

N.A. Manichkin French Institute for Central Asian Studies, Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic
e-mail: nes.pilawa@gmail.com**«THE SIGN OF THE COW»: LUNAR SYMBOLISM
IN OLZHAS SULEIMENOV'S HISTORIOSOPHY AND
WEST AFRICAN MYTHORITUAL PRACTICES**

This article examines a hypothesis put forward by Olzhas Suleimenov, a Kazakhstani poet, thinker, and researcher of ancient symbolic systems, regarding the primacy of lunar symbolism and its connection to early forms of sacred thought that originated in Africa and were expressed through the image of the crescent moon, the “sign of the cow.” The purpose of this article is to test this historiosophical hypothesis. The research material consists of published ethnographic, mythological, and religious studies sources on the peoples of West Africa (the Fon, Ewe, Ouatchi, Yoruba, Igbo, and others), as well as field data collected by the author during an expedition to the southern regions of Benin and Togo in 2025. The study is based on a comparative-mythological, structural-semiotic, and cross-cultural analysis of mythoritual complexes. Particular attention is paid to ethnoastronomical data, ritual practices, and narratives that reflect the rivalry between solar and lunar principles in local ontologies. The scientific novelty lies in the first systematic verification of O. Suleimenov's hypothesis using material from West African religious traditions and drawing on contemporary field data. It has been established that direct mythologems identifying the crescent moon with animal horns are rare; however, there are consistent structural and functional parallels between lunar and bovine symbolism. At the same time, narratives of the mythoritual beneficence of the Moon – symbolizing life-giving and maternal forces – have been identified, as well as ambivalent and negative narratives in which the Sun is associated with antisocial behavior, cannibalism, witchcraft, and retribution for violating social norms. The conclusion is drawn that Suleimenov's concept has partial heuristic value, provided that rigid climatic determinism is rejected and regional variability in African cosmologies is taken into account.

Keywords: Olzhas Suleimenov, lunar symbolism, West African mythology, Vodun, Orisha, cosmology, horns, Sun and Moon, myth-ritual practices, historiosophy, structural anthropology

Н.А. Маничкин

Орталық Азияны зерттеу жөніндегі Француз институты, Бішкек, Қырғыз Республикасы
e-mail: nes.pilawa@gmail.com**«Сиыр белгісі»: Олжас Сүлейменовтің историософиясындағы
ай символикасы және Батыс Африканың мифоритуалдық тәжірибелері**

Бұл мақала қазақстандық ақын, ойшыл және ежелгі символдық жүйелерді зерттеуші Олжас Сүлейменовтың ай символикасының басымдылығы мен оның Африкада пайда болып, «сиыр белгісі» деп аталатын жарты ай бейнесі арқылы көрініс тапқан алғашқы қасиетті ой формаларымен байланысы туралы гипотезасын қарастырады. Мақаланың мақсаты – осы тарихософиялық гипотезаны тексеру. Зерттеу материалы Батыс Африка халықтары (фон, эве, уатчи, йоруба, игбо және басқалар) туралы жарияланған этнографиялық, мифологиялық және дінтанулық зерттеулер дереккөздерінен, сондай-ақ 2025 жылы автор Бенін мен Тогоның оңтүстік аймақтарына жасаған экспедиция кезінде жинаған далалық материалдардан тұрады. Зерттеу миф-ритуалдық кешендерді салыстырмалы-мифологиялық, құрылымдық-семиотикалық және мәдениаралық талдауға негізделген. Атап айтқанда, жергілікті онтологияларда күн мен ай қағидалары арасындағы бәсекелестікті көрсететін этноастрономиялық деректерге, ритуалдық тәжірибелерге және әңгімелерге ерекше назар аударылады. Ғылыми жаңалығы – қазіргі далалық деректерді пайдалана отырып, Батыс Африка діни дәстүрлерінің материалдарымен О. Сүлейменовтің гипотезасын алғаш рет жүйелі түрде тексеруінде. Жарым айды жануар мүйізімен тікелей сәйкестендіретін мифологиялық элементтер сирек кездесетіні анықталды; дегенмен ай мен сиыр символикасы арасында тұрақты құрылымдық және функционалдық параллельдер бар. Сонымен бірге өмір сыйлайтын және аналық күштерді бейнелейтін Айдың мифо-ритуалдық пайдалылығы туралы әңгімелер, сондай-ақ Күнді антиәлеуметтік мінез-құлықпен, каннибализммен, сиқыршылықпен және әлеуметтік нормаларды бұзғаны үшін жазалаумен байланыстыратын амбивалентті және теріс әңгімелер анықталды. Қорытындылай келе, егер қатаң климаттық детерминизмнен бас тар-

тып, африкалық космологиялардың аймақтық өзгергіштігін ескерсек, Сүлейменов тұжырымдамасының ішінара эвристикалық өнімділігі бар деген қорытынды жасауға болады.

Түйін сөздер: Олжас Сүлейменов, ай символикасы, Батыс Африка мифологиясы, вуду, ориша, космология, мүйіздер, Күн мен Ай, мифоритуалдық тәжірибелер, историософия, құрылымдық антропология.

Н.А. Маничкин

Французский Институт исследований Центральной Азии, Бишкек, Кыргызская Республика
e-mail: nes.pilawa@gmail.com

«Знак коровы»: лунарная символика в историософии Олжаса Сүлейменова и западноафриканские мифоритуальные практики

В статье рассматривается гипотеза казахстанского поэта, мыслителя, исследователя древних символических систем Олжаса Сүлейменова о первичности лунарной символики и её связи с ранними формами сакрального мышления, зародившимися в Африке и выраженными через образ полумесяца, «знака коровы». Цель статьи – проверить эту историософскую гипотезу. Материал исследования составили опубликованные этнографические, мифологические и религиозные источники по народам Западной Африки (фон, эве, уатчи, йоруба, игбо и др.), а также полевые материалы, собранные автором во время экспедиции в южные районы Бенина и Того в 2025 г. Исследование основано на сравнительно-мифологическом, структурно-семиотическом и кросс-культурном анализе мифоритуальных комплексов. Особое внимание уделяется этноастрономическим данным, ритуальным практикам и нарративам, фиксирующим ривалитет солнечного и лунного начал в локальных онтологиях. Научная новизна заключается в первой систематической проверке гипотезы О. Сүлейменова на материале западноафриканских религиозных традиций с привлечением современных полевых данных. Установлено, что прямые мифологемы, отождествляющие полумесяц с рогами животных, встречаются редко, однако между лунарной и бовинной символикой существуют устойчивые структурные и функциональные параллели. При этом выявлены нарративы мифоритуальной благотворности Луны, символизирующей жизненные и материнские силы, а также амбивалентные и негативные нарративы, в которых Солнце связывается с асоциальностью, канибализмом, колдовством и воздаянием за нарушение социальных норм. Сделан вывод о частичной эвристической продуктивности концепции Сүлейменова при условии отказа от жесткого климатического детерминизма и учета региональной вариативности африканских космологий.

Ключевые слова: Олжас Сүлейменов, лунарная символика, мифология Западной Африки, вуду, ориша, космология, рога, Солнце и Луна, мифоритуальные практики, историософия, структурная антропология.

