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Away with the fairies: how old is human oral culture?

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The rapid pushing back of dates for early modern humans in the last decade has been quite startling. From around 90,000 BP, the frontier has moved to 300,000 BP. Humans probably left Africa by 120,000 BP, though whether this exodus was permanent is still debated. However, the evidence comes from fragmentary skeletal material. We have no evidence for the complexity of human culture in this period (or indeed for the next 250,000 years). A few years ago there was much talk among archaeologists of the beginnings of 'modernity', a slightly skewed concept in retrospect, a concept which tells us more about the present than the past.

While we are confined to material remains it is unlikely that much progress can be made on the social and cultural life of these early humans. But there are other types of indicator if we choose to pay attention to them, although they are not susceptible to the approaches that fill the pages of *Nature* and *Science*. But our imaginative life would be rather impoverished if this was the only measure of ideas about the human psyche. This essay is intended to suggest that oral cultures show deep connections

so specific that it is hard imagine they are coincidence or convergence. If so, then they can provide us with important insights into the outlook of these early modern humans.

Folklore is a much-despised genre in modern academia. It is considered antiquarian, sentimental and only suitable for mining by Disney films, thus hardly a serious academic discipline. Folklore narratives tend to be local, low-circulation publications often unaccompanied by analysis and often aimed at younger readers. However, considered more carefully in comparison with synchronic ethnographic data, they points to connections hard to explain without appealing to deep time hypotheses.

An example from Northeast India illustrates this point. The Idu, a people resident in the northeast of Arunachal Pradesh on the borders of Tibet, maintain a complex eschatology, a narrative of the journey of the soul after death.[1] The fate of the soul among the Idu is not significantly affected by the life of the individual, although those murdered and who die in accidents on the mountain must spend time in another part of the underworld. The journey involves passing along a series of locations which may broadly retrace the original migrations of the Idu. Then after traversing a lightless tunnel, the soul emerges on the bank of a river. The land of the dead is on the far side, and a ferryman must be sought and paid with a coin with which the dead person is supplied. On the far side of the river, the land of the dead is similar to the world of the living, with some minor differences in food and clothing, and entirely lacking in joyful celebrations.

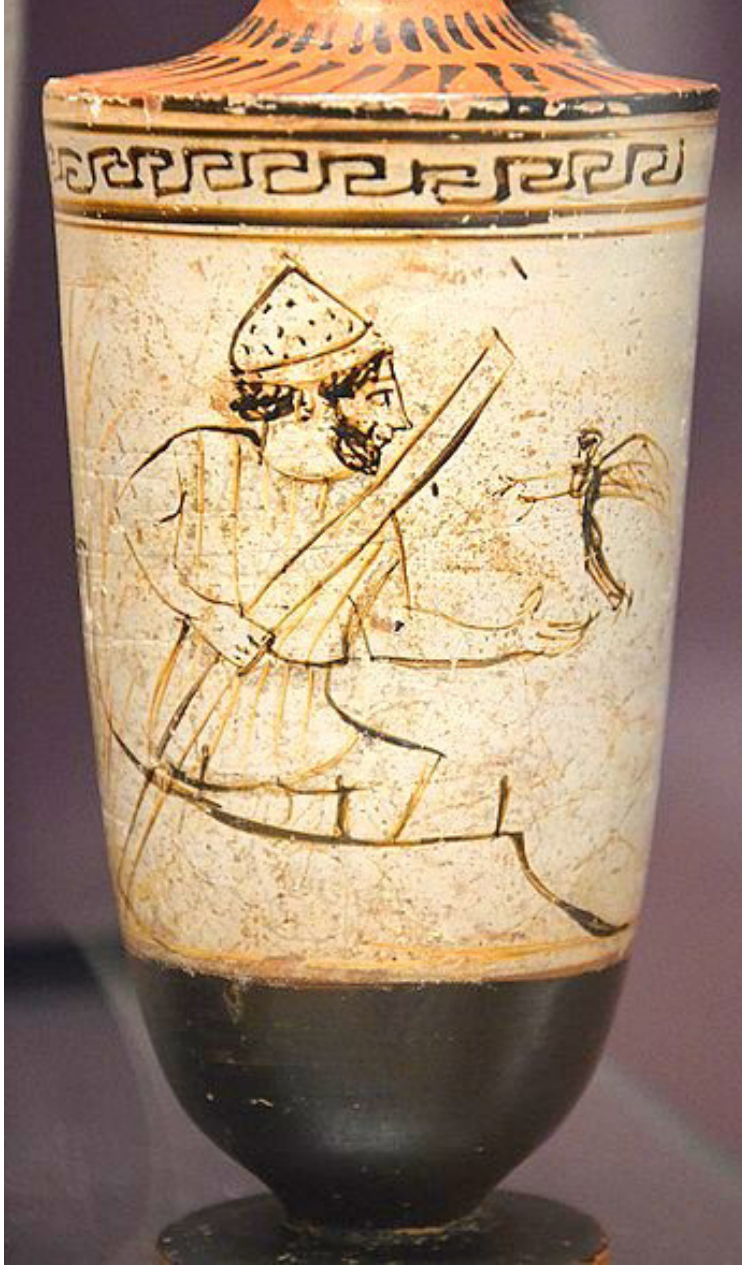

Photo 1. Charon welcomes a soul

Any classicist will recognise this narrative. Among the Ancient Greeks, the dead who have been neither particularly good or bad, arrive on the banks of the River Styx. The ferryman, Charon, accepts payment of an *obol*, a coin placed in the mouth of a corpse. Photo 1 shows

[1] All ethnographic data in this essay are cited from fieldwork by the author, and sources presented in more detail in full-length publications.

