰

It seems that the rock paintings and engravings from prehistoric Sahara provide proof of this cult of the inhabitants of the Northern Africa.

In the works of the first European explorations who dealt with this subject we have found the following facts previously unmentioned in the history of the theatre.³¹

In 1857, in a vast work of five volumes, Dr. Heinrich Barth, the German archaeologist and philologist, describes his five-years journey in Northern Africa and Sahara.³² Barth, touching upon oriental Tassili, describes, interprets and draws some engravings. One of these, appearing in the first volume, is of great interest for our study, and could be called „The African Counterpart“ to Henri Breuil's masked character wearing a goat skin and antlers in the Trois Frères Cave in France. Barth's copy represents two humans and an animal. We are interested in the character on the left which is much like that drawn by Breuil, although less detailed and lacking antlers. It is a man with the head of a stag/goat, clad in a skin or fur (presumably also goat); from the lower part there protrudes either the tail of the fur or the sex of the character (often exaggerated in the oldest Tassilian rock art). Without dating it precisely, Barth realizes the engraving is very old, „before the Roman epoch“ and „before the existence of the camel in Africa“. He says, „It recalls Egyptian art but I cannot say it is Aegyptian“.³³ The German archaeologist believes the engraving to represent a mythological subject of the ancient inhabitants of these places, and sees it as a fight between two gods for the animal to be sacrificed.

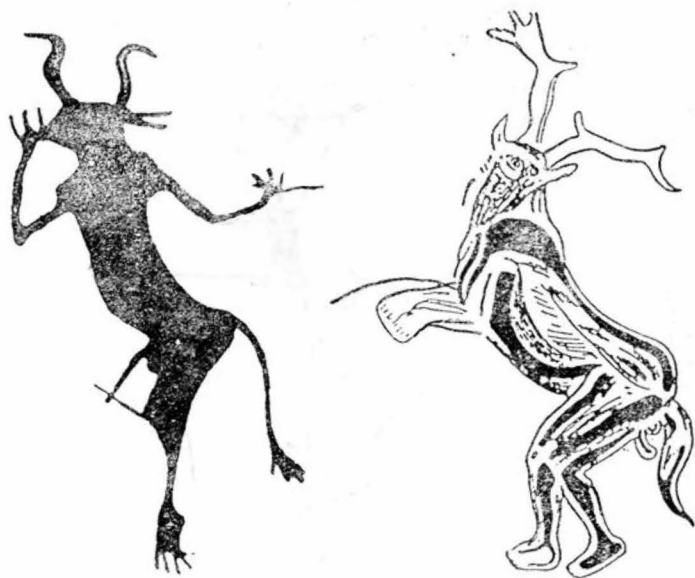
Subject to the fact that we have seen only Bart's copy, we believe the engraving belongs to the late Bovidian period (approximately 3,500±500 B.C.), and it may very well represent two masked warriors performing a ritual, rather than gods.

At all events, the character on the left sets us thinking, because it recalls the satyrs dressed in goatskin from the time of the Dionysian dithyrambs, that preceded the Greek theatre.

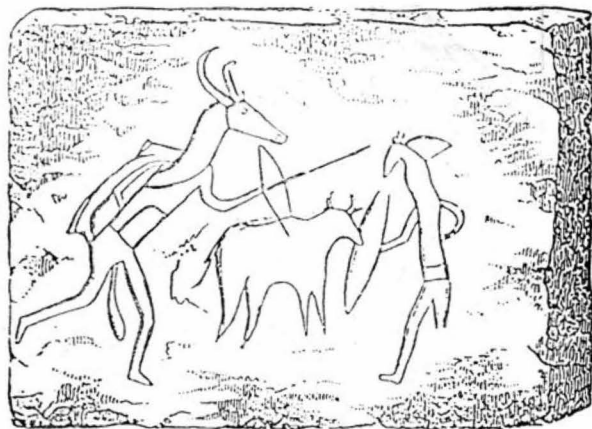
„The goat“ mentioned above may be related to the rituals of fertility and regeneration. (In this respect we should remind the reader that up to the present day there still persists in the Balkans — in Romania but possibly in other parts too — the custom of 'going with the goat' from house to house on New Year's Eve. A group of young men, among whom one is masked as a goat, wish people prosperity for the coming year).

