

## THE ROLE OF WATER IN SOME CHADIC TALES

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In the following paper the function of water in a collection of Chadic tales will be analysed. The narratives were collected by H. Jungraithmayr between 1971 and 1978 in the Gera district of the Republic of Chad. The occurrence of water will be examined in 41 Mokilko tales which have been the base of a larger research project on oral literature in three Chadic languages (Mokilko, Migama and Sumray) at the Professur für Afrikanische Sprachwissenschaften, Universität Frankfurt, from February 1989 to January 1993, financed by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft.

For this purpose every incidence was marked where water occurs in these tales either in the form of a drink, or as a river, a pool, a well or the sea, or as rainfall. It turned out that there are only 9 tales in the whole collection where no water is mentioned at all, out of which 5 have "fire" as an essential motive. But though water is mentioned in most of the tales, in only two tales it is part of the main theme:

1. the tale about the two hunters who are looking for water (see for an analysis: ADWIRAAH 1991),
2. the tale about the girl who falls into the water and changes into a fish (see JUNGRAITHMAYR 1981: 93-97).

In all other tales water is only a narrative element of stable but secondary importance.

The motives in which water occurs can be grouped as follows, according to their number of occurrence:

1. to drink water or to offer water to a person,
2. to give water to an animal,
3. to go and fetch water,
4. to reach a water place, a river or a well (on the way),
5. to meet a strange, supernatural being near the water place,
6. to wash or soak something or someone,
7. rainfall (caused by God),
8. to fall or to be pushed into the water,
9. to be killed at the water place,
10. to need (hot) water after someone has given birth,
11. to change into rain and whirlwind in order to flee.

On which levels of interpretation do these motives appear? On the one hand, as water is an essential element of every day human life it is part of the real environment where the action of a given tale takes place, for example:

- Because two hunters feel thirsty and exhausted after a long unsuccessful day they are looking for a pool (T 1).
- A stranger who arrives at a compound is offered some water to drink (T 24).
- A she-dog who returns home without her mistress is given water before the girl's relatives start to search for her (T 37).
- After the arrival at her new home the young wife has to go to fetch water (T 23).
- The well has a social function, too, it is the place where people can meet (T 15).
- Before the orphan girl who is lost in the wilderness can cook some roots for her brother she needs water to clean them (T 30).
- As the rain has started a woman goes to her farm in order to plant (T 32).

On the other hand water is also a basic element of the phantastic fictional world of the tale. The water place is the place where miracles happen, where man meets the supernatural and where danger is waiting:

- When the tick arrives at the water place, he asks the women for water, only one of them offers him some and is rewarded by jewellery coming from his mouth (T 17).
- Magic water, which they drank from her pot, allows Death to arrest the fleeing horses (T 31).
- At night the orphan girl meets a speaking lion near the river who threatens to devour her (T 28).
- After a supernatural birth at the finger the new born baby falls into a pool, only the wasp can drink up all the water and rescue the baby (T 14).
- The lizard-husband, whose secret has been revealed, is killed at the well when giving water to his horse (T 22).
- The brother who has been killed by his sister's ghost-husband near the river changes into a bird (T 24).
- When fleeing from the ogre a girl and her friend change into rain and whirlwind (T 25).

Water is often mentioned in connection with trickery when the clever one tries to dupe his opponent:

- The lion who has been tricked by the squirrel falls into the well when trying to drink (T 10).
- On a visit the hare is sent back to the river to fetch sand while the hyena drinks all the beer offered to them by his in-laws (T 7).

- The squirrel pretends to have fallen into the pool in order to wash his bottle secretly while hyena misses the chance to wash his, so the milk in it spoils (T 8).
- The squirrel and God bet: God cannot fill his vessel with water. God sends heavy rain, but the vessel cannot be filled because it is a sieve (T 11).
- The raven allows the squirrel to fly to the sky on his back, when they have arrived he lets him fall into the sea (T 10).
- The liar makes the villagers believe that he received a herd of cattle from the bottom of the sea, now they all jump into the water and are drowned (T 32).
- By pouring out water for his father who has allegedly given birth, the squirrel reveals the lion's injustice (T 5).

Though I differentiated the three levels (real life, supernatural occurrences and trickery) in order to demonstrate the role of water in the narratives, the examples show that within the world of the tale these three aspects are inseparable. The setting of the tale is within the natural environment and real social life of the people, but human beings, supernatural beings and animals interact. It is this phantastic and often humorous character of the tale rather than its realistic elements that attract the attention of the audience.

