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Robert Shanafelt †

Serpent Beings, Sacrificial Brides, Superboy Saviors

Comparative Analysis of African Serpent Lore

Serpent lore, dragon lore, and related ritual have long been of interest in religious studies, anthropology, and folklore. While works that provide rich ethnographic descriptions of particular cultural contexts are not to be neglected, broader comparative studies are also of value. Here a comparative approach is taken to the investigation of two themes widespread in African cosmic serpent lore: a shape-shifting Serpent Being with dragon-like features who is master controller of the waters and a related myth of a superboy who saves the world by slaying a dragon monster. Comparative analysis of tales from Lesotho indicates that Sotho-Tswana people retained ancient ideas common to other peoples in south and central Africa, and beyond. These two story lines are interpreted in terms of debates about diffusion, common origins, and independent invention. Both cognitive naturalism and inter-societal contact, in different ways, offer explanation of these shared themes.

† Robert Shanafelt was Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Georgia Southern University. He died on March 26, 2014. He had submitted final corrections to this article some weeks before his death.

This paper concerns a special type of serpent described in many parts of Africa, a serpent sometimes called a rainbow snake. Cosmic serpents in Africa are said to control the rain, to be able to fly, and to have human desires. In appearance, they combine the features of snakes with other animals, particularly those of mammals. They have been described as having horns, wings, or a horse-shaped head. In addition, they have the capacity to shapeshift into humans and other forms. Given these characteristics, they may be equated with dragons, although they do lack certain other common dragon features such as the breathing of fire. Grafton Elliot Smith, I believe quite properly, included African serpent beings in his comprehensive analysis of dragon beliefs and rituals known at the time.[1] Researchers of Smith's era also noted how widespread belief in such beings was in Africa.[2]

The first purpose of this paper is to discuss the literature on pan-African serpent-related mythology and connected issues about how this mythology may have developed and spread. A second purpose is to bring evidence to bear on this literature by means of describing some neglected folktales told among the Basotho of Lesotho collected in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Sotho narratives involve a serpent figure whose interactions with human protagonists reveal themes of drought, rain, and unexplained mystical powers. These stories are important to discuss with respect to the wider literature on mystical Serpent Beings for two reasons. First, the Basotho (and the closely related Tswana) are only beginning to be recognized as people among whom there was a serpent being regarded as having characteristics of divinity.[3] Second, the tales may shed light on the larger worldwide narrative and ritual corpus that involves mystical serpentine (dragon) beings.

My approach here is to focus on comparative analysis of stories and themes, abstracting them from many of the details of cultural and perfor-

[1] Grafton Elliot Smith, *The Evolution of the Dragon* (London: Longmans, Green & Company, 1919).

[2] Leo Frobenius, *The Voice of Africa: Being an Account of the German Inner African Exploration Expedition in the Years 1910–1912* (London: Hutchinson, 1913); Edward Westermarck, *Ritual and Belief in Morocco* (London: Macmillan, 1926); Wilfrid D. Hambly, *Serpent Worship in Africa* (Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History, 1931).

[3] They are not included in the important work of Luc de Heusch, *Rois nés d'un coeur de vache* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982); Penny Susan Bernard, "Ecological Implications of Water Spirit Beliefs in Southern Africa: The Need to Protect Knowledge, Nature, and Resource Rights," in *USDA Forest Service Proceedings RMRS-P-27* (2003), 148–54; Harold Scheub, *The Uncoiling Python: South African Storytellers and Resistance* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), for example.

mative context, and thus is quite different from that of the most experienced and prominent scholars doing related work in the field in southern Africa.[4] I realize that such an approach is anathema to many scholars of anthropology, religion, and history more generally. To Africanists such an expansive view may bring to mind the old arguments made by Leo Frobenius, and long dismissed as Romantic "antiquarianism," built on artificially constructed similarities.[5] Admittedly, such an approach also runs counter to the trend against the older comparative religion that sees such work either as a mill in the service of a racist and colonial project[6] or more simply as fundamentally flawed.[7] However, my point is not to claim that there are primordial archetypes to be abstracted somehow from the creativity of individual performers or the specifics of particular moments in the lives of a people. Rather, it is to argue for the endurance of memorable characters, themes, and story lines, given that omissions, additions, and other transformations inevitably arise as a result of individual creativity and culture change, on the one hand, and lapses of memory and wandering minds, on the other.

One of the oldest issues in the comparative study of stories and narrative statements of all types concerns the issue of similarities. Why do seemingly unrelated and disconnected peoples have identifiably congruent expressive elements, be they at the scale of motifs, characters, themes, styles, stories, or combinations of stories? For generations scholars have argued over differing explanations. These include: (1) diffusion or selective borrowing; (2) independent inventions due to common structures of the mind; (3) cognitive naturalism, meaning independent inventions, coming from similar minds working from similar experiences of the natural world; and (4) false similarity due to observer bias or error.[8]

[4] Bernard, "Water Spirit Beliefs"; Francis C. L. Rakotsoane, "Traces of Snake Worship in Basotho Culture," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 21, no. 1 (2008): 53–70; Scheub, *Uncoiling Python*.

[5] Leo Frobenius and Douglas C. Fox, *African Genesis: Folk Tales and Myths of Africa* (1937; New York: Dover, 1999).

[6] V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis: Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*, African Systems of Thought (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996).

[7] Jan Vansina, "Is Elegance Proof? Structuralism and African History," *History in Africa* 10 (1983): 307–48.

[8] J. F. Bierlein, *Parallel Myths* (New York: Ballantine, 1994), 271–303; Michael Witzel, *The Origins of the World's Mythologies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 20–26.

With respect to Serpent Beings (taken here to refer to Africa's cosmic serpents or rainbow snakes, as well as the dragons from other continents described by Grafton Elliot Smith), each of these explanations have been put forth. Smith sees the dragon as a divine cosmic serpent, originating as a god that controlled the essential lifegiving essence of rain and water.[9] He has them diffusing from a single source, ancient Sumer, spreading from there first to Egypt and other parts of the Old World, and ultimately to native America.[10] For him "the original dragon [Serpent Being] was a beneficent creature, the personification of water, and was identified with kings."[11]

Classic diffusion arguments such as that of Grafton Elliot Smith typically explained similarities as a consequence of descent from a single source. Another possibility is that they have multiple sources of origin and multiple sources of spread from inter-societal contact. Smith does not discount recent sources of spread of dragon lore, such as by sailors, but argues that this merely muddies the waters of the evidence for the ancient common origin. Diffusion may also occur through the direct teaching of new elements from one society to another. These may be taught as whole complexes or as smaller motifs, or learned informally without conscious teaching. All diffusion includes the possibility of changes that occur due to the process of cross-cultural transmission and repetition, changes such as inversions, sequence alteration, differences in emphasis, and character modification.

Diffusion arguments such as those of Smith have long been out of fashion. However, recently Michael Witzel has updated the common origin hypothesis using a variety of new arguments deriving from archaeology and genetics as well as an updated comparative mythology.[12] He argues that stories of Serpent Beings are not alone in having ancient origins, but that so do a large set of other mythic story lines about the creation and development of the world. Astonishingly, he believes these stories are much older than the first civilizations such as Sumer or Egypt. Indeed, he believes that the comparative analysis of myth reveals patterned similarities found across Africa, South Asia, and Australia, on the one hand, and Eurasia, the Pacific, and Native America, on the other, that can only be explained as survivals, mythic remnants of the original movement of the first human beings out of Africa, and their subsequent dispersal across the continents. This is a fasci-

[9] Smith, *Evolution of the Dragon*, 27.
[10] Ibid., 104.
[11] Ibid., vii.
[12] Witzel, *Origins of the World's Mythologies*.

nating, and provocative argument, but, as we shall see, not entirely relevant for this paper, as the mythic story lines about serpents discussed here are of a different type.

The second type of argument explaining commonalities in folk narratives, those concerning the nature of the human mind, are known in their classic form as the arguments of Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Maddock reviewed some of the psychoanalytic arguments put forward in the 1950s to explain mythological snakes. One of these arguments was that rainbow snakes are phallic symbols, and the serpent's watery domains represent the uterus. Combined, the snake and water symbolize primordial father and mother. Oral pathways, such as through swallowing or regurgitation, are seen as equivalent to a sexual act.[13] However, even if correct in assessment of a universal sexual imagination, this approach remains incomplete since more specific narrative congruencies between societies still require explanation. Obviously, serpents can be seen as sexual symbols, but in my opinion many specific features of the dragon narrative are not adequately dealt with by means of a single-minded emphasis on sexuality. Nor can a Jungian vision of serpents as a primordial archetype handle these details adequately. On the other hand, another classic approach relating to universals of the mind, that of structuralism, eschews worries about explanation of origins for analysis of narrative structure and details. With respect to African serpent lore, de Heusch provides a complex analysis of narratives involving Serpent Beings from central and southern Africa that sees them connected to symbolic transformations of water, earth, and sky symbols and related associations with kingship.[14] However, as will be discussed below, features of this argument are based on inadequate evidence.

Labels can obscure the more subtle features of explanations. While Smith was a clearly a diffusionist, he also saw a key role for elements of nature and the body in the spread and survival of myth. So, Smith's view also involved a version of the third perspective, what I am referring to as cognitive naturalism. The need for rain and water, for example, was a driving force for the spread and development of dragon lore. He also saw the shape and function of the placenta in birth as a catalyst for associations between fertility, water, and serpents. A related naturalistic argument has it that it is logical to asso-

[13] Kenneth Maddock, "Introduction," in *The Rainbow Serpent: A Chromatic Piece*, ed. Ira R. Buchler and Kenneth Maddock (The Hague: Mouton, 1978), 2.

[14] Heusch, *Rois nés d'un coeur de vache*.

ciate snakes with life-generating processes since the snake seems to regenerate itself by shedding its skin.

Robert Blust developed a different naturalistic argument to explain the common features of dragons/Serpent Beings around the world based on what he sees as the universal experience of rainbows, although he focuses more on describing the nature of rainbows rather than on detailing cognitive processes.[15] According to Blust, rainbows are logically associated with serpents because they stretch across the sky in serpent-like fashion. They are associated with rain because they occur during storms, yet they also can be associated with the end of rains and drought because they tend to occur close to the time rain stops. The fact that they seem to spring from earth-to-heaven or heaven-to-earth also explains the idea that they are serpents that can fly. In approach Blust's argument is similar to that of Barber and Barber, who see many mythological stories as originating in experiences of dramatic natural phenomena, and the human mind's tendencies to personify them and draw analogies.[16]

One popular naturalistic view of how the mind works to create religion is based in evolutionary cognitive science.[17] From this perspective, there are evolutionarily logical reasons for seeing supernatural agency beyond nature that are due to universal safety and survival concerns. For example, we may be predisposed to perceive potentially dangerous objects through the lens of a "hypersensitive agency detection device," a tendency to see motivated thought behind natural processes, so that a stick may be feared as a snake or a thunder-cloud feared as a god or demon. The logic is that it is better to assume a potentially harmful agency in nature than to falsely assume no danger at all. So, it is better to see spirit beings in nature with easily recognizable emotions, thoughts, and drives than to miss a diverse set of unconnected dangers. With respect to snakes, such arguments have been developed most forcibly by Balaji Mundkur and by Jason Slone and Joel Mort, and the argument appears to be bolstered by experimental research demonstrating that human infants are predisposed to fear snakes independently of experience.[18]

[15] Robert Blust, "The Origin of Dragons," *Anthropos* 95 (2000): 519–36.