Why the goat? Why has so much importance been given to this modest animal as compared to other imposing ones? The explanation resorts to other disciplines.

A thousand years ago the goat was already known in Asia and Africa. It was one of the first domesticated animals; man discovered that all of its parts could be utilised; it gave them their milk, meat and clothing. It was thus considered perfect and that is why it was seen from the very beginning as a holy animal.



Dancing sorcerer of Afvallingskop. Southern Africa (according to L. S. B. Leakey).



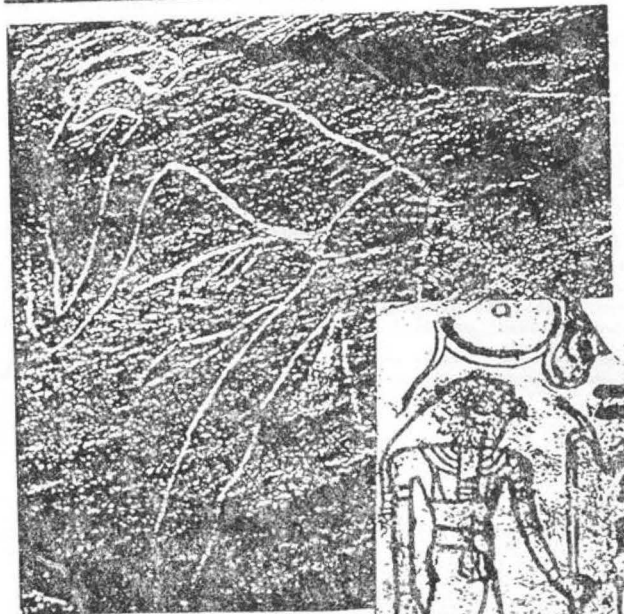
Dancing sorcerer in the Cave of the Three Brothers, France (according to Count Begouen and Abbé Breuil).

The resemblance between these two figures separated by more than 10,000 km is striking. Even today, these "masterly" disguises of men as animals in the secret societies of initiation contribute to maintaining, even among university-trained Africans, naturalists moreover, the superstitious belief according to which human beings can change into animals and vice versa, like the *Neurres* who, according to a legend recorded by Herodotus, changed themselves into wolves: relics from prehistory. (Raymond Furon, *Manuel de préhistoire générale*, fourth edition [Paris: Payot, 1959], fig. 57, p. 213 and fig. 105, p. 316).

a) African Retort' to Abbe Breuil's Sorcerer. Copy of a rock engraving discovered in 1849 by Dr. Barth at Thal Telissarhe, in the eastern ramifications of Tassili.



b) Rock drawing representing goats and goat-heads in Sefar, c. 4,000–3,500 B.C. (c. 150 km West from Telissarhe).
From H. Lohte, *Les fresques du Tassili*, Paris, 1958, Fig. 55).



Central Sahara (Tassili)

Egypt →



c) Crete.

Discussing its existence in Europe, the Swedish professor Herman Funkquist — among others — states that „this animal came to Sweden in the Superior Neolithic and it may have arrived here from Asia Minor and North Africa, via Greece, Italy...“³⁴ The existence of the goat in the Sahara and Egypt thousand of years ago therefore, and the migration of its cult should not surprise us. The goat/stag originated in Nubia and its cult appear to have begun there. Referring to the significance of this cult for the natives, Graves asserts: „The hirco-cervus, goat-stag, was a symbol of resurrection of man's hope of immortality“.³⁵ In his anthropological studies on present day inhabitants in Central Africa, Frazer maintains that even today they consider the goat a sacred animal.

The above-mentioned engravings discovered by Dr. Barth last century are part of a neolithic treasury including thousands of rock-paintings and engravings spread on an immense territory.

It was only at the middle of our century that the study of these documents began. From the point of view of theatre history it began much later.

