



van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 2020, The leg child in global cultural history: A distributional exercise in comparative mythology, at: http://www.quest-journal.net/shikanda/topicalities/leg_child.pdf

In this paper we shall address an interesting and wide-spread mytheme that nonetheless is little known outside the circle of comparative mythologists: the *leg child*. In comparative mythology, the leg child is a mythical anthropomorphic figure born from a human body otherwise than via the normal birth channel; cf. van Binsbergen 2018: 417, where I wrote approximately (text considerably adapted):

.... the mytheme of the leg child (NarCom 12b). This is a common motif, indicating a mythical figure who was born, not by passing through the normal birth channel, but through a thigh, armpit, waist, occiput or any other part of the human body except the birth channel. The type case is from Ancient Greek mythology, where Dionysus was sewn into his father Zeus's thigh, and born from there, after his mother Semele had been burned to death under the hot splendour of Zeus' lightning.(...) Quite a few mythical protagonists worldwide appear as leg children, including Ancient Egyptian Seth born from his mother's side, Thoth from his father's skull (Bonnet 1952: 702 f.), cf. Greek Athena from her father's skull (and when Hephaestus – who incidentally, as a smith was the very one to split Zeus's skull on that occasion – in sexual arousal ejaculated against Athena's thigh who in disgust wiped off the sperm with a handful of wool and cast it to the Earth, who immediately responded by producing Erichthonius [– by an ancient popular etymology, 'Wool-Earthy' – ,] this makes the latter also a leg child although he was reputedly borne by Gaia / Earth). Further: Tswana: Tintibane (Brown 1926); Algonquin: Malsum brother to Glooscap killed his mother by being born from her armpit. (...) Several culture heroes in Oceania / New Guinea are leg children. (...) The overarching Narrative Complex, 'From the Tree', appears to be an original cosmogonic / anthropogonic mytheme from Pandora's Box; it made it possible to imagine (not unlike immaculate, virgin birth, which has survived as a mytheme as is still a modern myth among Roman Catholic Christians) non-genital human conception and parturition, and apparently is revived in a narrative context when after the Flood the world needs repopulating but sexuality (which is considered, or implied, in many Flood myths to have been the occasion for the Flood in the first place) still has to be shunned. In such a context the leg child mytheme [– where offspring is produced in a plant-like fashion, as if from a seed, shoot, or pod – may be pressed into service, also because the alternative would be incestuous (hence the motif frequently occurs in Flood myths - Flood survivors are often very close kin: siblings of complementary genders), or because ordinary, genital reproduction would require two parents rather than the unique and dominant one (cf. Zeus, and the Christian God) favoured by myth. While covered under layers of 6th-7th c BCE Rabbinical male supremacy, Eve being born from Adam's rib (Genesis 2:21 f.) also makes even her a leg child.' In New Guinea, a famous 'leg child' has been Dudugera, appearing in tales from the Massom area in Papua New Guinea; and also mentioned by Oppenheimer 1998 – our point of departure in the consideration of Sunda effects. His name literally means 'leg child', and he was allegedly conceived when a divine dolphin brushed the thigh of his mortal mother when she went bathing in the sea. He grew up and rose into the sky to become the sun, scorching the Earth with such fierceness that his mother had to create the first clouds to protect

humanity (Cressey 1999; Cotterell 1989). Table 1 offers a referenced list of attestation of the leg child that have come to my attention:

no.	location	name	reference and notes
1	Europe, South East: Ancient Greece	Semele's unborn child Dionysus sewn in and born from Zeus' thigh	According to the common tradition, Dionysus was the son of Zeus and Semele, the daughter of Cadmus of Thebes (Homeric <i>Hymns</i> . vi. 56; Euripides <i>Bacchantes</i> ; Apollodorus, <i>Bibliotheca</i> , iii. 4. 3
2	Europe, South East: Ancient Greece	Athena from Zeus's head	Tzetzes 1601, <i>ad Lycophronis</i> , 355; Philostratus 1893, <i>Icon</i> . ii. 27;
3	Europe, South East: Ancient Greece	Erichthonius born from Hephaestus's seed which was wiped off Athena's thigh, subsequently fertilizing Earth ¹	Apollodorus, <i>Bibliotheca</i> 3. 14. 6 (
4	Europe, South East: Ancient Greece	Attis as bursting from Myrrhe's shrub	Frazer 1906; Pausanias, <i>Descriptio Graecae</i> ; Nonnus, <i>Dionysiaca</i> ; Ovid, <i>Metamorphoses</i> ; Ovid, <i>Fasti</i> ; Statius, <i>Silvae</i> ; Suidas, <i>Lexicon</i> .
5	Europe, South East: Ancient Greece	Hephaestus as thigh offspring of Hera (Hesiod (Theogonia: 927-928)	note that a leg child (Hephaestus) engendred another leg child (Erichthonius)
6	Oceania, Micronesia, Marshall Isl	Edao (child of creator god Loa	Edao's quest for immortality echoes the quests of Gilgamesh / Glaucus / Heracles'; Cotterell 1989
7	Oceania, Papua New Guinea, Massom area	Dudugera (<i>cf.</i> Oppenheimer 1998), the sun god; allegedly, his name literally means 'leg child'	he was allegedly conceived when a divine dolphin brushed the thigh of his mortal mother when she went bathing in the sea. He grew up and rose into the sky to become the sun, scorching the Earth with such fierceness that his mother had to create the first clouds to protect humanity (Cressey 1999; Cotterell 1989) ²
8	Africa, North East: Ancient	the god Thoth	born from his father's skull; Bonnet 1952: 702 <i>f.</i> ; also <i>cf.</i> Athena (Ancient Greece)

¹ In the context of Ancient Egyptian mythology, the obvious parallel is with the primal god Atum, who (according to some account: with the assistance of an *ad-hoc* goddess *drt*  or *ydt*  'Hand' (Hannig 2000: 1688) – which makes us realise that the Greek god Hephaestus, although apparently demoted to become a mere crippled god of artistic handwork, as god of fire may originally have been modelled after a primal god of creation (albeit not the Ancient Egyptian god Ptaḥ, as Blažek 2010 claims; van Binsbergen in press. There is probably also a link with the Biblical Onan (*Genesis* 38:9) who cast his sperm to the Earth rather than allowing it to impregnate his levirate partner, – and *cf.* Oan[nes], the primal god of Creation associated with Southern Mesopotamia but in fact mainly attested in a Syro-Palestinian Hellenistic environment (Cory 1828); referring to Temple 1976, Oppenheimer suggests that Oannes may be a symbolic of Sunda penetration.

² Persistent claims insist on Ancient Egyptian influence upon New Guinea (Perry 1923; Anonymous, Kariong, with references), even to the extent of claiming the existence of recognisable hieroglyphics inscriptions. The latter are easy to fake and may be forgeries. There is a hint of the story of Phaeton (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, II) in the New Guinea myth cited here., but as leg child (*cf.* Seth?) of a divine dolphin (Leviathan / Yam / Neith ? or *cf.* Biblical Jonah in the book of that name?) he has no obvious Ancient Egyptian or Ancient Near Eastern avatar. There is also affinity with the myth of Zeus scorching his mistress Semele to death while she was pregnant with Dionysus, and of the Japanese primal goddess Izanami being scorched at the birth of Kagutsuchi / Fire (van Binsbergen 2009 / 2017, with references; and 2012, where such scorching is interpreted as one element producing the other within the widespread cosmology of the cyclical transformation of elements.

