

# Aspects of the hero in the comparative mythology of Africa, Asia and Europe

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paper proposal, 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference, International Association for Comparative Mythology (IACM)

ABSTRACT: The hero is one of the most prominent themes in the mythologies of Africa, Asia and Europe. Major attempts have been made, in comparative mythology (Dumézil, de Vries), Graeco-Roman classics (Farnell, Fontenrose, Kerényi), psychiatry (Jung), anthropology (Lévi-Strauss especially for the Americas; Tegnaeus, Okpewho and Ford for sub-Saharan Africa) – but strikingly little in philosophy – to deal with the hero and his role in mythology. There has been a tendency in the literature to consider the hero template is an expression of the universal, unchanging human personality in a standard, constitutive role, e.g. as his mother's son (especially Jung, but elements of this can be found in most writers cited above). The long-range orientation that has prevailed in the emergent tradition of the Harvard Round Tables / IACM conferences, entails looking for typologies that can be more or less situated, on the basis of an empirical and typological argument, in space and time, against a time scale encompassing at least the entire existence of Anatomically Modern Man (200 ka), but more particularly from the Upper Palaeolithic onward (although in fact our datable evidence only dates from after 5 ka BP); against the background population genetics, long-range linguistics, archaeology and comparative ethnography offer additional inspiration, even specific models.

In my paper I will propose a number of models that may make it possible to add a time frame to the more universalising approaches to the hero, whilst retaining some of the insights these approaches have to offer. I appeal to a reconstruction that I have also invoked when seeking to throw some light on the emergence, spread and transformations of flood myths world-wide. I postulate (of course with only scraps of indirect evidence) that the Eurasian Upper Palaeolithic saw the succession to two major cosmogonies,

1. one hinging on the Separation of Water and Land (where Land was then apparently understood as emerging as the Only Son of the Sea as Virgin Mother, and for want of anybody else becomes her Lover),
2. the other, subsequently dominant, cosmogony of the Separation of Heaven and Earth.

I will argue, with reference to a number of specific cases from Africa, the Mediterranean, Northern Europe and the Ancient Near East – my grasp of the Asian material is too uncertain – , that much of the mythology of the hero (in fact, an amazing porporting of Old World mythology, *tout court*, from at least the Bronze Age onward) can be seen as transformations of (2) informed by the substrate ramifications of (1). An additional argument will be needed to explain how such mythologies ended up and gained dominance in sub-Saharan Africa, but this is a question I have repeatedly addressed in my recent work, and for which I have suggested a number of elaborately argued answers.