Introduction

Olzhas Suleimenov is one of the most prominent Kazakh intellectuals, whose influence on literature, culture, and the humanities in Soviet and post-Soviet Central Asia is difficult to overestimate. He is a poet and the author of landmark works, including the poem *The Clay Book* (*Глиняная книга*) (1969) and the study *Az i Ya* (*Аз и Я*) (1975), which offers a translingual reading of the Old East Slavic text *The Tale of Igor's Campaign*. His activities extend far beyond literature: he has actively contributed to the development of Turkological studies (Сүлейменов, 2002), engaged in historical and cultural reconstruction, and advanced his own interpretations of the origins of writing and languages. Suleimenov is also known as a public and cultural figure: one of the initiators of the Festival of Writers of Asia and Africa (1973), aimed at fostering dialogue among the literatures of the postcolonial world, and the founder and

chairman of the international anti-nuclear movement “Nevada–Semipalatinsk” (since 1989).

A special place in his intellectual legacy is occupied by his development of a distinctive concept of the *archaeology of numbers*, within which cultural history is viewed as a process of deciphering ancient signs, symbols, and linguistic forms that preserve memories of deep layers of human experience and the evolution of the earliest religious-symbolic systems, embedded in the global and dynamic interdependence of world culture (Сүлейменов, 2019; Сүлейменов, 2022). Suleimenov’s original mythopoetic historiosophy can be discussed with confidence. Although it focuses primarily on Eurasia, it devotes considerable attention to Africa; moreover, the Kazakh writer emphasizes the significance of the African continent as the ancestral homeland of human civilization and calls for the origins and earliest forms of culture to be sought there precisely (Маничкин, 2025). At the same time, unlike the

Asian and Eurasian dimensions of his thought, the African dimension has received insufficient attention and has not been subjected to adequate scholarly scrutiny.

The very formation of Olzhas Suleimenov's historical-philosophical mode of thought, rooted in his poetic perception of the world, was in part initiated by Africa. He associates a moment of intellectual insight with an episode in 1971, when he was a member of a Soviet delegation to Kenya. At dawn, observing the thin crescent of the Moon lying "on its back," the poet suddenly grasped its primordial symbolic nature. He imagined the impression such an equatorial Moon might have made on early humans: "What on earth could this phenomenon have been compared with? Why, the horns of a buffalo!" (Сулейменов, 2022: 115). This figurative experience became the starting point for the hypothesis that the earliest object of sacralization among ancient humans in Africa was precisely the Moon, while a solar cult, owing to the aggressive and exhausting effects of the daytime luminary at these latitudes, could not have been conceived as exclusively beneficent and emerged later.

The researcher L. Yerekesheva notes that the Sun and Moon in Suleimenov's poetry and essays function as "universal categories of cosmic existence," while, in their projection onto the landscapes of Asia, the Moon is associated with the open steppe, whereas the fierce, radiant Sun is associated with mountains. The celestial bodies are also linked to time: the nocturnal luminary, with its gentle light, usually associated with the unconscious, memory, and emotions, marks the past in Suleimenov, whereas the Sun represents the future, ambitious goals, and modernization. When night gives way to day and the Moon yields to the Sun, "new symbols of an entire epoch are born before our eyes," including the first human flight into space, commemorated in the famous poem *Earth, Bow to Man!* (*Земля, поклонись человеку!*) (Ерекешева, 2026: 357–60). Such an image of the Sun, as well as of the mountains and cities "subordinated" to it and opposed to nomadism, contains ambivalent and at times conflictual connotations in Suleimenov's work: modernization leads not only to the desired progress but also to historical and ethnocultural traumas, to the "burning out" of the historical agency of peoples by new linear narratives (Абылхожин, Крупко, 2024).

The Moon is associated with the historical past in Suleimenov not only because of the meanings attributed to it by traditional culture, but also because of his idea of an ancient lunar cult that gave humanity

its first sacred symbols, which later became the basis of writing. "The foundation of every sign of the Sun is the Moon," writes the Kazakh poet (Сулейменов, 2019: 37). He traces proto-hieroglyphs and ancient symbols back to the universal circle and to horns, the "cow sign," an animal of crucial importance to the development of the earliest agrarian societies. In his view, humans migrated to Eurasia from Africa already possessing a substantial cultural heritage, including the earliest mythological conceptions whose echoes can be found throughout world history, including the present.

The connection of the Moon and Sun with ancient cosmogonic conceptions of peoples around the world, as well as their participation in the creation of the world and humanity, can be traced in the traditional knowledge and sacred symbolism that have survived to the present. Although most historians of religion show that the Moon and Sun more often function as complementary rather than antagonistic principles in mythological systems, some cultures do contain narratives of tense interaction, hierarchy, or symbolic rivalry between these principles, at the levels of myth, ritual, and social organization. In the corpus of comparative-mythological data assembled by James Frazer, solar and lunar deities are considered as elements of seasonal and agricultural cycles. Their rivalry most often symbolizes the alternation of temporal phases: day and night, dry and wet seasons, and the life and death of nature (Фрэзер, 2001: 111–112, 486). In a number of traditions (for example, among the peoples of Oceania), myths about the Sun and Moon portray them as relatives whose quarrels and adventures explain the cosmic order. Indo-European traditions display a pronounced demarcation of spheres of influence. Thus, in Vedic religion, the Sun (Surya) occupies an important position in ritual practice and is understood as a source of power and social order, whereas the Moon (Soma/Chandra) is associated with the sacrificial drink and mystical knowledge. At the same time, in Indian astrology, the Sun is termed a "cruel planet" and endowed with an exceptionally harsh temperament.

The most famous example of symbolic differentiation may be found in the parallel existence of the Indian "solar" (Suryavansha) and "lunar" (Chandravansha) lines of kings described in the Puranic tradition. Some scholars interpret this as reflecting a transition from an ancient "lunar" ritual order to a "solar" state order; however, convincing evidence of a direct historical "displacement" of one cult by the other has not been found. At the same time, the idea of a mystical and sociopolitical opposition between

the Moon and Sun took root in European culture, particularly in esoteric circles. Thus, the French archaeologist, publicist, and cryptographer Claude-Sosthène Grasset d'Orcet (1876–1879) represented the history of the West as a mythologized confrontation between two secret traditions: the solar (popular, associated with the “Order of the Quarta”) and the lunar (aristocratic, associated with the “Order of the Quinta”), supposedly engaged in a continuous hidden conflict and determining political and religious processes in Europe. According to him, the Moon worshippers, who traced their lineage back to Aeneas, the founder of the Roman dynasty, were united by their veneration of the sacred cow Io; here, too, we encounter the bovine metaphor of horns as a crescent.

Motifs of opposition or asymmetry between the Moon and Sun periodically reappear in historical, religious-studies, and ethnographic publications concerned with reconstructing particular cultures. According to recent materials, among Turkic and Mongolic peoples and the eastern Finnic peoples, celestial mythology preserves a number of common archaic features in which the role of the Sun is less significant than that of the Moon; there is also a mythologeme concerning the emergence of the Sun from water, an element usually associated with the Moon (Иликаев, Шарипов, 2023).