	Egypt		
9	Africa, North East: Ancient Egypt	the god Seth / Suteh ³	born from his mother's side; Bonnet 1952: 702 <i>f.</i> ; Plutarch, <i>De Iside</i> , 12 Set is a god of the desert fringes, the wilderness, and foreign peoples ; from the treaty concluded between the Hittite king Hattusil and the Egyptian king Ramses II it is clear that Set is also a Hittite god. From the Early Dynastic period he was already venerated in the Delta (Bonnet 1952: 705 – thus corroborating the continuity between the Delta and West Asia; <i>cf.</i> Pyramid texts , see Seawright n.d.; Mercer Pyramid Texts: Utterance 222 §205a-b
10	Europe, South East: Ancient Greece	Pegasus	Perseus decapitated Medusa and the winged horse Pegasus sprang forth, along with his brother Chrysaor, in human form, both sired by Poseidon; <i>Hesiod, Theogony 280 f.</i>
11	Africa, Southern, Tswana	Tintibane	Brown 1926; Brown describes for the Tswana a pantheon that I find to display extensive Pelasgian / Aegean affinities
12	America, North : Algonquins (Hurons, Seneca, Iroquois)	Malsum	Cotterell 1989: 219; brother to Glooscap killed his mother by being born from her armpit ⁴
13	Asia, West, Bible World	Eve	born from Adam's rib; <i>Genesis 2:21 f.</i>
14	Africa, Central	woman created from knee of man [<i>cf.</i> Adam and Eve !]	Willis 1994: 22
15	Europe, South East: Ancient Greece	Pegasus	Perseus decapitated Medusa and Chrysaor sprang forth, along with his equine brother Pegasus , both sired by Poseidon; <i>Hesiod, Theogony 280 f.</i>
16	India	Indra	sprang from his mother's side in full armour (<i>cf.</i> Athena, from her father's head); Perry 1885; Gonda 1943: 312
17	Asia, West: Iran	hero bursting from his mother's side	Omidzalar 1984

Table 1. Referenced attestations of the leg child mytheme

³ Another unusual birth is that of the Ancient Egyptian god Thoth, who allegedly was conceived when Seth anally raped Horus; not only is the insemination (and birth?) channel unusual here, the case also claims pregnancy in, and birth from, a male *body*. Such 'hysterical' gender reversions are not uncommon in Ancient Egyptian mythology. Striking examples are when the male primal god Atum produces the first (divine) creatures through an act of masturbation (*cf.* previous footnote), or when humankind is considered to be 'the tears of the [male] sun god Re^c – claiming a procreative function that in natural reality is reserved for women. I take it that such a reversion is part of the gender reversion that, all over the Extended Fertile Crescent, takes place in the Bronze Age – when previously dominant goddesses are supplanted by male celestial gods, and banned to the women's quarters, the spinning room (van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011: Table 6.4, p. 142). In Babylonia, the sun god Marduk is a similar case: in order to prove his ability to lead the gods in battle against the destructive female water / chaos goddess Tiamat, Marduk is to produce a garment by the sheer power of his word – another appropriation of a female productive prerogative.

⁴ A similar case of a child killing his mother at birth is that of the Japanese fire god Kagutsuchi, who even though born along the normal passage, killed his mother Izanami by burning her genitals at birth (*cf.* van Binsbergen 2017; also *cf.* the Ancient Indian fire god Agni (Gonda 1943: 312), while in Uralic mythology a similar role is reserved for Iron as a mythical being. (Holmberg 1927; Tamminen 1928). These are East-West transcontinental continuities for which however a Sunda interpretation seems anachronistic.

Not exactly a leg child, but another variation on the theme of an unusual relation between unborn child and its mother, we find in traditions about the Buddha (Beck 1961): the unborn Boddhisathva rests in the body of his mother Maya, or daily descends into that body, where (in exaggeration of the actual, biological separation of a foetus from its mother's body in mammals including humans) he is surrounded by a screen of beryl (a precious stone) in order to prevent all possible pollution; (and denying the pivotal nurturative relationship between the mother and the foetus in the womb; the refusal to accept food from someone else is a major constitutive aspect of the high religious status of brahmanhood in Indian cultures) Brahma feeds him regularly one drop of honey, so powerful that no other person could taste from it without perishing.