[16] Elizabeth J. W. Barber and Paul Barber, *When They Severed Earth from Sky: How the Human Mind Shapes Myth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

[17] Justin L. Barrett, *Cognitive Science, Religion, and Theology: From Human Minds to Divine Minds* (West Conshohocken: Templeton Press, 2011).

[18] See Balaji Mundkur, *The Cult of the Serpent: An Interdisciplinary Survey of its Manifestations and Origins* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983); D. Jason Slone and Joel

However, while these explanations can explain our species' obsessive focus on snakes, they still do not address the commonalities in the narratives to be discussed here. Nonetheless, in this paper's conclusion I argue that it is possible to explain these commonalities by considering snakes in relation to other features of nature.

In sum, from the perspective of this paper, diffusionist views and cognitive naturalistic explanations are most germane. Structuralism, in the form of the work of Luc de Heusch, is important in that it has offered the most comprehensive contemporary analysis of African serpent lore, but its methods will not be pursued here as there is no point in trying to duplicate them. Of course, we must also be aware of the fourth explanatory issue, that of finding false similarities. To deal with this, one must provide sufficient evidence to demonstrate that the "similarities" claimed to exist across cultures are not simply vague resemblances or false positives due to a bias toward wanting to find them. One of the most difficult challenges of this type of research is dealing with the dismissive charge that the explanations provided are mere speculations. Witzel argues that he meets this challenge because he provides evidence for cross-continental parallels in mythic story lines, and does not merely cite similarities in isolated motifs or mythemes.[19] This paper also argues that there is a major story line that is spread across the African continent, and beyond. This is the story of ritual marriage and sacrifice to a Serpent Being who controls the waters.[20] In addition, this paper will review a widespread story line about a super-boy dragon-slayer.

Snakes and Dragon-Like Serpent Beings in Africa

In many sub-Saharan African ritual and narrative traditions, snakes are associated with rain, rainbows, human ancestral spirits, and rainmaking power. In many areas they are connected as well with stories of the creation of humans, with cosmological features such as the origin of wisdom and the so-

G. Mort, "On the Epistemological Magic of Ethnographic Analysis," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 16, no. 2 (2004): 149–63; Judy S. Deloache and Vanessa LoBue, "The Narrow Fellow in the Grass: Human Infants Associate Snakes and Fear," *Developmental Science* 12, no. 1 (2009): 201–7.

[19] Witzel, *Origins of the World's Mythologies*.

[20] James Frazer (*The Golden Bough*, vol. 2: The Magic Art and the Evolution of Kings (1911; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 155–70) places stories and rituals from around the world with this theme under the heading "Sacrifices to Water Spirits." He thus merges stories of the Serpent Being with those of other water divinities.

lidification of the earthly landscape, and with the fecundity of humanity and nature. In addition, occult practices are said to exist that can induce serpentine beings to bestow great wealth on those who seek it or to be threatening (because they may drown victims). An association between mythic snakes and royal power has long been held. For example, from what he observed in the 1860s in the city of Ouidah, Dahomey, West Africa, the British explorer Richard Burton noted that royal officials called upon the head priest at the temple of the python Dangbe to evoke Dangbe's aide to insure the crops and the well-being of the king. Women from royal or chiefly lineages also played complementary roles to the priests at such shrines. Not only in the region of Dahomey, but also in other areas of Africa distant from it, women served as priestesses at snake temples where they functioned as spirit mediums to the serpent spirit. They also enacted the role of ritual "wives" to the serpent, and thus did not marry men. Perhaps in keeping with a gender duality often associated with the snake, in Ouidah, Burton also reported that a man could become a ritual wife to Dangbe as well.[21]

After making a systematic survey of the continent in the late 1920s and early 1930s, it was the conclusion of Wilfrid Hambly that there were two main foci to the python cults of Africa from which similar beliefs and practices diffused.[22] One was in West Africa, centered on the kingdom of Dahomey. The other was in East Africa, located near the shores of Lake Victoria. A few decades after Hambly, the Belgian anthropologist Luc de Heusch argued provocatively that a reasonable explanation for the set of mythic themes and ritual patterns relating to snakes, royal power, and the control of rain that he found stretching from central to south Africa among Bantu-speaking people was that they shared a common origin.[23] Taking the comparison beyond Africa, Wim van Binsbergen has developed the even more provocative hypothesis that myths of a cosmic rainbow serpent are traceable to the original human migration out of Africa.[24] On the other hand, J. M. Schoffeleers

[21] Cited in Robin Law, *Ouidah: The Social History of a West African Slavery "Port", 1727–1892* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004), 98, 93.

[22] Hambly, *Serpent Worship in Africa*.

[23] See Heusch, *Rois nés d'un coeur de vache*; *The Drunken King, or the Origin of the State*, trans. Roy Willis (1972; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982); "African Religions: Southern Bantu Religions," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade, vol. 1 (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 539–46.

[24] Wim van Binsbergen, "Mythological Archaeology: Situating Sub-Saharan African Cosmogonic Myths within a Long-Range Intercontinental Comparative Perspective," in *Proceedings of the Pre-symposium of RIHN and 7th ESCA Harvard-Kyoto Roundtable*, ed. Toshiki Osada and Noriko Hase (Kyoto: Research Institute for Humanity & Nature, 2005), 319–49.

and Brian Morris operated with a far more restricted focus, emphasizing the peoples of Malawi.[25] What they described are the histories and associated practices of a set of shrines located on water's edge at different lakes and ponds spread across the country where snakes have been kept. As in Dahomey, Malawian shrines such as those to spirits Chikang'ombe, in the north, and Mbona, in the south, had high priestesses who were mediums and ritual wives to the Serpent Beings. These practices entailed conceptualization of the serpent both as a divinity who managed nature and as a shape-shifter who periodically became a man, and in doing so thereby expressed his passions in human form.

Seeking a generalization for the widespread parallels, Morris argued for a naturalistic explanation, writing that

> the symbolic association of the snake (especially the python) with rainfall and water, and with ecological cycles, with fertility and ritual power, and with images of death and resurrection, is found, of course, not only throughout Africa, but worldwide. The fact that it sheds its skin, and its structure has an androgynous quality, and that it coils around itself, and that, like the monitor lizard, it moves between land and water, no doubt explains why, according to many scholars, the snake (python) is an apt cultural symbol, or in Jungian terms, an almost universal "archetypal image."[26]

Despite the attention snake ideology and ritual in Africa have received over the years (including in the massive tome on Mami Wata traditions edited by Drewal[27]), the full range of peoples with traditions relating serpent divinities, human intermediaries, and rain control has yet to be delineated. For example, in this literature little attention has been paid to potential links between sub-Saharan and North African traditions.[28] As we have already mentioned, the Basotho also need to be included in the set of people who share the story line of a mythic snake demanding a human wife in exchange for rain.

[25] J. M. Schoffeleers, *River of Blood: The Genesis of a Martyr Cult in Southern Malawi, c. A.D. 1600* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992); Brian Morris, *Animals and Ancestors: An Ethnography* (Oxford: Berg, 2000).

[26] Morris, *Animals and Ancestors*, 219.

[27] Henry John Drewal, ed., *Sacred Waters: Arts for Mami Wata and Other Divinities in Africa and the Diaspora* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

[28] The Drewal volume does feature a paper on the "bride of Ansar" tradition of the Amazigh ("Berbers") which I will discuss later.

More on Explanations and Debates

As indicated above, both Balaji Mundkur and Robert Blust developed cognitive naturalist explanations to explain the worldwide distribution of serpent mythology. For Mundkur, the connection between serpents and rain that is often made from Africa to Australia is due to observations of snake hibernation and of their predictable migration patterns during periods of heavy rain or drought.[29] More generally, he argued, much of human fascination for snakes and our related talk about them comes from an evolved psychological tendency to fear or be excited by them, given their potential deadliness.

To reiterate, for Blust, the widely dispersed serpent (and dragon) narratives that link them with the rain are due to the similarity in appearance between brightly colored snakes and the color and form of rainbows.[30] Therefore, the universal tendency lies not in fear but in analogy-based perception. Thus, it is "natural" to see the rainbow not simply as it is, but also to see it as a water snake shooting up into the sky. The dragon is but another form of rainbow serpent; its hybrid characteristics a combination of a cold-blooded snake body and selected features of warm-blooded mammals and birds. Such a combination of features is also a logical outgrowth of a rainbow's simultaneous appearance with both rain and sun. Thus, dragons/serpent beings appear to be cool and damp like the rain, but warm and dry like the sun. By extension, the tendency to associate mating and pair-bonds with rainbow serpents comes from equally understandable interpretations of double rainbows in animistic terms.

In contrast to these naturalistic views, how do contemporary "common origin" perspectives describe the similarities in detail that have been found in rain serpent stories? Despite some differences between their accounts, van Binsbergen and Witzel both focus on the serpent-dragon as a divine being present as a key figure in stories of the creation of the cosmos.[31] Witzel also emphasizes the slaying of the dragon by a rival. However, neither work discusses marriage to a more localized dragon "keeper of the waters" or the slaying of a dragon-like beast by a boy hero who becomes king.

With respect to structuralist arguments, the vigorous critique made by historian Jan Vansina of the methods of structural anthropologist Luc de

[29] Mundkur, *Cult of the Serpent*, 275.
[30] Blust, "Origin of Dragons."
[31] Binsbergen, "Mythological Archaeology" and Witzel, *Origins of the World's Mythologies*.

Heusch gave comparative work in African mythology a serious set-back.[32] Indeed, Vansina's critique was so strong that for many years it appeared to have undermined attention to evidence that suggested deep cross-cultural mythic links between central, eastern, and southern Africa.[33]

Vansina clearly showed that de Heusch drew unwarranted conclusions based on incomplete or partial treatment of his sources. This is particularly so for conclusions not relevant here, such as those made about the nature of the political history of Rwanda or the origins of circumcision. Vansina also showed that many conclusions from structural analysis that appeared logically necessary to de Heusch were arbitrary and unfalsifiable, and therefore not really worthy of respect. I accept the validity of Vansina's critique of the empirical examples he delineates, but argue nonetheless that this does not necessarily warrant all of his own generalizations about the African past.

As a historian, Vansina argues that there are three features of the African past that invalidate not only the work of de Heusch but also other comparative approaches such as the one being pursued in the present paper. First, African (or Bantu) myth could not have a common narrative if there was not a common original language. Second, accounts of supernatural powers associated with kings must have developed only after kingship evolved. Third, archaeology provides no evidence of deep connections in ritual across time and geographical space in central and southern Africa. But these arguments are weak. First, if the motif indexes of the sort developed by folklorists Antti Aarne (1867–1925) and Stith Thompson (1885–1976) have taught us anything, it is that good stories, or at least their components, readily cross linguistic divides.[34] Second, evidence compiled by van Binsbergen shows that concepts of sacred leadership and divine authority "are older than state-like structures, and relate not to a political organization but to a specific cosmological and symbolic order."[35] Furthermore, many African kingships have risen and fallen in the course of centuries, and people may retain vestigial

[32] See Vansina, "Is Elegance Proof?" and Heusch, *Rois nés d'un coeur de vache*.