Lunar symbolism occupied O. Suleimenov even before his journey to Kenya. In 1968, the writer and director Yuri Mingazitinov created the poetic-documentary film *The History of the Cow Sign* (*История знака коровы*), in which, as researchers note, a local history is placed in a global context – a rare case in Kazakh historiography in which a local history was placed in a global context and brought to the screen as a documentary film, with the author moving beyond an ethnocentric perspective to address the origins and convergence of cultures on a global scale (Крупко и др., 2025: 398–399). Alongside the poem *The Clay Book* (1969), the film addresses the need to overcome dominant historical and cultural narratives transmitted through the Soviet version of European modernity and proposes viewing the intellectual history of humanity as a tense evolution of symbols, among which the first is the “cow sign” – a crescent shape resembling horns. In an ironic poem about the “divine heifer,” it is asserted that “in the beginning was the word ‘moo’,” and that “some dullard happened to hear ‘mind’ [ум] in ‘moo’ [му].” In search of ancient signs, the protagonist of the film, which satirizes narrow academic scientism, rushes through different periods and civilizations in order

to find a direct connection between petroglyphs on rocks and letters on a school blackboard. *The History of the Cow Sign* employs an onomatopoeic hypothesis concerning the origin of words: a human being who began “eavesdropping on animals” created the first words and signs; predators gave rise to images of danger and death, while their growls became the source of the names of weapons. Admittedly, an onomatopoeic approach is insufficient to describe the origin of language as a whole, since the actual evolution of language, judging from the evidence of anthropology and cognitive science, was considerably more complex and involved gesture, social interaction, and symbolization; nevertheless, onomatopoeia did and continues to play a role.

O. Suleimenov interprets the religious history of humanity as a drama in which lunar cults are successively replaced by solar ones. Within this comprehensive narrative, he advances propositions capable of providing answers to some unresolved questions of global history or, at the very least, stimulating a reconsideration of its “problem areas.” In particular, he maintains that in the 1st millennium BC the universal human cult of the Sun underwent a crisis, which became one of the factors behind the emergence of new religious systems and teachings subsequently recorded in the written tradition: the solar religion that originated with the earliest hieroglyphic forms of writing eventually gave rise to the alphabet and, ultimately, to the “age of prophets.” (Сулейменов, 2022: 109).

Materials and methods

The aim of the present study is to examine O. Suleimenov’s historiosophical hypothesis concerning the primacy of lunar symbolism and its connection with early forms of sacred thought, presumably formed in Africa and preceding the emergence of solar cults. This examination is undertaken for the first time and, in addition to its scholarly novelty, contributes to the development of Kazakh–African (and, more broadly, Asian–African) intellectual dialogue, which is becoming increasingly important as global connections between the continents grow and develop.

Drawing on African mythological and mythoritual traditions, the study seeks to identify correspondences or discrepancies between existing symbolic and ritual complexes and O. Suleimenov’s conception of the Moon as the primordial deity opposed to the Sun, whose cult emerged later. The study proceeds from the assumption that if such my-

thologemes did indeed exist in antiquity, their traces may survive in traditional narratives, ritual practices, and symbolic systems rooted in non-literate cultures and reflecting early agrarian conceptions associated with extensive agriculture, as well as with social institutions conventionally associated in anthropological literature with matrilineality and matrifocality.

The research materials comprise several complementary groups of sources. The first consists of published ethnographic, religious-studies, mythological, and historical-anthropological studies devoted to the traditional cultures of West Africa, above all those of the *Fon*, *Ewe*, *Ouatchi (Waci)*, *Gun*, *Yoruba*, *Igbo*, and *Ashanti*. These studies address cosmological conceptions, mythological narratives, ethnoastronomical knowledge, ritual practices, and symbolic classifications associated with celestial bodies, ancestor worship, vital force, and divine figures. The second group consists of the author's own field data collected during an ethnographic expedition to the southern regions of Benin and Togo in 2025. These include observations of Vodun ritual practices, interviews with priests (*bokono*) and other bearers of the tradition, documentation of local interpretations of mythological narratives, including narratives belonging to the Fá (Ifá) divinatory complex, the cults of the deities Mawu, Lisa, Hevioso (Shango), and Agbui, as well as documentation of sacred cultural objects and their symbolic interpretations. The use of field materials makes it possible to compare information contained in published sources with the contemporary state of the mythoritual tradition and to clarify how the corresponding symbolic complexes function within living religious practice.

The main corpus of the study is restricted to the culturally interconnected West African region, since it is precisely here, in a region where traditional cults have been well preserved and institutionalized, that one may expect explicit interconnected mythological conceptions concerning the celestial bodies. At the same time, materials from other regions of Africa, represented in the most authoritative ethnographic and historical-religious publications, are incorporated in order to test the stability of the patterns identified and assess the degree of their regional specificity. This selective expansion of the comparative base makes it possible to determine which elements of the symbolic complexes under study are local features and which display a broader distribution within the African cultural sphere. In addition to narratives concerning the relationship between the Sun and Moon, the analysis also addresses the symbolism of the crescent as a morphological ana-

logue of the horns of wild and domesticated animals and its place in various mythological and ritual contexts.

The methodological foundation of the study consists of the principles of comparative mythology, symbolic anthropology, and historical semiotics, which make it possible to view mythological complexes as systems of interconnected symbols, structural oppositions, and processes of transformation of meaning. The study employs comparative-historical, comparative-mythological, structural-semiotic, and cross-cultural methods. The comparative-historical method is used to compare mythological and ritual complexes from different African cultures while taking into account their historical contacts and regional specificity. The comparative-mythological method is employed to identify recurring narratives, images, and symbolic motifs associated with the Moon, Sun, vital force, and bovine symbolism. Structural-semiotic analysis focuses on the internal relationships among elements of mythological systems, identifying stable binary oppositions and patterns of meaning-making. The cross-cultural approach makes it possible to assess the reproducibility of the symbolic models identified beyond the West African cultural sphere and to evaluate the possibility of interpreting them as broader African or universal human structures.

Theoretically, the study draws on the structuralist analysis of myth developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss, which regards myth as a system of binary oppositions and their successive transformations, as well as on the approaches of symbolic anthropology associated with Clifford Geertz, according to which religious and mythological systems constitute models of social action in which symbols not only describe reality but also shape the ways in which cultural participants interpret it. Within historical semiotics, myth is viewed as an element of a broader semiotic space in which meanings are not fixed but are continually translated between different codes: verbal, visual, ritual, and corporeal. Thus, myth is understood not as a static narrative but as a dynamic process of meaning-making in which the stability of structures is combined with the variability of their local manifestations and historical transformations.

O. Suleimenov's hypothesis is tested not through a direct historical reconstruction of the presumed earliest lunar cult, but through an analysis of several interrelated levels of symbolic correlations. First, structural correlations are examined by identifying stable binary oppositions (Moon/Sun, wet/dry, cool/hot, matrilineal/agnatic, female/male) and the

ways in which they are realized in different traditions. Second, functional correlations are analyzed by comparing the roles of celestial bodies in the organization of calendrical time, ritual practice, social structure, conceptions of vital force, fertility, danger, and death. Third, morphological correlations are considered, including the analysis of recurring visual forms (crescent, horns) and stable narrative motifs (the devouring of star-children, pursuit of the Moon, revenge, rescue of offspring) capable of linking different symbolic series into broader conceptual complexes.

At the same time, mythological systems are viewed not as derivatives of a single historical source but as polycentric and nonlinear formations in which the independent emergence, mutual influence, and renewed reinterpretation of similar symbolic structures are possible. This approach makes it possible to avoid reducing complex mythological systems to a single historical cause or origin while preserving the possibility of testing the heuristic potential of O. Suleimenov's hypothesis from a broad cross-cultural perspective.