The implausible claims of Egyptian presence in Oceania and in Australia would be one – albeit counter-paradigmatic! – way to account for East West parallels between the Indo-Pacific / Oceania on the one hand, and the western Old World on the other, without recourse to the Sunda hypothesis.

Let us note that the leg child mytheme is fairly heterogeneous: producing a child from the skull (Zeus/Athena) is quite different from producing one from the calf (Zeus / Dionysus).

If we can resign ourselves to treat the attestations – despite their manifest heterogeneity – as constituting one consistent category, what strikes us is the paucity of attestations, making any interpretation hazardous⁵ With so few attestations, it is dangerous to propose a historical reconstruction. However, an historical reconstruction in Sunda terms would best fit both the paucity and the far-flung distribution – albeit that such an explanation forces us to consider the possibility of trans-Atlantic myth diffusion. Considering the time depth of attestation it is also possible to think of an Egyptocentric emergence and diffusion.

In principle, however, regardless of the actual geographic distribution, a Sunda effect may also be contemplated because of the fact that, with the possible exception of the N. American Algonquins, all attestations could be interpreted as lying on the path (*e.g.* the African cases), or rather at the far ends, (Marshall Islands; and Papua) of the hypothetical Sunda migration (*cf.* van Binsbergen 2019, 2020). The mytheme of the leg child is best attested in Ancient Greece (birth of Athena, Dionysus, Erichthonios, Pegasus), which could be regarded as the far end of Sunda influence (either through the Persian Gulf, or up the Mediterranean eastward from the Pillars of Hercules / Gibraltar) – note the genealogical and topographical linkages between these mythical characters which are compatible with a common maritime connection: Athena as implied companion of the sea god Poseidon at Athens; Athena as a sea god in her own right (as argued in van Binsbergen 2011; Pegasus as son of Poseidon and Medusa; Erichthonius as virtual child of Athena at Athens; Dionysus with multiple maritime including pirate connotations. And even the Algonquins might be included here: the mighty

⁵ In my recent book on Durkheim (2018) I have used the reconstructed *Borean linguistic material (*cf.* Starostin & Starostin 1998-2008) in order to access the oldest attainable layers of religious imagination. Here we have to reckon with the factor of tabooed words and concepts, which are the more likely to occur the more sacred the items in question were at the time. The relative paucity of leg child attestations may readily be interpreted in terms of the relative late appearance of this mytheme (hence my proposal to situate it in Neolithic or Bronze-Age times), but we may also suspect that the mytheme is in fact much older but that it was so tabooed that it could scarcely be transmitted to posterity – except in specific contexts such as a secret initiatory cult where it would be effectively shielded from transgenerational transmission, or a secularising context such as that of classical Greece, where the rational deconstruction of religious beliefs reached relatively high levels.

St Laurence River connects them with the Atlantic Ocean. However, when below we turn to consider the actual global distribution, we shall see that there are not enough East attestations to make a Sunda explanation very attractive. The Sunda-based reconstruction may be in line with Oppenheimer 1998 – yet the idea initially struck me as preposterous that, although totally unattested in Sundaland itself, the mytheme could have originated there and could have caused the numerous attestations at the other end of the globe in the Egyptian / Aegean region.⁶