[33] An exception is the work of Christopher Wrigley. He argued that "the peoples of southern Uganda, Zaire, Zambia and Malawi appear to share a common heritage of religious thought and practice and there must be a historical basis for this cultural affinity" ("The River-God and the Historians: Myth in the Shire Valley and Elsewhere," *Journal of African History* 29, no. 3 (1988): 383).

[34] Hans-Jörg Uther, *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography*, FF Communications, 284–86 (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 2004).

[35] Wim van Binsbergen, *Tears of Rain: Ethnicity and History in Central Western Zambia* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1992), 194.

memories of them long after they have gone. Finally, since the 1980s there have been further developments in archaeology which demonstrate the great antiquity of ritual homage to serpent beings in southern Africa[36] as well as in Arabian and other Middle Eastern cultures that were long in communication with those of Africa.[37] Suffice it here to say that, with respect to myths and rituals about serpent beings, neither Vansina nor de Heusch consider enough of the evidence to gauge them to their full extent.

Vansina is not the only scholar who in the 1980s worried about sweeping comparative analysis. Roughly at about the same time as he published his complaints about de Heusch and structuralism, noted Biblical historian Jonathan Z. Smith published what has become a classic essay in the field of comparative religion, his "In Comparison a Magic Dwells."[38] As the title suggests, this paper argued that far too often comparative studies involved what amounted to magical thinking: the magic is in a quest for similarity at the expense of difference, something that could be seen as akin to the reasoning behind sympathetic magic.

There is no need to go into more detail on Smith's argument here, but to forestall criticism of this sort I will point out some of the variations in beliefs and practices associated with Serpent Being mythology in Africa. This will then provide the background for delineating what I do see as a common narrative trajectory. The point of my analysis of the material from Lesotho will then be to explicate this story line. That there can be such a connection is surprising because the Basotho people have not generally been associated with serpent rituals and mythology; and they did not have serpentine shrines or sacred kings who got divinely charged through their subjects paying ritual homage to them.

(a) Snake Beings of the Mami Wata Type. These are sometimes called mermaids, with a fish-tail imagery heavily influenced by recent contact with Europeans.[39] But it seems clear that the serpent imagery is older. The West

[36] McEdward Murimbika, "Sacred Powers and Rituals of Transformation: An Ethnoarcheological Study of Rainmaking Rituals and Agricultural Productivity During the Evolution of the Mapungubwe State, AD 1000 to AD 1300" (PhD Thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 2006).

[37] Anne Benoist, "An Iron Age II Snake Cult in the Oman Peninsula: Evidence from Bithnah (Emirate of Fujairah)," *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 18, no. 1 (2007): 34–54.

[38] Jonathan Z. Smith, "In Comparison a Magic Dwells," in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 19–35.

[39] Brian Siegal, "Water Spirits and Mermaids: The Copperbelt Chitapo," in Drewal, *Sacred Waters*, 303–12.

African peoples that Béatrice Appia interviewed in the 1940s generally refused to speak about the most secret aspects of their snake-related beliefs, but many readily acknowledged the connection between wondrous snakes and wealth seeking. Her evidence also showed the blending and variation of local forms. For example, some Fouta Djallon people of highland Guinea reported that the serpent being they referred to as Ningiri was the owner of iron, and also took its nourishment from that metal, but this was not a regional belief.[40] Another sort of hybridization seems to have occurred among the Karanga of Zimbabwe. There an overt association is made by some between serpentine "mermaids" (*njuzu*) and a woman's fallopian tubes and amniotic fluid. This is not exactly new, as traditional serpent beliefs clearly are also about female fertility,[41] and Smith noted a connection between Persian serpent imagery and the placenta,[42] but it does represent a new understanding of *njuzu* as mermaids.

(b) Ancestral spirits returning to earth in snake form. This belief is reported as widespread in sub-Saharan Africa by Hambly. One practical consequence is that snakes so identified are left on their own, and not bothered, even when they come into a home. On a different but related theme, people of Arab origin on the island of Madagascar were reported by Hambly to believe in *fanany*.[43] These are large sea snakes which were said to emanate from liquids produced from the decaying body of a dead chief.

(c) Snake familiars. In Zulu, Xhosa, and Sotho, snake familiars are called "mother of the waters," (*mamlambo/mamolapo*) or more simply "python," and they are usually described in terms of healing. Ethnographers of South Africa and Zimbabwe at least since the 1940s have reported rituals in which diviners and their apprentices are said to take journeys beneath the waters of natural pools in order to gain gifts of healing power. Written from the perspective of a believer and practitioner, Penny Bernard's insightful work brings this research up-to-date.[44] Bernard also does not ignore that there can also be a dark side to a snake familiar. In this latter respect, van Binsbergen described

[40] Béatrice Appia, "Note Sur le Génie des Eaux en Guinée," *Journal de la Société des Africanistes* 14 (1944): 41.

[41] Herbert Aschwanden, *Karanga Mythology: An Analysis of the Consciousness of the Karanga in Zimbabwe* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1989).

[42] Smith, *Evolution of the Dragon*, x.

[43] Hambly, *Serpent Worship in Africa*, 29, 31.

[44] Penny Susan Bernard, "Messages from the Deep: Water Divinities, Dreams and Diviners in Southern Africa" (PhD Thesis, Rhodes University, 2010).

the belief in Western Zambia that some sorcerers, particularly women looking for ways to attack their husbands, create and nurture a human-headed snake which ultimately takes control and demands to be fed human flesh.[45]

(d) Invisible body snakes. In Bantu languages, these forms are commonly called *nyoka*, the same word used to refer to common snakes generally. When an invisible snake is lodged in the body it may cause serious illness. This has been found to be a common belief in Mozambique and the eastern part of South Africa.[46] For the Basotho, snakes can get lodged in the body, but they are not necessarily invisible. According a missionary working in Lesotho in the 1930s, sorcerers were said to be able to cause intestinal ailments by infecting victims with a small two-headed serpent called "kupane" that had to be extracted by an enema administered by medicinal specialists.[47]

What is obviously missing from this list are the mythic Serpent Beings associated with rain. Also missing are examples of what appear to be serpentine divinities of the sky. For example, beliefs and ritual about the Zulu "Princess of Heaven," a goddess who can take on the form of a snake, were described by ethnographers in the nineteenth century.[48]

The outline I provide next may represent what Wendy Doniger depicted as "a scholarly construct that contains the basic elements from which all possible variants can be created," functioning something like "a trampoline that allows each culture to fly far away to its own specific cultural meanings."[49] What I call Serpent Being has the following characteristics: He is male; he has power over all waters; he is given to jealousy and rage when mistreated, generosity when treated well; he can be invisible or appear in the form of a snake, a whirlwind, or a man. The story line in which he features consists of all or a set of the following features:

> Serpent Being prefers life in the waters of a river pool, spring, pond, lagoon, or lake, but he may be described initially as the snake-child of a human couple.

[45] Wim van Binsbergen, "Matthew Schoffeleers on Malawian Suitor Stories: A Perspective from Comparative Mythology," *The Society of Malawi Journal* 64, no. 3 (2011): 82–83.

[46] E. C. Green, "Purity, Pollution and the Invisible Snake in Southern Africa," *Medical Anthropology* 17, no. 1 (1996): 83–100.

[47] P. F. Laydevant, "Vestiges d'Ophiolatrie en Basutoland," *Anthropos* 30, nos. 5/6 (1935): 854.

[48] Bernard, "Messages from the Deep," 118–121; Siegal, "Water Spirits and Mermaids."

[49] Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 88.

> Serpent Being wants to marry a woman, often the most beautiful woman and/or daughter of a chief or king.
>
> In the course of his story, Serpent Being changes into one of his different forms.
>
> Serpent Being causes water to disappear or a tornado to arise. A young girl is sent to him to be his bride. This may be conceived as literally sending the girl underwater. Meat offerings are also commonly set out where Serpent Being lives in order to feed him.
>
> The offering of the bride to Serpent Being leads to rain and plenty.

While this story line appears today among the Basotho simply in entertaining tales, the work of Francis Rakotsoane of the National University of Lesotho shows that it is deeply connected to traditional religion.[50] His study of rainmaking and fertility rituals of the Basotho shows how the people's pre-Christian religion involved homage to a serpent divinity associated with rain and drought. A key example is the ritual hunt held to invoke rain known as *molutshoane*.[51] In this ritual, men gathered together early in the morning, sacrificed a black cow, smashed pottery, then drove their herds to the top of a nearby hill or mountain. As they went they hunted and killed everything they encountered, and made offerings of the fresh entrails to the serpent in watery places. According to nineteenth-century missionaries, one of the victims whose entrails were offered had to be human, and, more recently, Rakotsoane has shown that evidence for this human sacrifice is in traditional oral poetry and song. For example, he finds that one song equates

[50] Rakotsoane, "Traces of Snake Worship in Basotho Culture"; "New Perspectives in Indigenous Knowledge: The 'Water Snake' and its Place in Basotho Traditional Religion" (Presented at The Fourth Annual Mohlomi Memorial Lecture. Friends of Morija Museum & Archives with the Embassy of Ireland, April 12, 2011).

[51] As a national group Basotho refers to the people of Lesotho. As an ethnic-linguistic group they are also a major group of South Africa. South Sotho (spoken in Lesotho), Tswana, (spoken in Botswana), and North Sotho, (spoken in northern South Africa), are dialects of the same language. In Lesotho, South Sotho, or Sesotho, is written using the letter "l" before "i" and "u" even though in both cases it is pronounced as "d." Also, the "li/di" prefix indicates plurality, as does the "Ba" in the word Basotho, indicating people. ("Se-" indicates language.) When I refer to texts using Lesotho's format, I will use that system. Otherwise, I use the South African system which reads like English.

the preferred human victim, a barren woman, to the sacrificed black cow.[52] Evidence from archaeology and oral history indicates that animal sacrifice to a Serpent Being was once very general in southern Africa, and goes back deep into prehistory. Analysis of ancient ritual sites shows that rather than being haphazardly cast at watery sites here and there, offerings were deposited at a sacred pool or cave on the top of a prominent mountain or hill.[53]

The Serpent Being Lore of the Basotho

Basotho folktales (*ditshomo*[54]) contain a wealth of connections to the serpent beliefs and practices we have been discussing. A number of these stories were taken down in the original language and published with an English translation by Swiss missionary Édouard Jacottet.[55] Eminent folklorist Harold Scheub calls this collection "one of southern African's finest," with "stories detailed and full, the images resonant and profound."[56] A second volume containing sixty-five more tales was published only in Sesotho.[57] From a contemporary point of view, of course, the collection suffers from being based

[52] The black cow in southern Africa was commonly sacrificed to bring about rain, as it was associated with the darkness of rain clouds. See Heusch, *Rois nés d'un coeur de vache*; *Drunken King*. The neglected work of the missionary Laydevant also shows that the Serpent Being is a key figure in the initiation rites of the Basotho ("Vestiges d'Ophiolatrie").