Results and discussion

Some provisions of O. Suleimenov's concept, formulated in the spirit of climatic determinism, appear excessively categorical, particularly his assertion that no ancient solar cult existed in "hot" tropical Africa. Even a superficial analysis demonstrates the existence of solar symbolism in the cults of Olorun (Òrùṅ) among the *Yoruba*, Segbo (Sẹgbo) among the *Fon*, Likube/Livelelo among the *Nyamwezi*, and others. Moreover, rigid geographical and climatic determinism has been rejected by contemporary historical scholarship and anthropology.

However, rejecting climatic determinism does not mean denying the influence of the environment: rather, the emphasis shifts from causally deterministic explanations to models of cultural selection of symbols, in which ecological conditions function not as a cause but as a factor of variability. The issue therefore requires deeper examination. It is well known that in the local ontologies of sub-Saharan Africa, the most significant and persistent dichotomy is that of "hot/cool," evidently connected with climatic conditions. Moreover, this dichotomy travelled with people of African origin to the New World and has retained its central significance in Afro-Caribbean and African American cults such as Haitian *Vodou*, Cuban *Santería* and *Palo Monte*, and *Hoodoo* in the United States, and so forth. Colors, bodily fluids,

elements, natural substances and ritual substances, foods, seasons, calendrical phases, animals, plants, symbolism, and ritual acts are distributed according to these categories. Furthermore, an overview of the mythological functions of the Sun and Moon and evidence from African ethnoastronomy directly point to a division: the Sun is associated with heat, dryness, male activity, danger, as well as judgment, unnatural death, and funerary rituals, whereas the Moon is associated with moisture, coolness, the female womb, life cycles, and fertility. Let us consider several examples.

In the cosmology of the *Igbo*, who predominantly inhabit southeastern Nigeria, the Moon plays a crucial role. Although the Moon is not worshipped, has no cult of its own, and is not regarded as a deity, unlike the Sun, it is perceived as benevolent and loving. The Sun, by contrast, is stern and excessively powerful. The *Igbo* perform under moonlight in order to pass the night and prepare for the following day. The annual cycle and agricultural calendar, as well as certain festivals and dances, are oriented toward the Moon. The Moon also forms part of high social titlature. The Sun likewise plays an important role among the *Igbo*, regulating the times of work, rest, and sleep, while in some areas of Igboland it is personified as a deity and has its own cult associated with family organization and protective functions. At the same time, the *Igbo* have an ambivalent attitude toward the Sun: it is feared and considered excessively severe (Chukwuezi 2008: 213-214).

Turning to the *Yoruba*, the material is richer and better documented than in many other regions of Africa, owing to the attention devoted to the Ifá oracle (Bascom 1969; Olupona 2011). The Moon, known among the *Yoruba* as Òṣùpá, functions primarily as a regulator of time and as a celestial body "close" to human beings. The lunar cycle underlies the reckoning of time and ritual periods. In the texts of Ifá, which constitute a corpus of oracular verses and legends, the Moon often appears as a sign of recurrence, return, and predictability. It is not so much personified as a separate deity as incorporated into the system of the *òrìṣà* and divinatory signs as a cosmic rhythm. The Sun, called Òrùṅ, by contrast, is much less developed as an independent character. In a number of texts, it appears as a powerful and potentially dangerous force; there are formulas in which the Sun is described through its "burning" quality and destructive intensity, particularly in contexts involving punishment, exhaustion, or extreme trials. *Yoruba* culture contains motifs of opposition between the Sun and Moon, but more in the form

of contrast than mythological warfare: the Moon is gentle, cyclical, and associated with the rhythm of life; the Sun is sharp, linear, and associated with tension, conquest, and the limit. *Babaláwo*, the priests of the Ifá cult, may use expressions such as “a person under the moon” (in harmony with the cycle) or “a person under the sun” (subject to trial).

It may be noted that Olzhas Suleimenov's “lunar insight,” at the level of mythological and symbolic parallels, proves comparable to conceptions found in a number of West African traditions, where the lunar complex of motifs is often associated with more archaic religious strata and with models of early social formations reconstructed by scholars, which influenced the emergence of matrilineal kinship systems and matrifocality. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that the correspondences identified do not constitute a single universal model of a lunar cult, but are unevenly distributed and depend on the economic system, ecological environment, and degree of development of pastoralism.

In the religious system of the *Gbe* peoples (*Fon*, *Ewe*, *Ouatchi*, and others), known as *Vodun*, the solar deity Lisa appears as the cosmic father and demiurge participating in the creation of the living world; however, his position in the sacred hierarchy is described as secondary and derivative in relation to the lunar principle, Mawu. Some versions also emphasize the foreign cultural origin of the image of Lisa, associating it with Yoruba influences and with Ile-Ife, the sacred center of the *òrìṣà* cult. Lisa is consequently interpreted as a possible variation of the figure of Obatala.

Semantically, this opposition distributes functions between cosmic principles: Lisa is associated with the Sun, the structuring of the world, labor, social order, and celestial order, whereas Mawu is conceived as the primary ontological depth, the primordial maternal principle associated with the preformed cosmos, vital energy, renewal, and the immediate fullness of lived experience. Within this mythological complex, an important episode concerns Lisa (or his creative avatar Segbo-Lisa) sending a chameleon to the first humans, which later became established as a sacred animal in *Vodun* symbolism. In the contemporary visual code of Benin, this image is often transformed into a depiction of a lizard holding a golden solar disk in its mouth, creating a complex symbolic construction in which the zoomorphic body functions as a kind of “writing of nature,” combined with the motif of speech and the sign of astronomical order – a combination that may be interpreted as a figurative analogue to

the type of “hieroglyphic thinking” discussed by Suleimenov.

Let us examine *Vodun* mythology in greater detail. Unlike many other cultures of the world, among the *Ouatchi* and *Ewe* the east is associated not with positive images but with danger and threat. The west, by contrast, is considered beneficent. In the *Ewe* corpus (Togo, Ghana), a narrative has been recorded in which the Sun behaves as a destructive and tragic figure. In one version of the celestial myth, the Sun deceives the Moon, depriving it of its power, after which the Moon responds through cunning. During a famine, the Sun proposes that the Moon kill its families and devour its children, who take the form of stars. The Moon stages the killing but substitutes the Sun's children for its own, and the Sun, believing the Moon, actually kills its own children and is left alone. Interestingly, among the Pygmies of northern Congo, legends have survived concerning a war between the Sun and Moon and their children, the solar and lunar peoples, in which the Sun likewise remains alone, but the Moon assumes the role of aggressor (Березкин, 2009: 22). As for the *Ouatchi* and *Ewe*, whom one might call contemporary Moon-worshippers, the Sun in their cosmogony is not merely “hot” or “dangerous,” but an intellectually limited, cannibalistic, and destructive being whose actions lead to the destruction of the lineage, whereas the Moon, by contrast, is associated with cunning, the preservation of life, and fertility: it “remains with the children.”

According to the *Vodun* myth, the Sun discovered the deception, whereupon the Moon fled from it together with its children. This is why the Sun is alone in the sky, whereas the Moon appears every night accompanied by the stars. Ever since, the Sun has pursued the Moon and occasionally catches it—at which point lunar eclipses occur. In villages of the *Ewe* and *Ouatchi*, during eclipses children come out of their houses, beat old broken basins with sticks, and attempt to drive away the Sun in order to free the Moon, singing songs about solar cannibalism. One such song is given in Russian translation in a collection of African folk poetry:

“Where are your children, Sun?
Sun, where are your children?
Or have you swallowed your children?
Why do you chase the Moon now –
Did you want to take her children away?
But you will never catch the Moon.
Better look for your own children.”
(Ветер и птица... 1976: 84).

