RESEARCH NOTE

The Dog Star and the Multiple Suns Motif

An Asian Contribution to European Mythology

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Various archaic peoples believed that warmth of the sky's brightest star, Sirius,[1] combined with that of the sun to produce summer's heat. Sirius is the "Dog Star" of the constellation Canis Major (the "Larger Dog"), so the days following its annual conjunction with the sun came to be known in the West as the "dog days of summer."

Today, in northern temperate latitudes, Sirius reaches its annual solar conjunction in July, at which time it becomes invisible to the earthbound eye. Two thousand years ago, however, it reached this conjunction in June, the shift being due to precession of the equinoxes. The ancient Romans, Greeks, Egyptians, and other peoples around the world were very well aware that Sirius, though unseeable in the sky during its solar conjunction, nevertheless was there in the vicinity of the sun just as the year's warmest season began. Some ancient calendars made Sirius's first heliacal rising, when it again becomes visible in the sky following its conjunction, a major event of the year.

Actually, the tradition that Sirius adds its warmth to the sun's to produce summer's heat is a variant of the Multiple Suns motif in mythology. Archaic Multiple Suns myths recounted how primal people once suffered having a sudden abundance of suns in the sky, parching or combusting the land. A typical example of the Multiple Suns tale occurs among the Miao peoples of the Pearl River basin, in today's southern China:

> In deep antiquity there were ten (in another version six) suns in the sky. At first they would take turns, appearing one at a time. But later they came to shine all at once, and it grew so hot that the crops parched to death.
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> Faced with this circumstance, the king consulted his savants, and they decided to have an expert archer shoot down the suns. The suns one-by-one were shot down, but the last sun avoided its arrow and entered the western mountains. Now, since the sun stayed there without reappearing, a long, dark night ensued and people suffered awfully.
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> Once again the savants met together to discuss the situation. This time they decided to command the animal with the loudest cry to call forth

the sun. The lion-dog and the golden cow tried to perform this task, but their voices were terrible; the sun still refused to come out. Finally the cock crowed, and the sun, wondering what creature could have such a beautiful voice, peeped out from the east.

The four quarters became lit thereby, and the people greeted the sun with cheers of joy. Ever since, the sun always rises in the eastern sky as the cock crows each morning (Matsumura 1955, 3: 72, my translation).[2]

The Multiple Suns motif could have originated from observations of either sun-rivaling fireballs dropping from the sky, or parhelic and anthelic objects (also called "sun dogs") glowing in the atmosphere.[3] Parhelic phenomena really do make it appear as though "all the suns came out at once," while brilliant fireballs might well suggest to the mind that superfluous suns can indeed fall from the sky. Actually, both kinds of phenomena could have worked together through long periods of time to inspire and maintain the motif in human lore—assuming, of course, that common autopsis of natural phenomena actually can play a role in tale origins.[4]

However, since in many cultures the celestial faculae we call stars were regarded as children of the sun or as possessive of sunlike fire,[5] the notion that the brightest star, Sirius, could add its warmth to the sun's also definitely evokes the Multiple Suns motif—which points to a third plausible origin of the motif.

So far, folklorists and historians of astronomy have overlooked the conceptual link between the Multiple Suns motif and the notion of Sirius contributing its thermal component to the summer, perhaps because the motif was not so clearly expressed in the documents of Western cultures as in those of Eastern and New World cultures.[6] Even some classical Roman writers doubted the tradition that blue-white Sirius produced sufficient heat to increase summer's temperatures (Schaaf 2002).

I sometimes wonder if we should have gained our Copernican revolution had the motif not faded in the West, or had it been as strong in the West as it was in South and East Asia. Had the archaic Multiple Suns motif insinuated itself into the classical Aristotelian system of scientific astronomy, then later on, heliocentricity might never have become widely perceived, and the Copernican revolution might possibly never have arisen to ignite the scientific passions that cooked up the modern world.

And then where should we be!

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NOTES

1. Sirius, a magnitude –1.5 star, probably got its name from a Greek word meaning "sparkling" or "scorching."

2. Ho Ting-jui gives synopses of twenty-nine additional examples from Asia and the Western Hemisphere (Ho 1967, II: Tales 1–31). Discussion of Chinese examples in Lin (1962); de Beauclair (1962); Chang (1963). Further Chinese example in Werner (1958, 182–88). Hmong example in Tapp (1989: 62). Pre-Hispanic Mesoamericans told tales of multiple suns: a comprehensive bibliography in Elzey (1976). A North American (Ute) example in Olcott (1914, 12–13).

3. See, for example, *Sky & Telescope*, March 1990, photo on p. 345. *Scientific American* ("Scheiner's Halo," May 1987, 51–52) shows a 1677 CE illustration of the rare Scheiner's halo with parhelia.

4. Extraterrestrial fireballs are an especially strong candidate for autopsis origins. Daytime fireballs have been recorded at –22 magnitude, rivaling the sun in both luminosity and apparent size, even casting daytime shadows! What, besides the sun, could such a phenomenon be compared with? How might a traditional archaic folk explain such a phenomenon unless more than one sun dwells in the sky? Note that a fireball's—sometimes perceived—thermal pulse to the ground occasionally does ignite a natural wildfire or firestorm, suggestive of the mythical ekpyrosis (combustion of the land) that, in lore, follows from an apparition of superfluous or superluminous suns!

5. For example, Captain Cook reported that on Tahiti the copulative solar eclipse resulted in stellar offspring; and Munda-speaking peoples (viz., Uraon and Santal) told of a nongustatory-endocannibal sun unwittingly dining on its children, the stars (Ōbayashi 1971).

Beyond the subcontinent, the Batak of Indonesia related a tale that is essentially the same as the Uraon and Santal tales (Knappert 1977, 152–54). Very ancient roots are also indicated: the Selk'nam of Tierra del Fuego, a people preserving an apparently little-tainted Mesolithic culture, transmitted a tale that seems to straddle the Superfluous-suns Destroyed motif and the motif wherein the sun destroys its kindred and then attacks the moon as repayment for deceit—which is remindful of the Uraon and Santal tales (Campbell 1983, I: 257–358).

6. Note that the Uraon and Santal myths mentioned in the previous note might represent an earlier form of the anthropomorphized Greek myth in which Atreus slaughters Thyestes' infant sons and serves them up for dinner, so that Thyestes unsuspectingly consumes the flesh of his own offspring (Burkert 1983, 104–105). Kerényi found an African folktale whose story line also resembles those of the Uraon and Santal tales. He successfully compared it with the conflict between Zeus and Prometheus in Hesiod's Theogony (Kerényi 1979, 69–70), suggesting to us that the motif had other forms in Greece. Seemingly, anthropomorphization has deprived the Greek myths of their original references—with consequences for Western civilization.

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