[53] Murimbika, "Sacred Powers"; M. H. Schoeman, "Excavating the 'Waterpits in the Mountain': The Archaeology of Shashe-Limpopo Confluence Area Rain-Hill Rock Tanks," *South African Humanities* 21 (2009): 275–98.

[54] Anastacia Sara Motsei says there are three types of *ditshomo* corresponding to folktales (*ditshomo tsa basatsejweng*), legends, (*ditshomotshomo*), and myths (*ditshomo tsa diemahale*). However, it is not clear if these are commonly understood distinctions or if they are translations from the English ("Significance of Oral Patterns and Performances in the Lives of the Basotho," in *Oralité africaine et création*, ed. Anne-Marie Dauphin-Tinturier and Jean Derive (Paris: Karthala, 2005), 93–104). In any case, the distinction between stories told for fun and entertainment and those meant for more serious consideration is often hard to determine. Certainly, connections between the stories below which indicate sacrifice of a girl and rituals like *modutsoane* indicate a deep level of meaning. Sekgothe Mokgoatšana also shows that a serpent being is central to Bapedi discourse about the creation of the first humans, with the Bapedi being the largest of the North Sotho groups ("The Phallic Snake: a Sepedi Creation Narrative," *South African Journal of African Languages* 19, no. 3 (1999): 155–58).

[55] Édouard Jacottet, *The Treasury of Ba-suto Lore, Being Original Se-suto Texts, with a Literal English Translation and Notes* (London: Kegan Paul, 1908).

[56] Harold Scheub, "Southern African Oral Traditions," in *African Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Philip M. Peek and Kwesi Yankah (New York: Routledge, 2004), 427.

[57] Édouard Jacottet, *Litšomo tsa Basotho. Buka ea Bobeli*, Folktales of the Basotho 1 (1911; Morija, Lesotho: Morija Sesuto Book Depot, 1983).

on indirect dictation methods rather than on exact audio recordings. We also only have incomplete information about the storytellers. Jacottet did report one complete name, that of Moshe Mosetse, a man said to have been an early convert to Christianity who was born before 1810. There were also three mature women mentioned, but they were named only as 'Mamangana, Francina, and 'Maoni. 'Mamangana was said to have been elderly at the time of the completion of the introduction (September 1908), while the two other women were described as being middle aged at that time. Jacottet also reported that various others contributed stories, among them "unmarried girls, young men, or herd boys."[58] While we do not know much about these people as individuals, it is significant that they are all "ordinary" people who do not come from elite families.

The stories to be discussed are of two main types: those about the marriage of a young woman to a snake man who is named Monyohe, and those about an invisible man/being who lives in and controls a lake. While these stories were discussed briefly by Rakotsoane,[59] they have rarely been discussed in comparative terms. Another relevant story type is about a miraculous boy hero who kills a giant dragon and thereby becomes king. This will be discussed later. Here I summarize four narratives. Three of these feature the snake man named Monyohe and one is about the girl Senkepeng and her marriage to the mysterious Bulane.

I. Senkepeng Unwittingly Marries the Snake, Monyohe[60]

Senkepeng is a strong-willed girl who resists getting married. At a dance she refuses the requests of Morokapula ("Rainmaker") on behalf of his son. In response, Rainmaker causes a heavy rainstorm, and instructs all around to refuse shelter to Senkepeng. In desperation, she forces her way into the house of an old woman, and shelters there for the night. The next day, her problems with water continue as the river she needs to cross to get back home is in flood. Try as she might, she cannot wade the river because each time she reaches midstream she is driven back by some unseen force.

[58] Jacottet, *Ba-suto Lore*, xxii.

[59] Rakotsoane, "Traces of Snake Worship in Basotho Culture," 61.

[60] Édouard Jacottet, *Litšomo tsa Basotho. Buka ea Peli*, Folktales of the Basotho 2 (1909; Morija, Lesotho: Morija Sesuto Book Depot, 1979), 66–69. The Sesotho texts in this volume are the same as those given in Jacottet, *Ba-suto Lore*. The titles I am using here are my own.

After spending the night hiding along the river bank, Senkepeng is offered refuge by a stranger, a woman who has been impressed with her beauty. This woman is 'MaMonyohe, Mother of Monyohe, the snake man, and she immediately decides that Senkepeng is going to be her son's wife. Without much choice, Senkepeng thereafter takes on the labor of a daughter-in-law, working as 'MaMonyohe's helper to prepare and take food to the house where Monyohe lives. Over the course of time, Senkepeng never sees Monyohe during the daytime, as he always hides in the rafters. At night, even though Senkepeng sleeps in the same house with him, she still does not see him; rather, she hears him come down to where she is sleeping on the floor, and feels him rub against her with his tail (*mohatla*).

At the instigation of neighbors, Senkepeng eventually runs away. Discovering her absence, Monyohe chases after her, appearing as a great wind and whirl of dust. Then, as Senkepeng nears home, she manages to enlist the help of some shepherd boys who are able to run ahead and alert her family and their neighbors. They prepare a trap by setting numerous sharp things on the path. When an exhausted Monyohe arrives, he is easily wounded and is subsequently killed by the villagers… But this is not the end.

The mother of Monyohe arrives, and demands a black ox be sacrificed. After this she wraps Monyohe's body in the hide and burns it. She then takes the ashes, carries them to a nearby lake, and throws them in. After some time, Monyohe emerges alive from the lake, no longer in the form of a snake but as a handsome young man. He and Senkepeng then return to his village to resume life as a married couple.[61]

II. Monyohe Leaves Home, Marries Selemeng and Thakane[62]

A chief and his wife are unable to have children. They therefore enlist the help of a *ngaka* (medicinal specialist) who helps bring about a magical birth. When their son Monyohe is born he is hidden inside a snake skin to guard the secret of his birth, but in effect he becomes indistinguishable from a snake. He grows up thus, and no one but his parents sees him. Until it is time for his initiation into manhood, no one even knows the couple has a child. Even

[61] A Xhosa version of this story called "The Story of Long Snake," is given in George McCall Theal, *Kaffir [*sic*] Folk-lore* (London: Sonnenschein, Le Bas & Lowrey, 1886), 145–47. A major difference is that the snake man is not resurrected.

[62] Jacottet, *Litšomo tsa Basotho 1*, 118–23.

during his initiation, through stealth, the father is able to keep his son out of sight. The situation changes, however, when Monyohe insists that he must leave and go in search of a wife.

In snake form, Monyohe goes to his chosen village to find his select girl, Selemeng. First, he hides in a spring and in doing so causes all the water to dry up. At the same time, through some unstated force, he sends everyone away from the village on some labors. When they return, the people find that they cannot quench their thirst, as all the water in their vessels dries up before reaching their mouths. When a woman from the village then comes to fetch water from the spring where Monyohe is hiding, she does not see him but hears his voice. He commands the woman to go to Selemeng's home and ask her father for the girl's hand on his behalf. The parents feel that they have no choice in the matter, as Monyohe threatens to stop all food and water from coming to them until he gets his bride. Still, Selemeng (literally meaning 'Do Not Plant') refuses to agree to the marriage until it is worked out that her younger sister, Thakane, will go with her as a junior wife.

Although the two sisters saw Monyohe in his full snake form at their home, at his place neither do so; he maintains a kind of invisibility. Yet they stay with him in his house and feel his presence, and Selemeng soon has his son. One day as she begins to do her labors in the fields, Selemeng is warned that her baby must never go out without his protective necklace (*khoesa*). However, when they are out working one day, Thakane deliberately forgets the *khoesa* as a ruse so that she can sneak back to the village to see if she can get a glimpse of Monyohe. When she sneaks back, she is successful in spotting him, but he sees her doing so. Angrily, he turns into a whirlwind and disappears over the horizon. Thakane, for her part, is so startled that she runs back to her natal home. Yet, she is startled by his anger, not by his form, for what she sees is a handsome young man.

Monyohe's mother, upset at the disappearance of her son, sends all people away from the fields except Selemeng. Everyone else is forbidden to farm, and Selemeng is expected to do all their labors. Neither can she eat, drink, or nurse her son. To stave off the boy's hunger she only is permitted to feed him mud from a spring. This condition goes on for weeks but Monyohe eventually comes to the rescue. He returns in human form and settles down with her. Thakane too, although she is said to be mad (*lehlanya*), is brought back as a junior wife.

III. Kind Maliane and Her Disdainful Sister Marry Monyohe[63]

In this story, there are also two sisters who find themselves married to the snake. However, in this case the elder sister, Maliane, is humble and dutiful while the younger, unnamed, sister is arrogant and disobedient. The storyteller begins by describing Maliane's special requirements associated with the handling of milk, and how her mother is upset by her daughter's extreme fastidiousness. This causes a quarrel that incites Maliane to flee. However, because she has magical powers, Maliane is able to form herself into a whirlwind and make her escape. Also, as she sets out she receives advice from her pet dog; and on the trail she meets a talking rat who advises her about how to handle upcoming trials, trials that include licking the body of an old woman with a skin infection and performing other more mundane tasks. After following the rat's instructions, she ends up at the home of a woman who treats her as the wife of her son, Monyohe. Maliane, like Senkepeng, discovers Monyohe is a snake only when he crawls down from the rafters at night and wraps himself around her. A compliant Maliane does not flee, but merely waits to go home on an approved visit.

During Maliane's time at home, the younger sister is so impressed with how Maliane is prospering that she herself runs off to be Monyohe's second wife. She follows the same path as her sister but, along the way ignores all the advice her sister had received. Instead, she does everything in a selfish way, and is arrogant about it. Ultimately this behavior leads her to treat Monyohe with disdain, and he attacks her. Monyohe chases after her all the way back to her parent's home, where he then slithers into the village spring. After this, the water dries up and a ngaka is needed to get it back. The ngaka learns who has used magic to put Monyohe inside the snake skin. This person then is required to slaughter a cow, and medicinal charms are made from the animal's charred fat. The medicine works to transform Monyohe, and he is revealed as a handsome young man. Both sisters then go off with him as wives.[64]

[63] Jacottet, *Litšomo tsa Basotho 2*, 73–76.

[64] In a Xhosa variant, the elder sister is named Mpunzikazi, the younger Mpunzanyana. A version from Malawi is also known (J. M. Schoffeleers and Adrian A. Roscoe, *Land of Fire: Oral Literature from Malawi* (Limbe: Montford Press, 1985), 142–43). In a Bhaca telling, a brother rather than sister has a key role; and, rather than being resurrected, the snake husband is burned alive. The sister then saves the skull, and promises to present it to her brother as a gift (A. C Jordan, *Tales from Southern Africa*, vol. 4, Perspectives on Southern Africa (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 191–97). A different South African version is known as "The Story of Five Heads" because the serpent has that many heads (Theal, *Kaffir [*sic*]*

IV. Senkepeng and the Invisible Bulane[65]

This story does not explicitly feature a snake but the connection is implicit in that there is an invisible spirit who lives in the lake who controls the flow of water. The main characters are Senkepeng, daughter of a chief (*morena*), her brother Maphapho, and the spirit of the lake, referred to as Bulane. It is a time of drought, said from the beginning to be caused by Bulane. As the water shortage is severe, the chief sends Maphapho on a quest for water. He finds it in a distant place, in a pool on top of a mountain. However, something is not right. When Maphapho tries to bring a handful of water to his lips, the water dries up before reaching his mouth. When, in frustration, Maphapho calls out to ask for permission, a voice described as being that of the lord (*morena*) of the lake responds. The voice tells Maphapho that everyone will die unless he is allowed to marry Maphapho's beautiful sister, Senkepeng. Reluctantly, Maphapho agrees. After this, the water is released and Maphapho is able to take as much as he wants. Back at home, when Senkepeng and her father learn of the lake lord's request, they agree that she must abide by the brother's promise in order to save the people from disaster.