Some of the paintings and engravings represent masks, masked people, dances, ritual processions, clowns, in other words, theatre.³⁶

Central Sahara's civilization mainly (in principal Tassili) was at its height between 5500—2500 B.C. As a consequence of the advance of desert, the living conditions became harder and the population started to migrate. The comparative study of the rock-paintings in Central Sahara shows that a migration of the Tassilian culture to Egypt could have taken place at the beginning of the Egyptian civilization. Moreover, it seems that such a migration occurred directly from the present-day Libyan-Tunisian Coast to the Mediterranean isles, Sicily and Crete, and then to Greece. This is shown by a series of old paintings from Tassili Central Sahara, representing ithiophalic figures described later in the Dionysiac rituals in Greece, people wearing masks of animals, the goat/ram, and even people having bushy tails, similar to those whom the ancients called satyrs.

The theory of the migration of culture from Northern Africa to Greece has also been supported lately by Martin Bernal's linguistic studies (presented by the author in *Black Athena*, vol. 2). Accordingly, the thesis has been formulated in this way: the ancient Greek culture is far from being exclusively Indo-European, as it was maintained by Ernst Curt in „*Greek Historia*“, 1857. It represents a miscellany of various cultures to which the Semitic immigrants (the Phoenicians) from Asia Minor and the Egyptians have greatly contributed. After extensive comparative linguistic studies, Bernal has reached the conclusion that a quarter of the Greek language consist of words of Semitic origin. Having extended the same genre of study to the Coptic language, he concluded that a fifth of Greek is of Egyptian origin.

There are multiple and obvious arguments in favour of very old relations between the Greeks and the North-Africans. The myth of the Greeks' taking over of Egyptian gods seems to be more credible.

Conclusions

Starting with Herodot, for over 2000 years, there has been accepted the idea of „the father of history“ according to wich „nearly all the the Greek deities have been brouht from Egypt“.

The old Greeks did not refute this idea, and regarded the African impact on their social, cultural and religious life as natural, without prejudices. The Greek mythology and history abounded in such references: the legend went that Cecrops (Kekrops in Greek), the first king of Athens, came from Egypt; Argos originated from the Egyptian god with the same name, was the brother of Osiris; Athena's dress on her statues has leather fringes inspired from Libya; and it was from that country that the Greeks learnt how to harness the horses.

As for Dionysos, even if he came later to Olympos, his African origin was well-defined: Dionysos was Osiris.

The occultation of the African origin of Dionysos occurred later, in the 19-th century, when a series of European philosophers, historians and philologists started to deny any extra-continental, mainly the African —, contribution to the birth of European culture and civilization.

They could not admit that the Europeans should have overlearnt anything from peoples that they had defeated and subdued.

Indeed, these ideas could have such a great impact because there were no scientific arguments to counteract them. Mythology is not history, and, its nature could not but supply reality to a limited extent.

Research in anthropology, archeology, linguistics in the last four-five decades, as well as important rock-paintings and engravings discoveries, support the theory of the migration of culture from Northern Africa — Egypt to Greece, via Crete, and the African origin of Dionysos in particular.

I do agree to Margareta Bibier who asserts: „All other religions, primitive as well as highly-developed, have rituals or liturgies, repeating the same story every year, while only the Greek worshippers of

Dionysos developed myth and with them the material for the highest form of literature, the drama³⁷.

On the other hand, we should not forget that, if Greece was the cradle of European culture — theatre included — there were Africa and Asia that conceived and nursed the infant.

NOTES

1. Aristotle, *Poetica*, IV, 1449a.
2. Mircea Eliade / Ioan P. Couliano. Dictionnaire des religions. Paris, Plon, 1990, p. 160.
3. Walter F. Otto. Dionysos, le mythe et le culte. Paris, Gallimard, 1933 (ed. 1992), p. 17.
4. In: Martin Bernal. *Black Athena*, vol. 1, London, 1987, p. 31.
5. In: Walter F. Otto, op. cit., p. 12.
6. 1st ex.: „Dionysus, also called Bacchus... though introduced from Thrace and Phrygia...
...According to the most popular tradition, Dionysus (possibly thracian: son of Zeus)...“
The New Encyclopaedia Britannica vol. 3 p. 560
2nd ex.: „...son origine (de Dionysos n.n.) doit se trouver sans doute dans un dieu champêtre de Thrace dont le culte comportait des mystères“.
Larousse 3 volumes, vol. 1, p. 928.
7. „...Dionysos is certainly an ancient god of vegetation, surely originated from Asia Minor“...
Bra Böcker Lexikon, vol. 6, Stockholm, 1984

DESPRE ORIGINEA AFRICANĂ A LUI DIONYSOS

Vechi ipoteze și noi argumente

Rezumat

Dionysos-Bacchus a fost unul din cei mai importanți zei ai lumii antice, al cărui cult s-a practicat pe un teritoriu imens și o perioadă de timp îndelungată care s-a prelungit până în era creștină.

