

COSMOGONY THROUGH DIVISION IN ROMANIAN AND WORLD MYTHOLOGY

ROBIN WILDT HANSEN*

ABSTRACT: In this paper, an interpretation is attempted of the Romanian myth, “Legenda despre zidirea lumii”. Parallels are drawn with tales such as Genesis, the Babylonian narrative of Marduk constructing the world from Tiamat, and the Norse story of Odin shaping the world from Ymir. In the Romanian myth, Satan's prideful omission to enunciate God's blessing as he collects sand results in the formation of varied terrains. His attempt to harm God inadvertently spreads divine blessings all over the world. Similarly, in Norse and Yoruba myths, stifling barriers and attempts at desecration lead to the paradoxical spreading of life and blessings, emphasizing the unforeseen outcomes of resistance to divine will.

KEYWORDS: cosmogony; cosmogonic dismemberment; cosmogonic sacrifice; “Legenda despre zidirea lumii”; Genesis; Romanian Mythology; Norse mythology; Babylonian mythology; candomblé; Santeria; Palo.

In the following, we will examine “Legenda despre zidirea lumii” [The Legend about the Walling of the World]¹, one of the best-known Romanian myths, and find analogies in myths from different parts of the world.

In “Legenda despre zidirea lumii”, God decides to “wall in” (*zidi*) the world. It is interesting to dwell on the meaning of this action, not only in concrete terms but especially in a mythological context. It seems significant that walls are structures that divide: they are structures that allow for distinction between different categories.

When, on the other hand, there is no distinction and no boundaries, then reality is undifferentiated. This is Chaos. We may find a clue here: as we shall see below, mythology in general seems to consider chaos as the primordial state out of which the world is created – or rather formed.

World mythology is awash with stories of creation taking place through division. In Genesis, perhaps the most famous example of this in our part of the world, God contends with *Tohu vaBohu*, the Hebrew words which are translated in the King James Version of the Bible as “without form and void” (Genesis 1:2). This is a fitting description of the primordial chaos which we have mentioned above. God creates the world (in the form that we know) out of this chaos, dividing it into

* Independent researcher

heaven and earth, making a division between the “waters above and waters below” and between male and female, to name only a few examples.

Moreover, the treasure trove of Romanian folktales contains several variations of this myth about the walling in of the world. At least one of them directly says that it is all about creation:

Come, let’s make a world,” God said. “Let’s,” said Nifärtache [Satan]. “Get in the water and take earth in my name,” God said. Nifärtache jumps in the water and says, “I’m taking earth in my name, not in yours.”²

In a more animist (and gorier) version of the theme of cosmogony through division, there are the many myths in which a primordial being is slain and cut up into little bits in order to create the Cosmos. One example is the Babylonian myth in which the god Marduk slays the dragon Tiamat. Another is the Norse myth in which the god Odin and his two brothers, Vili and Ve, kill and cut up the giant Ymir, making the world out of the various parts of his body.

In the Romanian myth, God calls His greatest angel, Satan, and orders him to go with Him to help Him wall in the world.

So, they go together until they get to the seashore. God tells Satan to dive to the bottom of the sea and get him a handful of sand, adding that it is very important that he says out loud “I am taking this for God” while picking it up. Satan dives, but when he takes the sand, instead of saying what God has told him to say, he says, “I’m taking for me and for God!” When he gets to the surface, he opens his hand and sees that the water has washed the sand out, and there is no sand left in his hand. God asks him why he cheated, and tells him to dive down again. From what we might call a theological perspective, a valid explanation might be that there is nothing without God. From a more animistic and magical viewpoint, which is probably appropriate for the time and context in which the myth arose, the explanation can be that when something is taken from nature with the purpose of using it for magical purposes, it needs to be consecrated – or perhaps, more correctly, its consecration needs to be respected, in that it is not enough to simply take the physical sand (by force, as it were); rather, the spirit of that sand has to remain – that is the sorcerer or priest has to persuade the sand’s spirit to come with him or her. This commonly takes place through the saying of a prayer and/or the placement of a coin or other object to pay for the branch, stone, sand or other object that has been taken.³

Satan dives once more, he tries to play the same trick and the same thing happens. He realises that he can’t cheat God this way. So he dives in a third time and takes sand for God in his hand, but he also hides some sand in his mouth. He comes up to the surface and gives God the sand from his hand. God spreads it over the world, and Satan thinks gleefully that he, Satan, still has sand in his mouth, while God has let go of all of *His* sand. However, now God declares that the earth should grow. With this, the sand that he has spread over the world grows – as far as

I can surmise from the context, it grows as fertile soil, although the myth is not specific about this – but the sand in Satan’s mouth also grows as earth. It grows so much that Satan has to spit it out in order to be able to breathe, and everywhere he spits, a mountain grows. God says, “Look what you’ve done!” and lies down to take a nap.