So, Senkepeng is brought to the lake shore and left there alone. While at first she sees no one around, and no place to stay, she hears a voice telling her where she should sleep. Although she sleeps in an unsheltered spot, when she awakens the next morning she finds herself inside a wonderful house, with food, and all the comforts she could want. For months she lives there, apparently alone, with only the voice for company; yet she mysteriously becomes pregnant. At this point, Bulane's mother appears to help with the pregnancy, and Senkepeng has her child, a baby boy.

Sometime after the baby's birth, the voice agrees that Senkepeng may return to her family for a visit. (This is in keeping with tradition for new mothers.) Upon her return, everyone is amazed. Not only is she alive but she is prosperous and with a child. When Senkepeng returns to the lake, she brings along her sister, Senkepenyane, to act as a babysitter. However, it

Folk-lore, 47–53). In the nineteenth century, Stavem recorded a Zulu version, "Snake of the Deep Pools," in which it was the wife who killed the snake and brought him back to life as a man (Scheub, *Uncoiling Python*, 20–24). Farther away, in Mali, a Dogon tale has two sisters separately dragged underwater by Nommo, an androgynous water spirit. After passing trials, the kind girl is rewarded with enormous wealth, but, of course, the unkind girl is punished when she fails (Genevieve Calame-Griaule, "The Father's Bowl: Analysis of a Dogon Version of AT 480," *Research in African Literatures* 15, no. 2 (1984): 168–84).

[65] Jacottet, *Litšomo tsa Basotho 2*, 80–83.

happens that Senkepenyane cannot control the boy. One day, she scolds and insults him by saying he doesn't even know where his invisible father lives. Upon hearing this harsh language, Bulane appears in the house for the first time in physical form, looking shiny in appearance as he is draped in a metal cloak. Senkepeng sees her husband for the first time too, and now Bulane clothes his baby in a shining blanket as well. The story ends by reporting that a large prosperous village suddenly appeared by the lake, a village that recognized Bulane as the chief. Senkepeng was no longer alone, but was surrounded by people.

In a second version of the story about Bulane and Senkepeng, the relatives of Senkepeng refuse to keep their promise and the Serpent Being appears among them as a snake-in-a-whirlwind. When he then tries to take the girl by force, he is stomped to death by fierce bulls gathered in the cattle pen at the home of her maternal uncle.

One non-mystical way to interpret these stories is to see them in moral terms as a lesson about filial piety and marriage in that they stress the proper conduct of a daughter and wife. We also see key tensions between mother and daughter or daughter-in-law. Indeed, there are tales of a girl's marriage to a snake told from South Africa to Mali that stress this lesson of proper conduct and obedience.[66] The story of a good and bad sister, whose opposite behaviors lead to opposite consequences, also clearly parallels a tale-type that has been found to be one of the most widespread in the world.[67] However, given what these stories say about the Serpent Being's mystical control of water, there is clearly more to it than this. De Heusch makes a connection between a Venda story of two wives and their python husband and a Karanga story about the moon king and his two wives, the morning and evening star.[68] The most overt link is that the evening star wife (the younger) runs away with a serpent. Making use of some other parallels, De Heusch further argued that the Venda wives married to the serpent are also Venus as morning star and evening star. While interesting, we have no further evidence to pursue this possibility here.[69]

[66] Veronika Görög-Karady and Christiane Seydou, *La fille difficile: Un conte-type africain* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2001).

[67] Warren E. Roberts, *The Tale of the Kind and Unkind Girls: AA-TH 480 and Related Titles* (1958; Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994).

[68] Heusch, *Rois nés d'un coeur de vache*.

[69] Ibid., 45–46; Heusch, *Drunken King*, 316.

More surprisingly, the story line of the two sisters married to a snake is also found in southern China, where the serpent dragon is also known as a controller of the waters. A story reported from Kucong minority, for example, tells of a young woman who marries a snake, in order to save her mother. When the snake turns into a handsome young man with a beautiful palace, her sister tries to replicate her actions by capturing a boa and taking it home. However, the boa swallows her and the mother then sets them both on fire.[70] As noted by Frazer, and as we will discuss in the conclusion, there are numerous other examples of the story line of marriage and sacrifice to a snake-dragon man from far afield that are not easy to explain.[71]

In the three tales where he is named, Monyohe is presented as a man trapped within the form of a snake; Monyohe is also a wondrous being who has powers of transformation and abilities to affect the rain. Yet, the stories present contradictory or ambiguous visions of whether or not he is benevolent or evil, a bringer or prosperity or the victim of the machinations of others. The unseen male being Bulane who is master of a body of water lets it be known by voice that he desires a human wife. From the beginning we see his mystical powers in his ability to control water and manifest as the wind. In contrast with Monyohe, he is clearly presented as a wondrous being, a power to which offerings are made. Monyohe's connections to such powers are not made at first, but they become clear as he manifests himself as a whirlwind or otherwise influences the rain.

The conflicting endings to the Bulane and Senkepeng story suggest conflicting attitudes toward the spirit of the waters and his representations. Ambiguity is also reflected in the stories in which the mystical aspects of the serpent are downplayed and the motif of snake-as-ruse is emphasized (that is, someone has hidden a child inside the snake skin to protect him from witchcraft or other murderous plots). On the extreme negative side, in some versions the Serpent Being is portrayed as a malevolent force that needs to be resisted and killed, without any sense that he may be transformed into a person or a force for good.[72]

[70] Lucien Miller, ed., *South of the Clouds: Tales from Yunnan*, trans. Xu Guo, Lucien Miller, and Kun Xu (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), 153–57.

[71] Frazer, *Golden Bough*.

[72] Jacottet, *Litšomo tsa Basotho 2*, 77–79.

Connecting the Tales to Traditional Religion in the Wider Region

The fact that the bride in the second Monyohe story is called Selemeng ('Do Not Plant') is significant. This is rather direct evidence of connection with the Mbona shrine in Malawi described by Schoffeleers and Morris, as briefly mentioned above. This is because at the Mbona shrine the priestess-wife of the Serpent Being is also called 'Do Not Plant,' Salima, in the local language. Linguistic evidence supports a historical connection between the people who traditionally maintained this shrine, the Lomwe, and the Sotho people. According to linguistic analysis, despite their present geographical distance from each other, it is likely that the ancestors of the Lomwe and Basotho once lived near each other in Zimbabwe, until displaced in the eleventh century by other Bantu groups.[73] This evidence also fits in with what is known of the archaeology, in that people of the branch of Southern Bantu to which the Basotho belong are thought to have migrated from East Africa in a sequence beginning in the early Iron Age that included passing through the region of Zimbabwe.[74] If so, this would make it reasonable to suggest that the story of Selemeng/Salima was extant more than 900 years ago.

Located near the Malawi's southernmost tip, the Mbona shrine is named for the Serpent Being said to reside there; a spirit who if properly respected brings peace, bounty, and rain. Some oral traditions suggest young women were once offered up here as sacrifices as well.[75] The shrine is managed by elder male priests and by the priestess Salima. The shrine consists of a grove, Khulubvi, and a natural pond, Ndione, with the pond located about five kilometers to the east of the grove. The water in the pond is a reddish color due to what ethnographer Brian Morris indicates may be iron oxide in the water; but in the sacred tradition it is said to be red from Mbona's blood. The pool is also associated with ancestral spirits and a sacred python. The python is said to often come to the hut where Salima sleeps and "is described as playing with her body, without biting her or causing her harm."[76]

Besides the connection to the Mbona shrine, a deeper significance to the Sotho tales can be found by interpreting them with respect to other regional rain shrines. For example, the culture hero of the Korekore branch of the

[73] Tore Janson, "Southern Bantu and Makua," *Sprache und Geschichte in Afrika* 12/13 (1991/2): 63–106.

[74] Thomas Huffman, *Handbook to the Iron Age: The Archaeology of Pre-Colonial Farming Societies in Southern Africa* (Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2007).

[75] Schoffeleers, *River of Blood*, 54.

[76] Morris, *Animals and Ancestors*, 214–15.

Karanga in Zimbabwe is said to have fought the serpent Dzivaguru (Big Pool) and force him to retire to a mountain pool, where his shrine is located.[77] Just south of Zimbabwe, among the Venda, there is a story about two sisters married to a snake man that is like story II in that the elder sister knows the husband is a snake but the younger does not.[78] In the Venda version, the younger sister says she needs to go home from the fields to fetch her snuff box rather than the baby's protective necklace. Eventually, the younger sister succeeds in getting away, and she sees her python husband outside their home catching flies. Upset at being seen, the python husband then slithers off into the deeps of nearby Lake Fundudzi. With this, all waters dry up. In response, the chief orders beer to be prepared as an offering for python and the young wife is informed that she must herself carry this out into the lake. This is done with great ceremony, and the young wife with her beer pot disappears into the lake. The Serpent Being appeased, the waters return.

That there is a connection between stories of marriage to Serpent Being and Venda religious cosmology was first suggested by Jacqueline Roumeguère-Eberhardt. The most obvious connections are with the ritual sacrifice of the bride of the Serpent Being that was said to occur at Lake Fundudzi. "To all who live in the Northern Transvaal," she wrote, it is "common knowledge" that such a sacrifice occurred annually.[79] The Serpent Being, called python in the Venda language, was also at the heart of the Domba initiation rite, a rite of fertility for young people that involved sexual instruction and the Domba dance. In the dance, enacted in a low courtyard space, female initiates step slowly together in a long single sinuous chain, chest to back, grasping each other by the arms, simultaneously making serpentine up-and-down motions with both arms, all-locked together in synchronous harmony. At the same time, their instructor shouts "the python is uncoiling."

Roumeguère-Eberhardt found that the dance was an imitation of Venda cosmic creation accounts. In the beginning, it is said, the python vomited up the first human beings. In the Domba, the dancers are not only the python but the beings inside the great serpent's belly. And the courtyard space of the dance is symbolically identified with Lake Fundudzi as the lake of creation. The image of the serpent is reinforced as well by the geography of the lake, as it is formed from a river which drains suddenly underground, thus appearing

[77] Aschwanden, *Karanga Mythology*.

[78] Hugh Arthur Stayt, *The Bavenda* (1931; London: Frank Cass, 1968), 333–37.