Researchers note that a cluster of interconnected motifs (A41: “The Sun devours its own children”; M104: “supposedly killed relatives”; M105A: “supposedly killed children”) occurs throughout West Africa, from Côte d’Ivoire to Cameroon, but is also found in South and Southeast Asia (among the *Toraja*, *Batak*, *Mentawai*, *Mantra*, *Jehai*, *Ho*, *Turi*, *Birhor*, *Bhattra*, and others), suggesting ancient connections and probable migrations (Березкин, 2013: 72-80). Yu. E. Berezkin proposes that the Bushman-Australian mythological parallels involving a myth in which one bird provokes another to kill its chicks are connected with an earlier migration from Africa, whereas the Asian-African parallels, found only in remote analogies, are associated with a later migration (ibid. 85).

Among the *Gun* and *Fon* peoples inhabiting southern Benin, a variant of the Sun myth circulates. As reported by *bokono* (a diviner-priest, among the *Gbe* peoples the equivalent of the *babaláwo* among the *Yoruba*) Kpefatan Fentui, the Sun did not eat its children but threw them into the sea, where they turned into fish. The Moon, meanwhile, threw down a bag of stones instead of its children (AFM Fentui 2025; see also Fig.1). Observations of the practices of priests and analysis of their comments make it possible to conclude that the Sun and the heat associated with it are dangerous and must be “cooled” in various ways. Moreover, this heat is not so much a matter of temperature as an ontological principle:

for example, its excess in the human body is used to explain greed, uncontrollable anger, antisocial behavior, as well as a range of physical and psychological disorders.

According to *bokono* Kpefatan, the sign *Di Gbè*, when it appears during a *Fá* divination (the equivalent of *Ifá* among the *Yoruba*), contains “the Sun that burns a person with his own glory or anger when he becomes too prominent, conspicuous, and makes enemies,” while the sign *Yeku-Meji* signifies that the energy of the Sun or fire becomes so uncontrollable that it manifests itself as death and destruction. In the sign (*kpoli*) *Di Gbè*, there is a story about eggs laid by the hen *Sakpata*, the deity of smallpox: a greedy farmer, who was constantly expanding his holdings and seeking new land, came across them and ultimately provoked an epidemic. It should be noted that *Sakpata* is associated with an agnatic kinship system, male farmers, and the solar side of *Vodun*. In turn, the sign *Yeku-Meji* tells of the wife of Death, named *Yeku*, who went into the human world, where she killed everyone she encountered, but avoided the western, sunset side, attacking from the east (an association with the Sun). The destructive force could be overcome by a fish caught in the west, inside which there was a bone fatal even to Death herself: the figure of the fish here may perhaps allude to the myth of the Sun’s children cast down from the heavens into the sea (AFM Fentui 2025).

Figure 1

The author of the article (center) during a *Vodun* ritual. On the far left is *bokono* Kpefatan Fentui. Ouidah, Benin, 2025. Photo by Olateju Oladepo



The heat, and the east in particular, are associated by *Vodun* priests with “dangerous souls,” that is, people who died violent or unnatural deaths, were killed, died in accidents, took their own lives, or perished as a result of magical influence or the actions of witches. Such dead are buried neither at their family homes, as is still practiced in some villages, nor in common cemeteries. Instead, they are buried in the symbolic east, “under the sun,” in the bush, the forest, or wasteland, in a wild place called *dzogbe* among the *Ouatchi*, *àvè* among the *Ewe*, and *gbè* among the *Fon*. The term *dzogbe* is indeed attested in Western Ewe as a burial place for those who died violent or unnatural deaths and literally means “bush of fire.”

Anthropologist Klaus Hamberger draws attention to the semantic axis: Sun–heat–solitude–dangerous dead, and also brings the image of the Sun closer to the mythological figure of the witch, who in African folklore devours children and harms those around her, above all close relatives. The *Ouatchi* explicitly call the Sun a witch and say that it is hot because it is alone, while the evil dead are buried beneath its rays, in the place where it rises (Hamberger, 2011: 294-306).

It is noteworthy that a horned animal, namely a female buffalo, figures in the myth of the origin of witchcraft and the power of witches (*aze*): the buffalo transforms herself into a woman and becomes a hunter's wife in order to take revenge on him for killing wild animals. However, the hunter, or in other versions a group of hunter brothers or twins, manages to uncover her treacherous plan, and they kill her in the forest. Several drops of the buffalo's blood remain unnoticed beneath the bushes, from which *aze* is born. In another version, the blood gives birth to the *vodun* Aguin, master of magic and the wild forest, who subsequently pursues the hunters (Hamberger, 2011: 580-581).

Here we can discern the ambivalent symbolism of the wilderness and of witches as a principle opposed to humanity: on the one hand, they embody the merciless and cannibalistic Sun; on the other, witches perform their deeds under the Moon, at night. During their nocturnal flights, witches, their allies among the evil dead, and monsters inhabit a

perspective inverted in relation to that of human beings: they walk upside down, while the human night is, for them, daytime and a period of wakefulness.

Significantly, the changing of the seasons in the mythology of West Africa is associated with the activity of deities and spirits and interpreted in the context of dangerous solar activity. Thus, the appearance of stars in a clear sky is regarded as the ascent of spirits into heaven and associated with celestial fire. Their disappearance during cloudy weather in the rainy season, by contrast, signifies the descent of spirits to earth, corresponding to the rain. The disappearance and appearance of the stars also mark phenomena at the boundaries between seasons: cool rains and hot storms. When the Pleiades disappear from the sky during the May storms, *Vodun* practitioners say that the Moon is hiding her children from the cannibalistic Sun. As the practicing *Vodun* adept and artist Narcisse Dotou explains, rains are considered phenomena associated with the Moon and night, regardless of the time of day when they occur, whereas hot storms are subject to the Sun and day. For this reason, he says, the lord of lightning, the celestial *vodun* Hevioso, is depicted with staffs bearing lunar and solar symbolism, which rhymes with the double axe always protruding from his mouth (AFM Dotou 2025). It should be noted that this image of Hevioso also recalls the iconography of the demiurge Segbo-Lisa with both luminaries, in which the Moon is associated with Segbo's nourishing principle, while the Sun is associated with Lisa's establishment of hierarchy and the structure of the world. The name *Hevioso* is one of several attested forms, alongside *Xevioso*, *Xewioso*, and *Heviosso*.

Hevioso is a deity who embodies a duality characteristic of many *Vodun* figures, most notably the divine twins Hoho and the ambivalent trickster Legba. In this case, however, while the solar principle corresponds to Hevioso himself, the lunar principle is associated with the female figures accompanying the thunder god in mythology. This is most clearly manifested in *Ouatchi* culture, where ritual performances dedicated to Hevioso take place in parallel with rites in honor of Agbui, who is sometimes regarded as his wife or sister.