We hit here on a point that only late in my preoccupation with Sunda registered with me to its full extent, and that therefore could have received more explicit attention in this book's argument. Part of the Sunda Hypothesis is that the maritime carriers of Sunda genes as well as linguistic and cultural traits were on the run for the flood inundating their homeland in South East Asia; we have so far assumed that Sunda traits would have to have remained detectable in present-day South East Asia. On second thoughts this is a fairly naïve assumption. The postulated Sunda outmigration is supposed to have taken place mainly before the emergence of the Indus Valley cultures, Sumer, Ancient Egypt – proposed destinations of Sunda impact. However, whereas we can today rather fairly reliably reconstruct the languages of Ancient Egypt, Sumer and the Indus by the Early and Middle Bronze Age, this knowledge is entirely due to scholarly research of the last two centuries, before which no reliable data were available for Egypt, and Sumer and the Indus were even totally forgotten. When the British held sway in India, less than two centuries ago, the existence of Buddhism on India soil, and the birth place of the Buddha had likewise gone into oblivion, across a time interval of scarcely two millennia (Allen 2002). Minoan civilisation had to be rediscovered from scratch scarcely a century ago, across a time interval of barely three millennia (Evans 1921-1964). The largely Basque background of the North Sea populations of the British Isles and the Netherlands could only be reconstructed by state-of-the-art molecular genetics research (Oppenheimer 2006). What I am saying is that, *precisely if the Sunda Hypothesis cuts wood (and the present book asserts that it does!), we must not cherish the illusion of finding recognisable, present-day Indonesian traits at postulated Sunda destinations in Western Eurasia; nor finding identifiable and convincing West Eurasian traits, alleged to be due to Sunda, in present-day South East Asia.* The Sunda people may have fled without leaving manifest genetic, cultural and linguistic traces in their former homeland – where after the dramatic rise of the sea level hence massive flooding or previously inhabited sites, and after half a dozen millennia, such traces would have become unrecognisable by cultural and linguistic drift, the arrival of dominant newcomers, etc. In this way the concept of *Phantom Voyagers* (Dick-Read 2005) becomes a true shibboleth of Sunda studies. We are beginning to understand why, whatever lists of genetic and cultural indicators of Sunda we may be tempted to draw up, in the last analysis our data will fit such systematics only very imperfectly.

⁶ On second thought the situation is not so preposterous as all that: if the proto-Indonesian fled the flooding Sundaland at the beginning of the Holocene, c. 10 ka BP, and if this process continued for some millennia, the likelihood that their cultural, religious and mythological traits may still be detectable in recognisable form in modern Indonesia is as small as the likelihood that the inhabitants of North-western Europe still demonstrably speak the language and pursue the rituals of the megalith-builders that preceded them by several millennia, or that the language and culture of the Ancient Sumerians still demonstrably, strikingly, determine the present-day socio-cultural landscape of Southern Iraq. Sunda is a construct, and its specific traits cannot be readily reconstructed from a contemplation of present-day South East Asia (even though the latter assumption was Oppenheimer's 1998 leading thought).

The leg child motif may also be interpreted in a very different way. In reconstructed *Borean, there are two pairs of consonantal homonyms that refer to both ‘morning’ and ‘leg’ or ‘thigh’. Although more direct indications in the form of rock art depictions are so far lacking,⁷ there are distributional indications that in the Central Asian Upper Palaeolithic (when and where African and Amerind cultural and linguistic strands had not yet separated) new-born children were dedicated to the early morning sun. Very much later, the custom is mentioned in the *Institutes of Vishnu* (1880-1910 / 1988, ed. Jolly, p. 114), and attested in Ancient Egypt (Stricker 1963-1989; Renggli 2000) and also described for Bantu-speaking South Central Africa (van Binsbergen 1988, 1992: *Likota Iya Bankoya*, where the Nkoya King Kayimbila (c. 1800 CE) thus dedicates his newborn child in the morning sun ; cf. Mutumba 1972) but also newborn babies among the Hopi (Niethammer 1995), and in general neophytes in the Nadene-speaking Amerindian female puberty initiation (which ritually re-enacts a birth) are thus dedicated. in *Borean times we are still before the emergence of the ‘upward gaze’, and instead of dedication to the sun, we may read ‘dedication to the Primal Waters in their ‘above’ aspect, i.e. to the sky’. The myth of the leg child might then have arisen because of deliberate punning, or accidental confusion, or the effects of a linguistic taboo, of the two meanings involved: ‘morning’ and ‘leg’. Cf. reconstructed *Borean:

*(CVKV) _n , with various meanings		*(PVKTV) _n , with various meanings	
*(CVKV) ₁	‘arm, leg’	*(PVKTV) ₁	thigh
*(CVKV) ₂	‘morning, evening’	*(PVKTV) ₂	morning
*(CVKV) ₃	‘white’		
*(CVKV) ₄	‘dirt, faeces’ (possibly a paired opposite with (CVKV) ₃)		

Table 2. Possible *Borean background of the leg child concept

The distribution is very similar to that of NarCom 12a (Fig. 12.1), and the same overall argument applies, including the suggestion that the origin may lie in the New World.

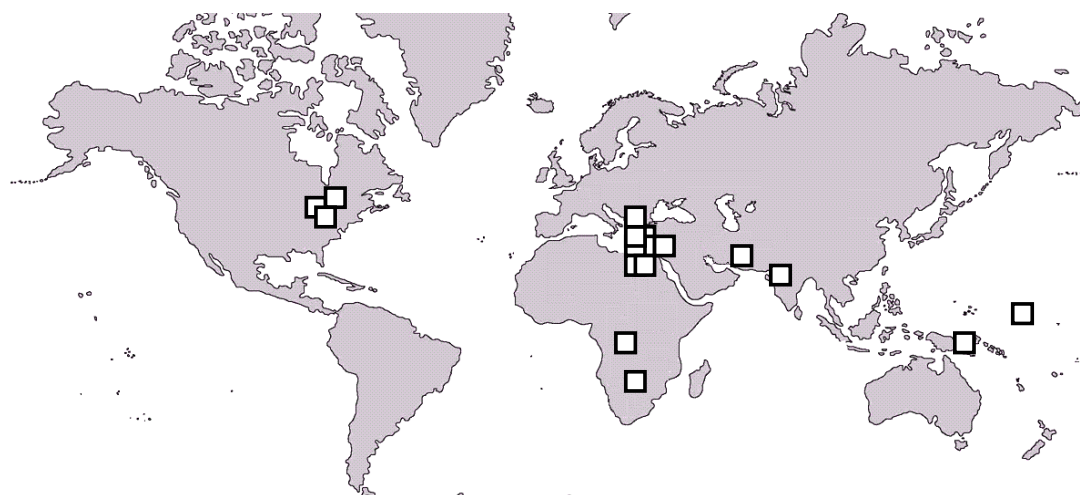
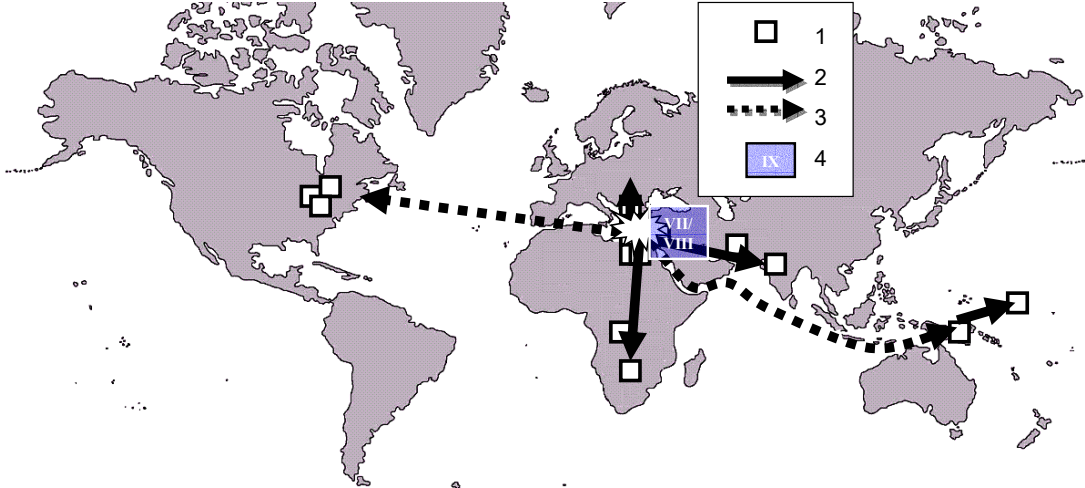