Aserțiunea lui Aristotel după care originea tragediei trebuie căutată în cântecele liturgice — ditirambe — care îi erau închinete, au conferit zeului o dimensiune și mai mare, depășind limitele mitologiei și a ajuns un subiect de cercetare pentru istoria teatrului.

Studiul de față se referă la originea lui Dionysos și a cultului său pentru motivul că locul de naștere al zeului a fost în general asociat cu locul de naștere al teatrului, conferind acestui loc prestigiu, glorie și poziție de superioritate față de rest.

Intr-un anumit context istoric, acest lucru a avut semnificația sa deosebită, cu importante consecințe asupra modului de gândire al omului occidental modern.

După cum se știe, identificarea locului de naștere al lui Dionysos nu este atât de ușoară, dat fiind multitudinea versiunilor. Enciclopediile de azi au redus numărul lor doar la două, Tracia și/sau Asia Mică.

Autorul susține că trebuie luată în considerație neapărat încă o ipoteză, aceea a originii africane — mai precis egiptene — a lui Dionysos. Veriunea africană, precizează George Cristea, este cea mai veche și a fost eliminată cu bună știință din literatura de specialitate și enciclopedii pentru că deranja acum circa două sute de ani. Apoi a fost ignorată de urmași până în zilele noastre, deși ea ar trebui, în opinia sa, să fie aceea căreia să i se dea prioritate.

Ipoteza sus amintită era predominantă în trecut: aserțiunea lui Herodot după care „Aproape toți zeii greci au venit din Egipt“ (II, 51) a fost însușită de greci la epoca respectivă fără complexe și acceptată ca atare timp de peste 2000 ani, atât de lumea veche cât și de Evul Mediu european. Nu era o simplă afirmație gratuită ci bazată pe observație: Herodot călătorise în Egipt și remarcase asemănarea dintre zeul grec și Osiris și a ritualelor și festivităților închinat acestuia.

Prin sec. al XVIII-lea însă lucrurile încep să se schimbe dar în 1754, în marea enciclopedie „des sciences, des arts et des métiers“ publicat de Diderot și D'Alembert, putem încă citi (vol. IV, pag. 1013) următoarele: „Dionysus ou Dyonisus, nom formé de Dios et Nysa; on le donna à Bacchus, parce qu'il passait pour fils de Jupiter et pour avoir été nourri à Nysa... ville d'Égypte, sur les frontières de l'Arabie... par les nymphes.“

Acum însă romanticii începură să descopere frumusețile Greciei antice și atenția Europei s-a îndreptat spre această țară din ce în ce mai mult, considerând-o ca leagăn al culturii și civilizației europene. Ideea a fost, puțin mai târziu, extrapolată pe plan politic, întrucât ne aflăm în plină expansiune colonială; mai ales supunerea Africii de către Europa trebuia justificată cumva, pentru a arăta superioritatea învingătorului pe toate planurile. Așa se face că spre sfârșitul sec. XVIII-lea, începutul celui de al XIX-lea, o serie de luări de poziție, în primul rând a unor filozofi germani, determină un curent de opinie care supraviețuiește până în zilele noastre, conform căruia originea culturii europene trebuie căutată în Grecia și numai acolo. Atunci Hegel susținea că „Africa nu are nici o istorie“, atunci au început să fie criticați toți cei care pretindeau că Egiptul a avut o civilizație mai veche decât Grecia și tot atunci începe să dispară din dicționare și mențiunea originii africane a lui Dionysos.

Printr-un studiu complex în care autorul face apel și la alte discipline, în primul rând antropologie, istoria credințelor religioase, proto-istoria societății umane din bazinul mediteranean etc., el își propune să încerce a reabilita vechea ipoteză a originii africane a lui Dionysos și să o plaseze din nou în locul pe care l-a avut înainte deoarece o consideră ca fiind cea mai verosimilă.