Why does God lie down to take a nap after berating Satan? It doesn’t seem like a natural thing to do. However it does signal how unconcerned God is by Satan’s adversarial actions. Furthermore, it calls to mind the passage from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, in which the poet says:

Whence,
But from the Author of all ill could Spring
So deep a malice, to confound the race
Of mankind in one root, and Earth with Hell
To mingle and involve, done all to spite
The great Creator? But their spite still serves
His glory to augment.⁴

Thus, for the level of understanding in which God is seen as a character in a story, it makes narrative sense that He would be sufficiently unconcerned by Satan’s actions that he would not be afraid of sleeping. However, on a mythological level of understanding, the “logic” transcends the level of the narrative: we would expect there to be a deeper meaning. I would argue that this deeper meaning can be found in the following:

The sand spread by God turns to fertile soil; however, the sand spat out by Satan turns to rigid mountains. This represents a less dynamic reality than the previous one. God, being everything, therefore stiffens to a certain extent, and this is represented by him falling asleep.

This part of the myth, in which Satan spits out the sand, calls to mind the Old Norse myth of the Mead of Suttung, (*Suttungsmjøden* in Danish and Norwegian). The mead is the necessary ingredient for inspirational genius. Odin goes to *Jotunheimen*, which may broadly be said to be the underworld, though the name literally means “Home of the Frost Giants”, and manages through trickery to steal the mead from the frost giant Suttung. He puts on his eagle’s plume, draws all the mead into his mouth and flies to Asgaard. Suttung puts on his own eagle’s plume and follows Odin in hot pursuit. When the gods in Asgaard see Odin approaching, they lay out large vats on the ground in the courtyard of Asgaard, and Odin manages to regurgitate the mead into the vats. However, before doing so, during the chase, a few drops fall to the ground outside the walls of Asgaard, and these are “the poetasters’ part”,⁵ that is the inspiration that the mediocre and false poets draw upon. It is interesting to note that only the parts of the mead that fell inside the realm of the gods serve as the inspiration of true poets. This seems to suggest that the inspiration for true poetry comes from the gods. The analogy with the Romanian myth is obvious: the sand that God spreads over the world immediately becomes fertile,

while the sand that Satan is forced to spit out turns to mountains. Now a mountain is a rigid, petrified structure, which seems like an apt metaphor for the productions of poets that do not have access to divine inspiration.

Now, as God was sleeping, Satan decided to kill him by throwing him in the sea. So Satan picked him up and carried him towards the seashore. However, by this time, the earth had grown so much that it reached up to the sky and the sea had disappeared, covered in earth. Satan then carried God to the other side of the earth, but also there the sea had disappeared. So in the end, Satan had no other choice than to lay God back where he had been sleeping.

It is interesting to note that the disappearance of the sea entails that the source of the sand is no longer there – we remember that Satan fetched the sand from the bottom of the sea. The fact that the sea dries up is another sign of the disappearance of fertility.

We find echoes of this in another Norse myth, which is also about walling in. It is the myth of the Master Builder who comes to Asgaard and offers to build an impenetrable wall, which would protect the gods from any assault that might come from the frost giants. In fact, in theory such a wall could even prevent *Ragnarok*, the end of the world. There is a drawback to the offer, however, as the Builder's price is very steep: in return for the impenetrable wall, he demands the Sun, the Moon and the goddess Freya.

The gods were tempted by the idea of the impenetrable wall, but they were simultaneously horrified by the price they would have to pay. Loki, the craftiest of the gods, said that they should accept the offer but only allow the builder a third of the time that he has demanded, and they should not allow him to get help from anyone. Furthermore, if he does not complete the wall in time, he will not get paid. The Builder agrees to the terms, but requests that he may use his horse, Svadilfari, to haul the stones for the wall. The gods agree. However, Svadilfari is no ordinary horse but a magical stallion with incredible powers. The Builder therefore works very fast indeed, and the gods start to fear that he will finish within the agreed time.

I would speculate that the Sun and Moon represent day and night – and thus the passing of time – while Freya represents fertility and love, and thus the passing of generations and the movement from one's own "walled-in" standpoint to that of the beloved, since love famously is what bridges divides. Again, we are brought back to the Romanian myth and the theme of the sand that turns to mountains instead of fertile earth when it is not imbued with the blessing of God – and additionally with God falling asleep and becoming less vital (as it were).

Thus, it is the essence of life itself that is endangered by the "protection" of the wall. And in fact, it is through love/fertility that the gods solve the problem. As we have seen, the Builder's magical stallion is crucial to his success. Now the stallion is a symbol of fertility – for obvious reasons. Loki, upon being threatened by the other gods, therefore transforms himself into a mare and lures the stallion away from its task. The two horses run away together, and the Builder runs after them.

However, the horses run all night, and the deadline passes, meaning that the Builder has lost the wager. In his rage, he goes to attack the gods; but the god Thor appears and slays him with his hammer.

“But Loki had such dealings with Svadilfari, that somewhat later he gave birth to a foal, which was grey and had eight feet; and this horse is the best among gods and men.”⁶ The horse that Loki gave birth to was called Sleipnir, and Loki gave Sleipnir to Odin as a gift. Sleipnir became Odin’s famous eight-legged steed upon whose back Odin travelled in all the nine worlds.

Returning to the Romanian myth, God wakes up from his sleep and Satan says, “Come, Lord, bless the Earth.”