Finally after this survey of the occurrence of water in H. Jungrathmayr's collection of Mokilko tales we shall analyse one tale whose theme is centered on water: The story of the girl Jintalma who is thrown into the water and changes into a speaking fish (T 41). It was told by Ayya, a young woman about 25 years of age in N'Djamena (see JUNGRAITHMAYR 1981:250). Here too, the phantastic aspect is predominant, a complete metamorphosis from human being to animal takes place when the girl is surrounded by water. It can only be revised when the same conditions exist. The fish has to be put into several vessels filled with water before it changes into a girl again.

Let me first give a short summary of the tale:

The very beautiful girl Jintalma, who attracts many suitors, is asked by her girlfriends, who have no suitors, to go swimming with them. After several excuses - she always argues that she has some work to be done for her mother - she cannot help but accompany her friends. At the water she is alone and obviously isolated from the other girls, as the narrator explains (T 41, s. no. 19): "They went there and as they were swimming, swimming, swimming, swimming and swimming, she was the only one without a sister". The girls envy her and push her into the water, there she is drowned, but she does not die and changes into a fish. When her father comes there to catch fish she jumps into his net and calls him in a song: "My father take me carefully! I was in the water, I am Jintalma." But her father does not recognize her, he

says he has never seen a speaking fish before, so they should kill it and cut it into pieces. Though even the pieces appeal to the father again and later appeal to Jintalma's mother three times as well, both parents refuse to help because they know that speaking fishes do not exist. So they cut and cook the fish. Only her brother takes a piece of it to his grandmother. She listens to the fish's song, places it into several pots of water and on the following morning the fish has changed into a girl again, who is even more beautiful than before. At the end of the tale Jintalma's father visits the grandmother, there he is attracted by the beauty of the girl, but still does not recognize her as his daughter. So he makes a serious mistake and asks the grandmother to allow him to marry her. Now Jintalma gets angry, she takes a stick and beats him. Finally she blames the whole family that they did not listen to her appeals. Now they all regret and start crying because they are so happy that they got their daughter back.

This tale cannot be understood as a story of real life: in real life a father cannot marry or even attempt to marry his own daughter. A daughter cannot beat up her father, parents would normally recognize their daughter and a girl cannot change into a fish. Moreover the tale appears cruel to us, how can these girls kill their comrade by throwing her into the water and why do the parents not listen to their daughter's appeal and cut her into pieces? All this shows that it is obviously a phantastic fictional story which must be understood on a symbolic level.

The following attempt to interpret the tale is based on Erich Fromm's work *The forgotten language. An introduction to the understanding of dreams, fairy tales and myths*, where he explains the universal symbolic value of fire and water and finally analyses the story of Jonah, the unwilling prophet who is swallowed by a fish. He writes: "The story is told as if these events had actually happened. However, it is written in symbolic language and all the realistic events described are symbols for the inner experience of the hero. We find a sequence of symbols which follow one another: going to the ship, going into the ship's belly, falling asleep, being in the ocean, and being in the fish's belly. All these symbols stand for the same inner experience: for a condition of being protected and isolated, of safe withdrawal from communication with other human beings". (FROMM 1952:29)

The story of Jintalma is also talking about an individual who feels isolated and different from the people around her. Her beauty and the intention to work for her mother expressed in the beginning of the tale are an image for her positive traces of character, she is a "good girl". But nobody is close to her: the other girls envy her, she has nobody who is like her, as the sentence "she was without a sister" (repeated two times in the tale) expresses. Her loneliness gives her an experience unknown to all the others. Her retreat inside her own self is as if she

leaves the normal environment (which she shares with others) and lives in another element (symbolized by the water) where she fits "like a fish in the water". There nobody can reach her unless she herself is looking for contact (she jumps in her father's net). Even her parents who seem to be very realistic people (they do not accept that a fish can speak - and who would?) are excluded from her inner experience. But the girl's painful isolation (she is cut into pieces) does not last forever, it is only a transitional stage. Finally she finds people to help her, her brother and her grandmother. The grandmother accepts her difference of character (she puts her back into the water) and gradually (from one pot to the other) helps her to get adopted to the normal world, where finally she appears more mature and beautiful than before, so that the father (a symbolic figure for all men) falls in love with her. But after she has overcome her isolation she is able to articulate her problem and reproach those who did not mind her before (beat the father). She is now accepted and loved by her family, a symbol of the society.

Water in this tale symbolizes as explained above a condition of inner isolation, it is an element of transition. The analysis of the story about the girl who falls into the water and changes into a fish shows that in order to understand the occurrence of water under phantastic circumstances in tales one must attempt a symbolic interpretation.

## REFERENCES

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