Figure 2

Detail of a tapestry depicting Hevioso holding staffs bearing symbols of the Sun and Moon. Tapestry made by the traditional artisan Narcisse Dotou. Cotonou, Benin, 2025. Photo by the author



In the view of K. Hamberger, who studied in detail the social organization and cults of the *vodun* among the *Ouatchi*, Hevioso and Agbui, or rather their devotees, known as *sosi* and *agbuisi*, reproduce the ancient myth of the Sun and Moon. It is no coincidence that people killed by lightning, the weapon of Hevioso, were regarded as criminals or evil sorcerers and were buried only after a special rite which, according to the sources, included elements of necrocannibalism. Hevioso is conceived as the chief witch-hunter, yet during ceremonies honoring his new devotees, the *sosi*, a chick, representing a child, is killed. Together with other ambivalent features and ominous allusions, this makes the figure of the deity ambiguous and unsettling. The anxiety and uncertainty reproduced through these rituals constitute a psychological effect essential to the priests and an element of social control. Yet this excessive anxiety is mitigated by the lunar *agbuisi*, who reproduce the formidable solar rituals of Hevioso as a carnivalesque parody and absurdity. The image of Hevioso suggests that, although he is the leader of the witch-hunters, he may himself be a secret sorcerer and cannibal. Ac-

cording to Hamberger, Hevioso corresponds to the role of the Sun as a witch-mother, whereas Agbui embodies the mother who “brought us all into the world.” The story of the Sun and Moon, reproduced in the mystery of Hevioso and Agbui, presents the figures of two archetypal mothers, or two conceptions of motherhood: one devours her children, the other protects them; one carries them within herself, the other is surrounded by them. This corresponds to two aspects or positions in *Ouatchi* logic: contiguity and separation, represented by the obscuring of the stars by the Sun, and substitution and inclusion, represented by the starry firmament surrounding the Moon. These, in turn, sustain agnatic and matrilineal/matrifocal kinship organizations (Hamberger, 2011: 490-498; 520-529).

Hevioso is usually regarded as the Vodun counterpart of the *òrìṣà* Shango, worshipped by the *Yoruba*, and although the cult of Shango from the kingdom of Oyo may have influenced neighboring Dahomey, there is no reason to assume that one deity derives from the other. More likely, both deities have a common prototype. Both Shango and Hevioso are thunder gods, and both are associated with

royal power, secret tribunals, and punishment. The principal attribute of both is the double axe. While in the case of Hevioso it protrudes from his mouth, in the case of Shango it grows from his head. Researchers see here a trace of the veneration of double fossil axes, made in the Neolithic period from meteoritic stone and becoming, in myth, “implements that fell from the sky” (Ajadi, 2021). In some interpretations, Shango's axe expresses the dual, divine and secular, spiritual and human nature of this *òrìṣà* – as lord of thunder and as the deified king of

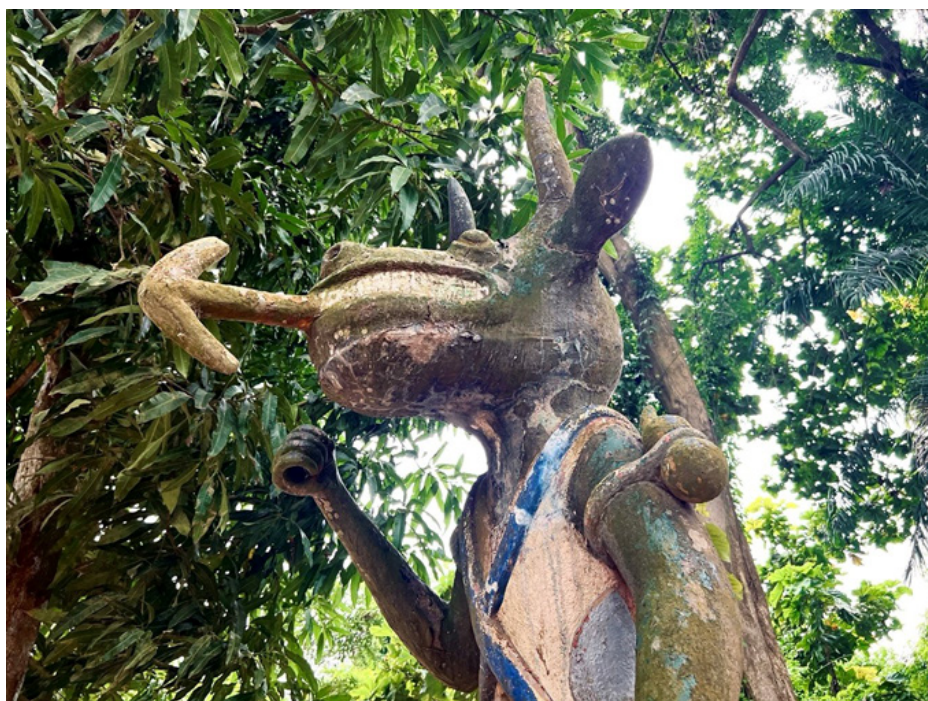
Oyo. It is a sign of supreme, “doubled” power, an attribute surpassing ordinary weaponry.

It is impossible to state with certainty that the double axe is connected with horns, although in the Dahomean variation the axe is pointed and curved, making it closely resemble horns. Hevioso himself is sometimes depicted crowned with horns, with the head of a ram, his sacred animal. Apparently, his ambivalent symbolism at different levels is related to the horns of the crescent moon and to the nocturnal, witchcraft-associated side of life.

Figure 3

Statue of Hevioso with a double axe and a ram's head in the sacred grove of Ouidah, Benin, 2025.

Photo by the author



If we turn to the Upper Guinea region and examine materials on the *Ashanti* and *Akan*, as well as the symbolism and mythoritual practices of the central and southern regions of Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire (Rattray, 1927; Rattray, 1930; Meyerowitz, 1951), we likewise encounter interesting narratives associated with the Sun and Moon. In some tales, the Sun and Moon are relatives whose relationship is complex. The supreme deity Nyame Amowia is sometimes associated with the Moon, while his creative aspect, Nyankapon, sometimes distinguished as a separate deity, is associated with the Sun; at the same time, the Moon is emphasized as playing the primary role and giving the Sun its vital force, *kra*.

This recalls the relationship between Mawu and Lisa in *Vodun* cosmology. In Akan art and symbolism, the crescent shape is used as an independent sign, while animal horns signify power and status. Yet these two symbolic series are not brought together into a single mythological image in the available texts. If a structural analogy exists, it is not recorded as an explicit traditional interpretation.

The connection between the Moon and horns can be traced much more clearly in the ancient symbolism of northeastern Africa, in the Nile Valley and the Ethiopian highlands. In ancient Egyptian material, this connection is expressed directly and unambiguously. Already in the texts of the Middle

and New Kingdoms, the lunar deity Khonsu is depicted with a characteristic head emblem: the lunar disk resting within a crescent. This crescent is not an abstract geometric form—it is regularly interpreted in Egyptological literature as a shape analogous to the horns of a bull. The same visual and symbolic scheme underlies the image of Hathor, whose cow horns frame the solar disk, while this “horned frame” itself corresponds in form to the lunar crescent. Such headdresses are constructed according to the principle of enclosing a disk within a horn-like crescent, so that the form acquires a stable meaning as a “receptacle” for the celestial body. Egyptian iconography deliberately employs zoomorphic forms to express cosmic phenomena, and horns are one of the key mediators of this kind (Hornung, 1982). The very figure of the celestial cow embodying the sky makes the analogy almost literal: the firmament is conceived as the body of a cow, while the horns form the edge that holds the celestial luminary.