“It is not necessary,” God replies. “I blessed it last night, when you carried me from west to east.”

This is again analogous to the myth we have just examined: the Builder (who was, of course, a frost giant in disguise) sets out to wall in Asgaard, ostensibly for “protection” but in fact to strangle the gods and take away their fertile life force. However, this cannot be accomplished without the work of the powerful, fertile stallion. Like God on Satan’s back bestows his blessings on the Earth when Satan tries to kill him, the stallion bestows its seed as it ostensibly works to accomplish the Builder’s intention to wall in and suffocate the gods. Thus, the result of the attempt to stifle life is in fact more life. Svadilfari impregnates Loki and makes sure that everything continues according to the laws of nature, which in the Romanian myth equate to God’s will.

It is interesting that Satan’s laborious attempts to oppose or even kill God only furthers God’s work (as addressed in the previously quoted lines from *Paradise Lost*). This theme of doing good as one seeks to do evil is seen in several myths around the world. For instance, there is the Yoruba myth of how the god, Obatalá, who only wears white, is killed and cut into little pieces and spread over the earth. The god Eshu, who is Obatalá’s perpetual nemesis, and was called Satan by the missionaries despite his positive attributes, sets out to pick up the pieces. He finds most of them, and Obatalá is put back together again. However, he doesn’t find many of the pieces, and they remain scattered all over the earth, giving rise to the saying that “Obatalá is everywhere.”⁷

Even more analogous is the myth in which Obatalá (here called Oshalufá, which denotes his avatar of advanced age) sets off on a journey to visit his son, Shango, in the town of Oió. Before leaving his own town, he visits a soothsayer, who tells him not to go. Oshalufa says that he will go regardless, and so the soothsayer counsils him to bring three sets of white clothes on his journey, and to accept calmly everything that happens to him on the road, and to comply with all requests. Oshalufa follows the soothsayer’s advice. He sets out on his journey. He soon meets Eshu along the way. Eshu asks him to help carry a great deal of red palm oil. He complies, and as he does so, he is unable to avoid getting his immaculate white clothes smeared red. Oshalufá being a white god, he must stay pure. He therefore

goes to the river and washes himself and changes into a new set of immaculate white clothes. This string of events repeats itself three times, so that he is wearing the last set of white clothes when he arrives at Oió. At the gates of the city, he encounters the horse that he gave his son Shango as a present. It is running free, so he catches it to bring it to his son. However, just then his son's guards appear in search of the horse. They arrest him as a thief and brutally throw him in the city's dungeon. Oshalufá follows the advice of the soothsayer and accepts everything calmly.

As Oshalufá rots in jail, the kingdom is struck by an infertility of both animals, crops and women. In desperation, Shango consults a soothsayer. The soothsayer tells him that an old man has been thrown in jail unjustly, and that this is his terrible revenge although he has never once complained. Shango immediately goes to the dungeon. To his dismay he finds that the prisoner is none other than his father, the great king, Oshalufá. He orders water brought from the river so that Oshalufá may be washed and given new white clothes. He himself dresses in white to honour his father, and he orders that the entire kingdom must dress in white that day. He carries Oshalufá around the realm, where Oshalufá is venerated by the entire population. Fertility returns to the kingdom.⁸

It is easy to see the parallels with the Romanian myth: Eshu tries three times to desecrate Oshalufá, just like Satan tries three times to take sand without doing so completely in God's name – that is without consecrating it correctly. Oshalufá accepts the unjust treatment calmly, and does not even protest when he finds himself rotting in jail. This is analogous to the way God sleeps as Satan tries to kill him. When Shango finds out that his father is unjustly in one of the prisons of his kingdom, he makes penance by making his entire kingdom wear white, and by carrying him around his kingdom on his shoulders, where he is celebrated. In this way, the blessing of the white god, Oshalufá, is spread to the entire land, just like the blessing of God is spread across the earth as Satan carries the sleeping God to the corners of the earth. At this point, fertility returns to the land, just as it does when Svadilfari impregnates Loki as a consequence of the Builder's bad intentions, and the mounds of fertile earth overcome the sea and the mountains as God blesses the earth through the adversarial actions of Satan.

NOTES

¹ *Basme din toate ținuturile românești*, p. 83–84.

² “Haide ș-om face pământ”, zice Dumnezeu. “Haide”, zice Nifärtache. “Bagă-te în mare și ia pământ în numele meu”, zice Dumnezeu. Nifärtache se bagă și zice: “Iau pământ în numele meu, nu într-al tău.” (Elena Niculiță-Voronca, *Datinele și credințele poporului român*, p. 20.)

³ I have observed this practice during my fieldwork in Brazil on the religion Candomblé, and in information gathered through my interviews with a priestess of the religions Santería and Palo from Cuba.

⁴ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 2, verses 380–385.

⁵ Snorri Sturluson, “Skáldskaparmál”.

⁶ Snorri Sturluson, “Gylfaginning”.

⁷ Reginaldo Prandi, *Mitologia dos Orixás*, p. 718.

⁸ Reginaldo Prandi, *Mitologia dos Orixás*, pp. 736–739.

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