Fig. 1. Global distributions of the mytheme of the leg child (NarCom 12b)

⁷ Solar elements are abundant in Central Asian rock art, for a few examples cf. van Binsbergen 2019: 348 f., but none have so far been interpreted, as far as I know, in terms of infants being dedicated to the morning sun.

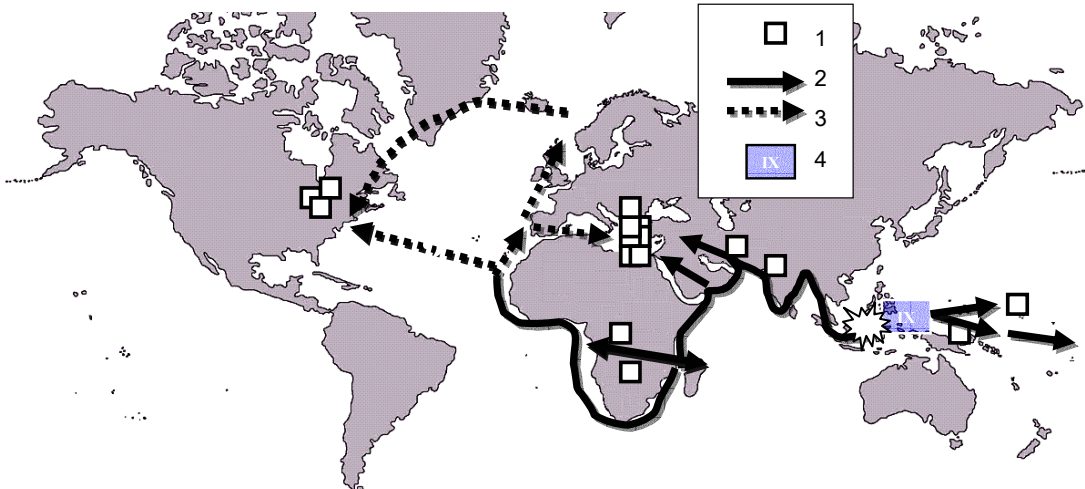
However, the limited number of attestations on a global scale, and their extreme concentration in the Egyptian / Aegean region, suggests the mytheme to be of fairly recent origin, i.e. belonging to the CITIs VII or VIII. Accepting the affinities between the Tswana and the Egyptian / Aegean pantheon, and considering as remotely plausible the claims as to Egyptian / Phoenician impact upon the New World (Heyerdahl 1952; Gordon 1968) and upon the Indo Pacific and Oceanian regions (Perry 1923), we obtain as possible historical reconstruction:



LEGEND: 1. attestation of trait; 2. proposed diffusion; 3. as (2) but even more putative; 4. CITI

Fig. 2. Global distributions of the mytheme of the leg child (NarCom 12b) from an epicentre situated at CITI VII or VIII.

The abundance of Egyptian / Aegean attestations, as against the paucity of Oceanian ones (and none from the Indo-Pacific region) should not deter us (for reasons given above: total outmigration from the homeland half a dozen millennia or longer ago does not necessarily leave detectable traces in the homeland!) to explain the global distribution of the leg child mytheme in Sunda terms; the following diagram is an attempt:



LEGEND: 1. attestation of trait; 2. proposed diffusion; 3. as (2) but even more putative; 4. CITI

Fig. 3. Explanation of the global distribution of the mytheme of the leg child (NarCom 12b) in Sunda terms, as if emanating from CITI IX – despite the paucity of recent attestations of this NarCom in

In conclusion, the global distribution of the leg child mytheme to a limited extent warrants an interpretation in terms of Sunda transmission.

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