As for the relationship between the Sun and Moon, in Egyptian religion it is not constructed as a moral opposition. The solar deity Ra occupies a central position as the source of order (*Ma'at*) and guarantor of cosmic stability. The Moon, represented above all by Khonsu and Thoth, performs auxiliary but important functions: the measurement of time, healing, and the regulation of cycles. In some myths, for example those associated with Thoth, the Moon even appears as a restorer of disrupted order, but this does not constitute a conflict with the Sun; rather, it is a distribution of roles. There is no negative figure of the Sun in the Egyptian tradition. On the contrary, the threat comes from forces opposed to the solar order, such as Apophis, rather than from the Sun itself.

Ethiopian materials present a less unambiguous picture. In Christian Ethiopia, cosmological symbolism has been largely reshaped by biblical tradition, and the Sun and Moon appear primarily as creations of God, deprived of independent mythological agency. However, in earlier and parallel strata – above all in Aksumite culture and Cushitic traditions – motifs survive that bring Ethiopia into closer relation with the rest of northeastern Africa. Archaeological and iconographic evidence from Aksum shows the active use of solar and lunar symbols in state ideology: coins bear the disk and crescent. Here, too, the crescent already has a standard, “horned” form and reproduces the same visual principle found in Egypt and the broader Near Eastern world. This does not necessarily imply a direct borrowing of the mythologeme “moon equals horns,” but it does show

that the corresponding form was perceived as meaningful and recognizable.

In ethnographic descriptions of the peoples of Ethiopia, the Moon more often appears as a calendrical and ritual reference point and as a marker of cyclicity. Possible connections with animal horns can also be noted. In the pastoral cultures of Ethiopia, especially among the *Oromo* and neighboring groups, cattle and their horns play an important symbolic role, and their resemblance to the crescent moon appears to have symbolic significance. Interestingly, Ethiopia preserves a motif in which the ancestress Eve conceals ugly children, dangerous spirits, *jinn* or *zar*, from the Almighty (see: Маничкин, 2022), a motif that has little place in the Abrahamic tradition but bears a striking resemblance to the West African mythologeme of children hidden by the Moon from the Sun.

Rich horn symbolism is found in the culture of the *Nuer*, one of the largest tribal confederations of East Africa and a Nilotic people (Evans-Pritchard, 1940; Evans-Pritchard, 1956). Although no direct identification of the crescent with horns is recorded, horns among the *Nuer* function as a formative principle: people classify cattle according to the shape of their horns, give bulls names based on these forms, and even reproduce them bodily in dances and postures. Cattle, and bulls in particular, serve broadly as mediators between human beings and the divine order, so that horns become incorporated into a sacred economy involving sacrifice, the distribution of vital force, and relations with ancestors.

Materials from various African peoples demonstrate the existence of two symbolic complexes: the lunar complex, associated with the cycle and rebirth, and the bovine complex, associated with cattle, horns, and vital force; these prove to be functionally parallel. In pastoral societies, where the shape of horns is understood both aesthetically and ritually, the crescent inevitably enters the field of the same morphological analogy. Yet the sources rarely articulate this as a distinct myth, unlike, for example, the Mesopotamian tradition, where the symbol of the moon god Sin is the horned crescent and the resemblance between the shape of horns and the lunar crescent is explicitly conceptualized (Black, Green, 1992: 54-55).

Bringing East African materials into comparison with West African ones, it is interesting to examine the place occupied by the Moon in the religion of the *Sandawe*, a people inhabiting the area between the Bubu and Mponde rivers in the central regions of Tanzania. Semantically, the Moon is superior to the

Sun and figures prominently in myths of creation, stories, songs, proverbs, riddles, oaths, customs, and rituals, as well as in facial adornment. The Moon is directly associated with female fertility and the fertility of the earth, while symbolic parallels can be discerned between menstruation and rain and between the changing of the seasons. Unlike the Sun, the *Sandawe* Moon is unambiguously positive: it is associated with freshness, health, safety, purity, and fertility; it plays a role in conception, death, postpartum rites, periods of mourning, and the proper passage of the soul into the afterlife. The Moon is associated with light, clarity, whiteness, vital force, and protection. The Sun, meanwhile, has an ambivalent nature and often exerts a harmful influence. This worldview contrasts with that of neighboring Bantu-speaking peoples, for whom the Sun possesses a number of beneficial properties attributed to the Moon by the *Sandawe* (Raa, 1969).

Any search for symbolic and mythoritual narratives connecting the lunar crescent with horns must take into account the history of cattle domestication in Africa. This was neither a single nor a linear process. According to the available evidence, it involved several waves of the introduction and local adaptation of already domesticated animal forms, primarily from the Near East. It is generally accepted that the center of cattle domestication was located in the Fertile Crescent, from where domestic cattle began to enter the African continent through Sinai and the Nile Valley around the seventh to sixth millennia BCE. There are, however, hypotheses concerning centers of independent domestication of the African aurochs, leading to the emergence of the earliest domestic cattle breeds on the continent (Stock, Gifford-Gonzalez, 2013).

The so-called Green Sahara, the Holocene climatic period when the territory of the present-day desert was characterized by a savanna and lake landscape favorable to pastoralism, was of particular importance in the early history of cattle husbandry in Africa. It is here that the earliest evidence of pastoralism is found: rock art depicting cattle herds, archaeological traces of seasonal camps, and early forms of mobile pastoralism. It is important to emphasize that even in these regions the process did not involve the primary domestication of animals, but rather the early spread of already domesticated species and forms and the formation of specific pastoral cultures.

East Africa became the next major center of pastoral development, where stable pastoral complexes emerged from the third to second millennia BC. Here animal husbandry often existed indepen-

dently of agriculture and played a central role in social organization. Yet this region too faced serious ecological constraints associated with livestock diseases and the characteristics of the landscape, which shaped distinctive strategies of nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralism.

A quite different situation developed in West Africa, especially in the Gulf of Guinea zone, including the territories of the future political formations associated with *Fon* and *Yoruba* cultures. Here ecological conditions—humid tropical climate, dense forests, and the high prevalence of disease vectors, above all the tsetse fly—severely restricted the possibility of sustained cattle husbandry. Historically, agricultural systems and small-scale livestock keeping predominated in these regions, particularly goats, sheep, and poultry, while cattle were either absent or present only in extremely limited forms, primarily in peripheral savanna zones. It is therefore unsurprising that in *Fon* and *Yoruba* cultures, as known from mythological and historical sources, the cow is not a central element of the economic system in the same sense as in Saharo-Sahelian or East African pastoral societies. Cattle appear in their symbolic sphere as prestigious animals associated with power, wealth, and the sacred legitimation of rulers, but not as a basic economic resource of everyday production. In other words, in these societies cattle are more a marker of status and ritual significance than the foundation of the economic system.

Thus, the history of pastoralism in Africa demonstrates regional inequality: the early pastoral cultures of the Sahara and East Africa developed under favorable ecological conditions and through the active introduction of already domesticated animals, whereas West Africa, including the civilizations of the Gulf of Guinea, remained for a long time outside the full zone of cattle pastoralism because of natural barriers and epidemiological factors.