[79] Jacqueline Roumeguère-Eberhardt, "The Mythical Python among the Venda and the Fulani," *Archiv für Völkerkunde* 13 (1958): 16.

to coil in the midst of a circle of mountains. In Lesotho, the entrance of newly initiated young men from their isolated encampment back down to a home village is led by a procession of men who make a slow weaving line called *ho etsa monyakwe*.[80] This is also accompanied by a deeply resonant rhythmic chant. The *monyakwe* line is made during female initiation ceremonies as well. The similarity here to the movements of a giant snake and the Domba dance is patent.[81]

The power of the Serpent Being over rain and fertility can also be shown with respect to how more ordinary pythons were traditionally treated by the Venda. To take but a few examples: the python was thought to belong to the king, so a dead python must be brought to the capital for the king; it is taboo to kill a python during the rainy season, for it will cool the earth and stop the rain. On the other hand, during the dry season in order to insure the fertility of cattle, a python may be sacrificed and parts of the body strategically placed; its "male" tail and "female" head buried in the cattle pen, its carcass disposed of in a river. Finally, "the Python is explicitly linked with the fertility of women, and a sterile woman wears a python skin round her loins and neck in the hope of becoming fecund."[82] Various Venda clans say they are historically linked to the Karanga (Shona) of Zimbabwe. Roumeguère-Eberhardt points out that some Venda known to her in the 1950s made pilgrimages to the Matopos (Matobo) Hills to visit the shrine where is located a rock painting of a python and sacred pools and caves.[83]

With respect to mysterious powers and transformations, the story of Bulane is most direct. Bulane lives in the lake, has the ability to cause drought, and desires to marry the girl Senkepeng. While until the end of the story he is invisible and never takes on a snake form, it is clear from all the parallels as well as other extant version that Bulane, "the lord of lake and rain" is the same as Monyohe, "the serpent man who controls the water." At a physical level, both also link serpent imagery with masculinity, water, and sexuality. While the links are implicit, they are also found in Lesotho's female initiation ceremonies. At a certain stage, the neophytes are led at dawn to a river where they stand while being sprinkled with water; they then are required to get out

[80] Hugh Ashton, *Basuto: A Social Study of Traditional and Modern Lesotho*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 52.

[81] I am not aware of any academic literature exploring *monyakwe* in context or comparing it with the Domba dance.

[82] Roumeguère-Eberhardt, "Mythical Python," 17.

[83] Ibid., 19.

and lie down and wait for a mysterious disguised figure called by the name Motanyane. As Rakotsoane argues, the evidence of initiation songs indicates that Motanyane is also the Serpent Being.[84] His water is the sexual water of procreation, the wombs of women the containers of life.[85]

Stories and practices like these are not confined to Bantu peoples. According to a nineteenth-century source quoted by Willoughby, "the Hottentots believe that a serpent dwells near every spring and that the fountain dries up if the serpent departs."[86] Similarly, Geoffrey Parrinder mentions a Songhai story about a Snake Being who is the master of the lake, is married to a human girl, and who controls the fish, crocodiles, and hippos that come there.[87] Frobenius describes other accounts told of a young prince who slays a water-controlling beast.[88] More prominent are the Soninke legends and epic narratives that involve the magical serpent Bida. As in the other stories we have been discussing, Bida controls rain and water, and demands to be given a young woman (or women) to marry. However, Bida also acts as a protector of cities and a provider of wealth and power. Indeed, the foundation of the ancient empires of Ghana and Mali were said to depend on him. The stories also tell how one young girl to be sacrificed to him is saved by her lover, and how the hero kills Bida in the process.[89]

Among the Amazigh of North Africa, there was also a male master of water, Anzar; but whether or not there were serpent connections is unclear. The most well-known version of the story describes how there was once a girl who often bathed naked in the river. Anzar, taken by her stunning beauty, sought to marry her, but she demurred. In response, he turned a ring on his finger, and the river suddenly dried up and the earth turned brown. Afterward, however, when she finally agreed to be with him, the water and greenery of nature returned.[90]

[84] Rakotsoane, "New Perspectives in Indigenous Knowledge," 11–12.

[85] Colin Murray, "Sotho Fertility Symbolism," *African Studies* 39, no. 1 (1980): 65–76.

[86] William Charles Willoughby, *Nature-Worship and Taboo: Further Studies in "The Soul of the Bantu"* (Hartford: Hartford Seminary Press, 1932), 45.

[87] Geoffrey Parrinder, *African Mythology* (1967; New York: Peter Bedrick, 1986), 82.

[88] Frobenius, *Voice of Africa*, 467–94.

[89] Frobenius and Fox, *African Genesis*, 116–27; John William Johnson, Thomas A. Hale, and Stephen Paterson Belcher, eds., *Oral Epics from Africa: Vibrant Voices from a Vast Continent* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 3–7; Stephen Paterson Belcher, *Epic Traditions of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 79–81.

[90] Marie-Luce Gélard, "Une cuiller à pot pour demander la pluie: Analyse de rituels nord-africains contemporains," *Journal des Africanistes* 76, no. 1 (2006): 81–102.

Traditionally during times of severe drought, the story of Anzar and his bride was enacted in the form of a mock wedding. The Kabyle people of Algeria held a ritual in which a pretty young girl was dressed up to be the "bride of Anzar" and the villagers marched with her in procession to a body of water where the "King of the Rain" Anzar was said to reside, with the chief female officiate waving a wooden ladle at the sky as they went. In Morocco and Tunisia, instead of performing a ritual marriage, a large well-dressed doll, made out of ladles or similar wooden objects, was offered to Anzar.[91] In some places, Anzar was also represented in the drama, either as a figurine or as an actor. In either case, he had to wear dark clothes, signifying rain. The ritual process also involved a stick ball game played by pubescent girls around the "bride" as she was being prepared.[92] This game has roots that go back to an ancient mock battle, with real violence, that North African women once staged to evoke rain, the violence associated with the power of storms.[93]

Anzar can be taken to mean both rain and Rain King while "the bride of Anzar" can also refer to a rainbow. Achab argues that the bride was the personification of an ancient earth-mother goddess.[94] Not only is this similar to the narratives about Bulane and Senkepeng, but part of the ritual practice associated with the Mbona shrine in Malawi is a ceremonial procession of the chosen priestess bride to the shrine. And, in a parallel that Freudians would have little trouble explaining, one of the rain rituals Rakotsoane describes is a game of chase young girls play with the sturdy round stirring rod (*lesokwana*) that women use to make the thick sorghum or maize porridge that is the region's staple food.[95]

In southern Africa, archaeological evidence going back to at least the twelfth century indicates a relationship between hill tops, water pools, caves and rain control. The earliest of this evidence shows interactions between agriculturalists and hunter-gathering populations at these sites.[96] The antiquity of the associated practices is also demonstrated by the ethnoarchaeological work done by Murumbika who found rainmaking rituals still vibrant

[91] Gélard, "Analyse de rituels nord-africains contemporains."

[92] Cynthia Becker, "The Bride of the Rain in North Africa," in Drewal, *Sacred Waters*, 447–50; Karin Achab, "Amazigh Mythology: Tislit n Wanzar and the Mother Goddess," *Amazigh Voice* 17, no. 1 (2009): 3–9.

[93] Gélard, "Analyse de rituels nord-africains contemporains."

[94] Achab, "Amazigh Mythology."

[95] Rakotsoane, "Traces of Snake Worship in Basotho Culture."

[96] Schoeman, "'Waterpits in the Mountain'"; Murimbika, "Sacred Powers."

among contemporary Sotho-Tswana, Venda, and Shona groups.[97] However, there is also an evident distinction both archaeologically and ethnographically between the locations of ritual sites chosen by different types of societies: kin-based chiefdoms with less rigid hierarchies were more likely to hold their rain rituals at remote sites while the more hierarchically organized societies with sacred kings held them at their home bases. Other evidence indicates change associated with social collapse, such as the collapse of the stratified kingdom of Mapungubwe that occurred circa 1220–1300. There was thus a waxing and waning of power that could develop either as the consequence of invasion and conquest by outside forces, or that could be the consequence of internal state collapse. Traditions of Luba, Chewa-Lomwe, Shona, Venda, and others conform to this pattern of rise and fall. Another factor that is too complex to describe here is the impact on state formation of trade with non-Africans coming from coastal regions in search of ivory and gold.

Evidently, the Basotho fit into a very widely practiced ritual system; their serpent practices were not just about a serpent divinity but were part of a regional naturalistic religion, with a special focus on rain and threat of drought. However, this system eroded over time such that some features of it among the Basotho came to be overtly attacked in narrative. Probably under Christian influence, but perhaps also because of a rejection of divine attributes of would-be-kings, the Serpent Being came to be seen by some as a monster or a bogeyman which, like Satan, needed to be overcome. In any case, in surviving folklore we can still trace the basic story line that was enacted in myth. This is: (1) a serpent dragon lives in a river, lake, or pool and controls the rain; (2) to release the rain and related bounty the serpent dragon (who is also a shape-shifter) demands a human female bride; and (3) the bride may be offered as an actual human sacrifice to the waters or there may be a ritual substitute bride.

The Wonder Boy, Dragon-Slaying, Kingship, and the Rain

Another feature of the Serpent Being is his relationship to powerful social roles. For example, in the stories discussed so far the bride demanded by the serpent is not only beautiful, she is also the daughter of a chief or king. Thus, a force of nature seeks alliance with a powerful human ally. This relates to the common African notion that sacred leaders are mystical regulators of natural

[97] Murimbika, "Sacred Powers."

forces, particularly rain. The serpent myths and associated ritual traditions also reveal the layered history of social transformation from a less hierarchically organized society to sacred kingship. Some oral traditions from southern Malawi, for example, conceive of Mbona as an assassinated king who died from decapitation, and then became the Serpent Being.[98] The Luba's Nkongolo is also described as a defeated king who, after decapitation, became the rainbow serpent. Finally, we can mention the Venda king Thoho-ya-Ndou who, after his army suffered defeat in battle, is said to have miraculously disappeared into Lake Fundudzi.[99]

In South Africa, the role of royalty as controllers of nature is most famously associated with the Rain Queen of the Lovedu, but associations between chiefs, kings, and rainmaking is found throughout the region. Since monarchy as centralized leadership did not come to the Basotho until after the early nineteenth-century struggles against the armies of Shaka and related groups, and the subsequent encroachment of whites from the Cape, the social memories of sacred kingship among the Basotho most likely go back deeper into the past, as described above, when their ancestors lived in proximity to the Mapungubwe state.

A key narrative with respect to the mystical power of leaders told in Lesotho is that of the wonder boy, Sankatana. This tale fits into the "swallowing monster" category which Alice Werner found to be widespread across the continent. These stories have the following characteristics: "[1] A whole population is swallowed by a monster. [2] One woman escapes and gives birth to a son. [3] This son kills the monster and releases the people. [4] They make him their chief."[100] Taken by itself, this tale type appears simply as a wonder story, but there are also parallels with central African narratives about the foundation of kingship, and the divine powers of kings. While the story is wondrous, it is wonder tale, mythic history, and cosmology all entangled. However, in the Sotho versions there are only obscure hints to a history of royalty and divinely authorized social power. The beast itself may be a dragon, but to my knowledge its characteristic features are never defined in the folktales, except to say that it is big enough to gobble up all

[98] Schoffeleers, *River of Blood*.