Photo 2. The red cabbage palm in Central Australia

a vase, now in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, depicting this scene. Once across the river, the souls enter the asphodel fields, which much resemble our world except that life is colourless and without joy.

These eschatologies are obviously remarkably similar. The explanation is not obvious since there is no traceable historical connection between these two regions, and no chain of related ideas in the intervening area. Unless we invoke coincidence or convergence it is difficult to imagine they do not represent isolated survivals of extremely ancient ideas which have elsewhere disappeared. Is this possible? Do ideas and descriptions survive largely unchanged over many millennia? Evidence from Australia suggests that indeed they do. A remarkable study by Sharpe & Tunbridge (1998) documents the survival of oral traditions which describe extinct animals, characterise lands that went under the seas more than ten thousand years ago and volcanic eruptions of similar antiquity. Even more remarkably, in Central Australia a cluster of red cabbage palms (Photo 2), *Maris livistona*, was previously thought to be a relic of Gondwanaland. It is now known to be an anthropic translocation from as long ago as 30,000 years which had already been identified within oral tradition (Kondo *et al*. 2012; Blench 2018).

If so, then a way of thinking about this is that there are indeed specific oral traditions which are part of a deep fund of human culture, which go underground and only surface at dispersed points. It is particularly easy to imagine this in Eurasia, where the noise of empires and the tramp of armies has a tendency to erase the uninterrupted transmission of culture.

The presumption of this essay is that these similarities are not convergence, that human beings do not have a 'natural' tendency to come up with the same ideas. This can be quite easily tested by comparing these ideas with the stories and ethnographic narratives of other continents, notably the New World, Melanesia and Australia. The correspondences discussed here have no parallels outside the Eurasia/Africa area, which seems to point to a common origin.

Africa is linked to Europe through a quite different tradition. In Central Nigeria, one of the persistent traditions which survives into the present are the narratives of encounters with bush spirits. Among the Berom and

Mwaghavul peoples of the Jos Plateau, people remain very fearful of these spirits, often associated with streams and ponds. They are malicious, and often wish to harm those who encounter them. For example, among the Berom, they are known as *cèng*, and look like mis-shapen humans, with the legs of animals or other transplanted body parts. The *cèng* make friends with children and persuade them to exchange limbs, so that the children become cripples. Encounters with the *cèng* can be positive, in the sense that people who meet them are given strategies to make them wealthy or help them acquire a wife. A man can appear suddenly rich, become a successful hunter or a highly productive farmer, without explanation. However, when they die, their riches or property will mysteriously vanish. Among their neighbours, the Mwaghavul, river spirits, *nyem dung*, pose similar threats. However, their capacity to offer supernatural skills to hunters or blacksmiths and to give teenage girls exceptional beauty encourages people to visit them, with the same dismal long-term consequences.

In this case, European folklore offers multiple parallels. Irish traditions are some of the best documented in this respect. The *Aos sí* (latterly fairies) are spirits which inhabit sacred places, a fairy hill, a special tree (often a hawthorn) or a particular loch or wood. Those who enter these spaces will cause the *aos sí* to retaliate. They are often spoken of indirectly, for example, as 'The Good Neighbours', 'The Fair Folk' etc. They have to be appeased with offerings, for example by gifts of milk or apples. Irish folklore is replete with *piseog*s, perhaps demeaningly known as superstitions, which describe how to treat fairies respectfully, for example not throwing water out at night without shouting a warning for the faeries to stand clear (Waters 2020). Before tasting their *poitín*, illegal distillers spill the first drop on the ground for the fairies. Another *piseog* involved the stealing of the farmer's last sheaf of the harvest, the *cailleach*, a plait of foliage attributed great power in rural areas.

According to how they are treated, the fairies can bring good luck or bad, misfortune or prosperity. But prosperity brought by fairies is always insubstantial and can disappear on a whim. A similar idea underlies *Das kalte Herz* (Heart of Stone) transcribed by Wilhelm Hauff (1827). The downtrodden glassblower Peter Marmot sells his heart to the forest spirit, Dutch Michael, in exchange for prosperity. All goes well for a time and

Photo 3. Peter Marmot and the Little Glass Man

then the prosperity suddenly vanishes.[2] Peter has to go to the forest in search of the Little Glass Man, Schatzhauser, who explains how to deceive Dutch Michael and reclaim his heart (Photo 3).

More examples could be cited, for example the contest described in the English folksong *The Twa magicians* (Child Ballad 44), where the two antagonists transform themselves into different animals in a battle to outwit one another. In Arunachal Pradesh, similar battles between shape-changing shamans are discussed as a matter of recent history and their consequences pointed out on the landscape.

The argument is that these correspondences cannot somehow have evolved recently either by diffusion or convergence, that they must draw on a common origin and must therefore be as old as the point before which these cultures were part of a single cultural inheritance. This should then be very early indeed, perhaps when the first movements out of Africa began to populate Europe, or when there was a zone of interaction which stretched between the Himalayas and Europe. This in turn argues that we must attribute a much richer culture to early modern humans than is usually envisaged by archaeology. That the users of Aterian points or the makers of Aurignacian stone tools would already have been engaging in a rich oral culture, whose roots can be detected in the present.

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[2] The British Government introduced legislation in 2018 to target riches that cannot be accounted for, the Unexplained Wealth Order (UWO). But by 2021 these seem to have been no more effective than the quest for faerie gold.