In the available academic literature on tropical Africa, a direct connection between the crescent and the horns of a bull or cow, unlike in Egypt, is not clearly attested, although indirect indications, such as the association of witchcraft with the female buffalo, can be found. There is, however, a very extensively documented symbolism of horns as bearers of vital force and social form, and independently of this, lunar symbolism associated with cycles and fertility. Their convergence is the result of a structural analysis based on form (curvature), function (fertility and vital force), and cultural context (pastoralism), but it is rarely recorded in the sources in the form of a direct mythologeme.

Conclusion

Two levels of interpretation should be distinguished: the first is genetic (the question of the origin of symbolic complexes), and the second is structural-typological (the question of the recurrence of forms and functions, and of the ontological primacy of the Moon). The present study is limited to the second level and does not posit a single historical line of origin for the motifs under consideration.

The question of correlating the crescent with horns in African traditions is indeed more complex than it might appear, because, unlike in the Near East or the Mediterranean, in tropical Africa this connection is rarely formulated as a direct mythologeme of “moon–horns.” It may be present implicitly, through the intersection of two powerful symbolic series: the lunar and the bovine. In the visual culture of West Africa, horns are directly associated with strength, fertility, and vital energy, the source of which in a number of religious cults, such as *Vodun*, is the primordial mother Mawu, associated with the Moon. Whereas in ancient Egypt horns and the crescent were combined iconographically, in West Africa we find rather an unarticulated analogy—not an explicitly formulated myth, but a correspondence of forms and functions: thus, in the *Vodun* rituals of the *Gbe* peoples, as in the cults of Central Africa, the horn serves as an important ritual container for creating powerful fetishes intended to regulate vital force and power.

Another relationship identified here is more important. Among a number of West African peoples, particularly prominently among the *Ewe*, *Ouatchi*, and *Fon*, the Moon possesses ontological primacy: it is regarded as the more ancient luminary, associated with fertility and the source of life. Demiurgic deities associated with the Sun and social order, such as Lisa, appear later, both in cosmological narratives and in ritual practice itself. They complete and give form to what was previously generated by the primordial deity. Thus, Lisa, lord of purity and the color white, apparently represents a regional transformation of the Yoruba *òrìṣà* Obatala. Solar and lunar symbolism is also present in the cult of the dual deity Hevioso, where it forms an ambivalent pair reflecting the complexity of two social and symbolic logics: contiguity and substitution, agnatic and matrilineal kinship. The tension between the Sun and Moon is manifested in the ritual performances of the devotees of Hevioso and Agbui among the *Ouatchi*, as well as in the complex of in-

digenous Beninese and Togolese beliefs concerning witchcraft and witch-hunting.

The motif of the opposition between the Sun and Moon is expressed most vividly and clearly in the legends of the *Ewe*, *Ouatchi*, and *Fon*, which tell of an agreement between the two luminaries from which the Moon secretly withdrew, thereby saving her children (the stars), but becoming the object of pursuit and violence on the part of the Sun. Combined with the notion of the negative power of sunrise and the east, and with the association of dangerous dead, witches, and monsters with hot, open wastelands exposed to the burning rays of the Sun (*dzogbe*, *gbě*), such an image of the Sun may be interpreted as a possible reflection of a past conflict between Moon worship and Sun worship, or as transmitting traditional narratives of the hostility and danger of the Sun that have ancient origins. This is also reflected in the widespread ontology of cool and hot principles in tropical Africa, according to which anything excessively hot—whether a ritual object, bodily fluid, psychic phenomenon, environmental condition, and so forth—must be cooled in order to become stable, safe, and productive. The beneficial primacy of the Moon also corresponds to traditions concerning an ancient matriarchy or periods when women possessed greater power and influence.

Consequently, the imaginative intuition of the Kazakh writer and scholar Olzhas Suleimenov, later developed in his works on the history of ancient religions and sign systems, finds partial confirmation. In the mythoritual practices of West African peoples, the lunar principle still functions as benevolent and associated with the life principle itself, with proper economic and social organization, and with the supreme deity Mawu, whereas the Sun is associated with danger, desiccation, and solitude. According to the available evidence, the cult of Mawu and Lisa was institutionalized during religious transformations initiated by the co-ruler of Dahomey (*kpojito*) Hwanjile in the eighteenth century, displacing the deity Nana. Nana Buluku, the ancient ancestress of all that exists, nevertheless did not disappear from ritual practice. Importantly, she too is associated with the Moon; today she remains part of the mythological genealogy of the origin of the world and is worshipped as a deity of lagoons, swamps, and magic.

Further analysis of the relevant narratives and mythologemes should encompass the vast body of material from Central and Southern Africa. The diversity of cultures and cults in these regions may provide researchers with a wide range of data neces-

sary for refining existing hypotheses and generating new ones.

The analysis conducted here shows that the hypothesis concerning the antiquity of the lunar complex of symbols possesses considerable interpretative productivity at the level of structural correspondences. Although it would be premature to regard it as a universal historical model, the ontological primacy of the Moon is nevertheless clearly discernible, pointing toward the origins of the cosmos and the most ancient cults. Rather than a linear scheme of succession between lunar and solar cults, what emerges is a complex system of regional configurations in which the two principles function as complementary, but differently emphasized, elements of cosmological thought. The material examined makes it possible to clarify the heuristic potential of Olzhas Suleimenov's concept: the issue may concern not so much a direct historical reconstruction of an original lunar cult as the identification of a stable morphology of symbolic forms in which lunar images are indeed regularly associated with ideas of fertility, cyclicality, and vital force, whereas the Sun is associated with dangerous phenomena.

Thus, the concept of the “cow sign” may be regarded as an analytical model that makes it possible to identify deep structures of mythological thought across different cultural areas. In light of the African materials and the qualifications introduced above,

Olzhas Suleimenov's hypothesis acquires the status of an instrument for identifying persistent forms of symbolic thought that may manifest themselves in different cultural and historical configurations without necessarily implying a genetic connection.

Acknowledgements

The article was prepared within the framework of grant funding from the Science Committee of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, IRN: AP23488969, “Acquiring Historical Subjectivity and Overcoming Cultural Trauma in the Historical Narratives of the Creative Intelligentsia of Kazakhstan (1951–1991).”

Благодарность

Статья подготовлена в рамках грантового финансирования Комитета науки Министерства науки и высшего образования Республики Казахстан ИРН: AP23488969 «Обретение исторической субъектности и преодоление культурных травм в исторических нарративах творческой интеллигенции Казахстана (1951 – 1991 гг.)».

Author's Field Materials (AFM)

AFM Fentui 2025 – participant observation and an interview with *bokono* Gommannussin Kpefatan Fentui, Ouidah, Benin, August 2025.

AFM Dotou 2025 – interview with artisan Narcisse Dotou, Ouidah, Benin, August 2025.

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Information about the author:

N.A. Manichkin is a researcher at the French Institute for Central Asian Studies (24 Isanov str., Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic, e-mail: nes.pilawa@gmail.com).

Автор туралы мәлімет:

Н.А. Маничкин – Француз Орталық Азияны зерттеу институты зерттеуші (к. Исанова, 24, Кыргыз Республикасы, Бишкек, e-mail: nes.pilawa@gmail.com).

Сведения об авторе:

Н.А. Маничкин – исследователь, Французский Институт исследований Центральной Азии (Бишкек, Кыргызская Республика, e-mail: nes.pilawa@gmail.com).

Поступило: 15.05.2026

Принято: 31.08.2026