[99] Johannes H. N. Loubser, "Discontinuity Between Political Power and Religious Status: Mountains, Pools, and Dry Ones among Venda-Speaking Chiefdoms of Southern Africa," in *Belief in the Past: Theoretical Approaches to the Archaeology of Religion*, ed. David S. Whitley and Kelley Hays-Gilpin (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2008), 202.

[100] Alice Werner, *Myths and Legends of the Bantu* (1933; Sioux Falls: NuVision, 2007), 163.

the creatures of the world, and that it does so with a gigantically long tongue. There are several published Sotho versions of the story of the boy hero that have been published. I will rely on two given by Jacottet that were subsequently translated into English by Guma.[101] My goal is to indicate points of congruence with similar central African stories rather than to provide a full exegesis.

The Sankatana story always begins with a stark accounting of the fact that there exists a being (usually called Khodumodumo) that has swallowed up all the people (the *sechaba*) and all the animals. There remains only a pregnant woman who has hidden herself in a cattle pen. To this woman is born a miraculous boy child who can already walk and talk at birth. As soon as he finds out what has happened to everyone he sets out to fight the monster.[102] Ultimately, he stabs the beast and kills it, thereby releasing all the people and animals that had been trapped inside. In their joy, the people agree to make Sankatana their king. However, they soon become jealous and try to put an end to him. From here there are two quite different endings. In one of Jacottet's version, Sankatana allows the people to kill him, and he becomes transformed, his heart flying up to the sky like a bird. In the other version, the boy is saved by his magical cow, who warns him of the plots against him. The second version ends when Sankatana's own mother tries to poison him, but her treachery backfires as the poisoned food kills the father instead. Still, in neither case does he remain king.

A version told among the Zulu in many ways parallels the version of Sankatana that features a miraculous cow. Among the Zulu, leadership was much more ritualized and "sacred," so it is significant that their boy hero also is described as having miraculous powers that give him control over death and the rain. Furthermore, he is in conflict with a rival chief, and ultimately triumphs to become king.[103] It is not possible to relate the details of all the other African narratives about miraculous boys who become kings, but

[101] Samson Mbizo Guma, *The Form, Content and Technique of Traditional Literature in Southern Sotho* (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 1967). It should be noted that Jacottet was well aware of the widespread extent of swallowing monster stories, and cited examples from the Hausa as well as numerous others from across southern Africa. See: Jacottet, *Ba-suto Lore*, 70.

[102] It needs to be pointed out that the Lesotho tales, as with many others in Africa, are performed with refrains that are sung in call-and-response fashion. The versions of Sankatana I have heard in Lesotho emphasize the boy's initial search for Khodumodumo.

[103] Henry Callaway, *Nursery Tales, Traditions, and Histories of the Zulus in Their Own Words, with a Translation into English and Notes* (1868; Westport: Greenwood, 1970), 221–37.

scholar of religion Evan Zuesse connects such stories to shared cosmology. He argues that

> throughout the central Bantu-speaking area and beyond, there is a complex mythic pattern involving a culture hero's conquest of a monstrous or uncouth opponent who turns eventually into a water serpent and goes down to rule the dead and the rains from the depths of a river or pool. The culture hero may be the Sun, who conquers his elder or twin brother, the Moon, thus instituting the primacy of day over night and culture over nature. (Formerly the sun and moon were of equal brightness.)[104]

To draw parallels, but also in the interest of brevity, I have chosen to outline three well-known epics reported from Central Africa, two from what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and one from Angola. The outline of major events associated with the boy in each story are summarised in Table 1. Luba stories from the DRC feature the rainbow/serpent king Nkongolo and his nephew, the hero Kalala Ilunga. The hero for the Nyanga people, a small society from DRC's Kivu province, is Mwindo, "Little-one-just-born-he-walks." For the Kimbundu of Angola, the superboy is Sudika-Mbambi.[105]

In addition to the parallel of being born with preternatural powers to a single mother in a depopulated world, three other parallels need brief mention. First, Khodumodumo is a dragon beast like the one the other heroes

[104] Evan M. Zuesse, "African Religions: Mythic Themes," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade, vol. 13 (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 76. A version collected from a Kua (Central Kalahari) woman shows cosmological connections in a different way, reflecting both "Bantu" (Tswana) and "Khoesan" influence. In this version, the first human in creation is a woman called Makweni ("Moon Person," from the Tswana word for moon). She brings forth the first man from a seed. Born a mature hunter, the man goes forth and kills the dragon, Tumbotumboro. Because Tumbotumboro is so big, the hunter can only move part of it. Still, he manages to a bring a section to Makweni and, together, they cut it open. In this way the animals and other people trapped inside are freed (Carlos Valiente-Noailles, *The Kua: The Life and Soul of the Central Kalahari Bushmen* (Rotterdam: AA Balkema, 1993), 192–97).

[105] The version of Mwindo I am referring to here is that of Candi Rureke, published in Daniel P. Biebuyck and Mateene Kahombo, *The Mwindo Epic from the Banyanga (Zaire)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969). It is also synthesized in Roger D. Abrahams, *African Folktales* (New York: Pantheon, 1983), 240–94. The story of Sudika-Mbambi was reported by Heil Chatelain (*Folk-Tales of Angola* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1894), 84–97).

	Sudika-Mbambi (a twin)	Kalala Ilunga	Mwindo (a twin)
(1)	Father away at birth	Father away at birth	Father tries to kill Mwindo
(2)	Inborn supernatural abilities	Inborn supernatural abilities	Inborn supernatural abilities
(3)	Fights serpent being and crocodile monster	Fights, kills, uncouth uncle, the serpent-king, Nkongolo	Fights father; kills serpent being and swallowing land dragon
(4)	Rivals try to kill him with a pit trap ruse	Rivals try to kill him with a pit trap ruse	Rivals try to kill him with a pit trap ruse
(5)	Is swallowed by dragon, resurrected by twin brother	Is swallowed by dragon, but he resurrects others	Dragon tries to swallow him, but fails; he resurrects others
(6)	Becomes divine, with twin, becomes thunder and storms of east and west	Becomes king, brings iron, associated with storms and lightning	Becomes king, associated with copper; after conflict, lightning god is his benefactor

TABLE 1. COMMON EVENTS IN THREE TALES OF THE SUPERBOY HERO

fought.[106] And, by overcoming the dragon, all the heroes establish authority over nature, physical forces, and human life. A second item relates to rivalry for power; in all these stories the heroes are in conflict with their fathers or otherwise removed from him. This implies succession dispute. While the rivalry is muted in the Sankatana stories, it is evident in the version that has the mother try to poison him, but instead poisons the father. Third, as with the

[106] The earliest versions were reported by Eugène Casalis, first in 1841, then in 1861 (*The Basutos, or, Twenty-three years in South Africa* (London: James Nisbet, 1861), 347–50). These are in many ways anomalous. First, as Jacottet (*Ba-suto Lore*, 71) argued, Casalis misnamed the beast Kammapa/Khamapa, probably mishearing the Sotho word *khanyapa* (fabulous serpent being). That Khodumodumo is equivalent to a monstrous serpent being is also clear from Tswana perspectives, where the beast is called Sengongói/Lerurarua and described as a giant half-crocodile, half-snake (Willoughby, *Nature-Worship and Taboo*, 5–6). Casalis also makes his unnamed boy a prankster akin to Little Hare (*mutlanyana*) and the Xhosa/Zulu boy called Uhlanganyana, and thus lacks cosmological connotations. As Werner (*Myths and Legends of the Bantu*, 167) put it, the hero here "does not quite seem in character." Note also that published or online retellings that refer to Sankatana as "Moshanyana" are confused. Moshanyana just means "little boy" in the Sotho language.

other wondrous boys, Sankatana's rivals try to kill him after initially revering him. Interestingly, they use the peculiar method of attempting to get him to fall to his death in a pit trap. The presence of this apparently trivial detail in all three accounts suggests that it encodes a powerful historical memory. Indeed, historical sources show that a vivid connection can be found. This connection is with a royal investiture ceremony, known from Luba practice, in which a commoner was made to dance in front of a pit trap until he fell in and was impaled; the victim's blood was then used in medicines meant to empower the new king.[107] Thus, in being associated with the death pit, Sankatana is linked with both king and commoner. This dual connection is in keeping with the ambiguous feelings about sanctified royal power already suggested by the Serpent Being narratives that show both disdain and reverence for him.

Consider now Sankatana's cosmological associations. Here the Sotho stories reveal only one direct association, but others can be made from comparison with the central African stories. The direct cosmological association is with the sky, given in the version where Sankatana is killed and his heart ascends to heaven to be with the birds. This detail, which otherwise seems incongruous, makes logical sense if, like the other heroes, the boy hero Sankatana is seen as a sky divinity, one linked to lightning and storms. (Possibly relevant also is the belief that Basotho share with others of southern Africa that lightning is a kind of bird, *mamasianoke*, the hammerhead stork. But the Sankatana story and the other boy hero tales outlined here call into question Zuesse's claim that the hero represents the sun.) As a divinity of storms, Sankatana would serve as the paired complement to the divinities of the earth and the earthly waters associated with the serpent divinity and his ritual wife. Such an interpretation is also supported by the depiction of Bulane as a master of shiny metal, either iron or copper. This associates Bulane with both kingship and the divine, as "iron objects were used for royal investiture and as insignia for office in a greater part of sub-Saharan Africa."[108] Kings throughout central and eastern Africa were also symbolically deemed blacksmiths. The act of metallurgy was thought akin to magical transformation. For example, among the Songhai, it is the Serpent Being who taught smiths how to turn solid into liquid and back again, and smiths were said

[107] Thomas Q. Reefe, *The Rainbow and the Kings: A History of the Luba Empire to 1891* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 44.

[108] Shadreck Chirikure, "Metals and Society: Iron Production and its Position in Iron Age Communities of Southern Africa," *Journal of Social Archaeology* 7, no. 1 (2007): 75.

to be twins to the divine Nommo.[109] In the southern African context, it was said that the Sky God, closely associated with the power of thunder and lightning, provided the gift of both fire and metal.[110]

Conclusions

Witzel develops the interesting idea that societies may have "foundational topics" that endure over the generations and that shape the trajectory of their mythologies, with a myth so directed said to be following a "pathway dependency."[111] The examples he gives include original sin in Christianity and primordial obligation in India. Despite transformations and loss, when dramatic oral traditions are carried on in time there are likely enduring elements that reflect their origins and legacies of development. This paper suggests that we should also include the dragon controller of the waters and the hero dragon slayer as such foundational topics that have strong pathway dependencies in Africa and elsewhere.

From this perspective, the relevant question was asked by Maddock with respect to Australian serpent myths and their possible connection to others: "Is it right to assume that rainbow-serpent beliefs have an ancestral belief in common?"[112] Witzel argues that they do, and that this ancestral belief goes back deep into the Paleolithic.[113] But the pan-African narrative of a primordial python vomiting up the cosmos posited by de Heusch, or the all-encompassing serpent-dragons that Witzel finds to be common to many creation stories of the world, are not a feature of the story lines that are the

[109] Eugenia W. Herbert, *Red Gold of Africa: Copper in Precolonial History and Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 33–34.

[110] Irving Hexham, "Lord of the Sky—King of the Earth: Zulu Traditional Religion and Belief in the Sky God," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 10, no. 3 (1981): 276. Beliefs and practices associated with serpents and Serpent Beings continue to be of importance today in southern Africa. The following works are recommended for those interested in learning more of their role in contemporary life. Bernard, "Water Spirit Beliefs"; Bernard, "Messages from the Deep"; Seán Morrow and Nwabisa Vokwana, "'Oh Hurry to the River!' uMamlambo Models in the Eastern Cape, South Africa," in Drewal, *Sacred Waters*, 325–38; Rakotsoane, "Traces of Snake Worship in Basotho Culture"; Siegal, "Water Spirits and Mermaids"; Felicity Wood and Michael Lewis, *The Extraordinary Khotso: Millionaire Medicine Man from Lusikisiki* (Auckland Park: Jacana Media, 2007).

[111] Witzel, *Origins of the World's Mythologies*, 39.

[112] Maddock, "Introduction," 4.

[113] Witzel, *Origins of the World's Mythologies*, 387–88.

focus of this paper.[114] Rather, the Serpent Being stories here are localized rather than being about the creation of the cosmos. The contrasting images thus suggested are quite like those that existed in imperial China between the dragon of the heavens (*tian*) associated with the emperor's control of nature and the localized dragons often referred to as "Dragon Kings" (*Long Wang*) that were associated with smaller-scale communities and their concerns with local rain and local rivers.[115]

Mention of China here would be superfluous if not for the fact that we can make a direct connection between our Serpent Being story line and a parallel story line about sacrifice to river dragons in China. For example, the story of a Chinese community making a human sacrifice in the form of a ritual marriage of a beautiful young girl to the river dragon (*He Bo*) was famously recorded by the "Grand Historian" of the Han Dynasty, Sima Qian. He describes in his *Shi Ji* (circa 104–91 BCE) how a Confucian official of the earlier Warring States period abolished the ritual and replaced it with more realistic system of irrigation control. Reportedly, practice was for a girl to be pampered for ten days before being dressed in splendor and set adrift on her "bridal bed," only to be left to drown. Other reports indicate that similar practices can be dated back to the Shang Dynasty.[116] In more recent times, the esteemed folklorist and linguist Wolfram Eberhard found that the story line is widespread in the contemporary folk narrative of China's southern minorities and further into southeast Asia and that the ritual endured into recent times.[117]

Grafton Elliot Smith was indeed onto something when he noted the ubiquity of the maiden sacrifice theme associated with dragons. Yet, James Frazer described so many more parallel stories from throughout the New and Old Worlds of people sacrificing "brides" to water demons that they should give us pause.[118] His examples include far too many disparate people for the stories to be derived from a common source, no matter how ancient, especially as they do not fall neatly into Witzel's division of an African-South East

[114] Heusch, "African Religions."

[115] Qiguang Zhao, "Chinese Mythology in the Context of Hydraulic Society," *Asian Folklore Studies* 48, no. 2 (1989): 237.

[116] Anning Jing, *The Water God's Temple of the Guangsheng Monastery: Cosmic Function of Art, Ritual and Theater* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 131.

[117] Wolfram Eberhard, *The Local Cultures of South and East China* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969), 238, 380–90.

[118] Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 155–70.

Asian-Australian route of spread or a Indo-European-North Asian one (his "Gondwana" versus "Laurasian" pathways).

A better case can be made for the perspective that nature, when linked to human proclivities toward analogy and personification of natural phenomena, ultimately serves as a basic source for myth; and it is with "nature in mind" that the earliest religious expression came to be.[119] Here, I suggest, a plausible "cognitive naturalist" scenario is the following: (1) Serpent Beings (dragons) developed their peculiar features as mythological characters in the manner suggested by Blust, from the interpretation of rainbows.[120] This process not only associated serpents with rain and drought, but also with terrestrial waters and the powers of transformation. (2) Serpent Beings became associated with human sacrifice at rivers and ponds because these sites are potentially dangerous, sometimes very dangerous, and people drown at them. Human sacrifice was an attempt to establish a reciprocal bond with the unseen power causing the death. Rivers and ponds are also visible signs of the problem of too much water, flood, and too little water, drought. Death by drought and flood suggest a need to propitiate a powerful, unhappy, deity. (3) Rivers are doubly indicative of sexuality in that their flowing waters are analogous to female fertility while their undulating shape is phallic. Thus, given human tendencies to personify and conceive nature in terms of animate motive and emotion, it is to be expected that dangerous river sites be conceived as sexual beings with desires that may be frustrated. Combine these three factors together and you have the basic elements of the story line of ritual marriage to the Serpent Being, controller of the local waters.

Other naturalistic elements are relevant as well. The nature of rain, moisture, light, and caves themselves inspire peoples to conceive of rain similarly in terms of serpents and rainbows. Even the moon and stars are connected to serpentine forms in a naturalistic way, as when Native American, Arab, Persian, and Indian astronomical observers depicted the nodes of the lunar orbit associated with eclipses as the head and tail of a giant dragon[121] or saw constellations in dragon form.[122] These natural observations are sparks prompting the development of micromyths. Borrowing a term from the ge-

[119] Stewart Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[120] Blust, "Origin of Dragons."

[121] G. Azarpay and A. D. Kilmer, "The Eclipse Dragon on an Arabic Frontispiece-Miniature," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 98, no. 4 (1978): 363–74.

[122] Barber and Barber, *When They Severed Earth from Sky*.

ometry and mathematics of chaotic transformations, the micromyths then become intellectual "sinks" that consistently cast out memorable characters and events to be preserved amidst a whirlpool history of churning thoughts and experiences.

The above being said, there is also a strong case to be made for inter-societal contact. In contrast to the argument of Smith there is little credible evidence here for common origin from a single source.[123] However, it is unlikely that the Serpent Being story line was independently invented dozens of times in Africa among neighboring people. Clearly, people talked to one another and borrowed from one another's traditions. Hambly showed connections between West and East Africa going back to the early colonial period[124] while Roumeguère-Eberhardt demonstrated with her comparative analysis of Venda and Fulani myth that there were parallels between contemporary West and South Africa.[125] There may be insufficient information to comment adequately on potential links to North Africa, but the parallels with Amazigh rituals associated with the water spirit Anzar and his bride require some explanation. There even seem to be strong similarities to pre-Islamic Arabian religion, where the sun, the moon, and Venus were divinities, and the Moon God Wadd could be depicted in the form of entwined serpents.

We also are learning more and more about cross-cultural exchanges in prehistory, exchanges that even linked China with India, the Near East, and the East African coast going back to the fourth century BCE.[126] So, what I would hypothesize is that inter-societal contact since antiquity facilitated the spread of a story line independently invented in a few key, unknown, places.

With respect to the Sotho snake husband and the boy hero stories, the choice of pure independent invention seems more obviously inadequate. We know that there have long been borrowings between different African peoples and my analysis of shared mythic motifs in this story line provides a little more evidence about this. For example, the connection between the names Selemeng and Salima, as well as the shared factoid about death pit traps and kings, are significant little details that are supportive of the linguistic and archaeological evidence that indicates a heritage of contact between the ancestors of Basotho and those of Zimbabwe and Malawi and other of their

[123] Smith, *Evolution of the Dragon*.

[124] Hambly, *Serpent Worship in Africa*.

[125] Roumeguère-Eberhardt, "Mythical Python."

[126] Philippe Beaujard, "From Three Possible Iron-Age World-Systems to a Single Afro-Eurasian World-System," *Journal of World History* 21, no. 1 (2010): 1–43.

neighbors to the north during the era of the Mapungubwe state. Regarding inter-societal contact within other peoples, it is also clear that there has long been religious exchange between southern African Bantu-speakers and KhoeSan-speaking pastoralists and foragers. For example, the "Bushmen" who lived historically in Lesotho believed in underwater and subterranean beings as well as python spirits and magical abilities to control rain.[127] Furthermore, Bushmen contributed key ideas about divination and healing to southern Bantu.[128]

The shared symbolism of Serpent Being myths and practices also shows how widespread was the idea of gender complementarity with respect to the production of rain and an associated greening of nature. As the male element, the Serpent Being needs always to be complemented by his bride. In practice, this means also that python shrines always need their priestess wives and that rainmaking (as well as royal power) are based on a logic connecting women with the fluid fecundity of water. In the latter regard, as has noted, an explicitly sexual representation of rain and fertility in Africa has long been observed by ethnographers, although in the past they were reluctant to discuss the connection in depth.[129]

Of course, we should not only look for parallels. There were key differences. /Xam Bushmen of South Africa thought of gentle rain as female and the power of rain was associated with the flow of menstruation, with young women particularly associated with it.[130] In general, San rainmaking specialists worked by invoking the spirits of rain animals, which they attempted to steer in the sky. While these could be of serpents, they more typically were elands. Two other interesting contrasts can be drawn from the Étotilé people of Ivory Coast and from Nigeria's Oru Igbo who live near Lake Oguta at the confluence of the Niger and Ubashi rivers. Among the Étotilé, the lagoon water serpent Assoho can transform into a man, and he likes meat sacrifices, but he is mostly celebrated as a military protector, and a guardian

[127] Anne Solomon, "The Myth of Ritual Origins? Ethnography, Mythology and Interpretation of San Rock Art," *The South African Archaeological Bulletin* 52, no. 165 (1997): 3–13.

[128] W. D. Hammond-Tooke, "Selective Borrowing? The Possibility of San Shamanistic Influence on Southern Bantu Divination and Healing Practices," *The South African Archaeological Bulletin* 53, no. 167 (1998): 9–15.

[129] Todd Sanders, "Reflections on Two Sticks: Gender, Sexuality and Rainmaking," *Cahiers d'Études africaines*, no. 166 (2002): 285–314.

[130] Jeremy Hollman, ed., *Customs and Beliefs of the /Xam Bushmen*, The Khoisan Heritage (Philadelphia: Ringing Rocks Press, 2004), 129–130; 165.

of the fishing season[131] Among the Oru Igbo, the lake goddess Ogbuide is a benevolent rainbow who uses python as a messenger of her goodwill. She also is associated with seasonal regulation of fishing and agriculture, but is part of a larger cosmological system that includes an earth goddess and the (male) god of the sky.[132]

All this starts to look overwhelming, and, of course, can lead to wild speculation. Despite the fact that comparative research on snake and dragon lore has been ongoing for more than a century, much about their motifs and story lines remains open to question, challenge, and debate. It is hoped that this paper will have added a few more facts and hypotheses to be taken into consideration as this research develops in the future.

[131] Claude-Hélène Perrot, "Le génie Assoho dans l'economie et histoire des Éotilé," in *L'invention religieuse en Afrique. Histoire et religion en Afrique noire*, ed. Jean-Pierre Chrétien et al. (Paris: Karthala, 1993), 105–20.

[132] Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, *The Water Goddess in Igbo Cosmology: Ogbuide of Oguta Lake* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2008).