

# Idiomatic Expressions based on Dualistic Cosmology and Chthonian Motherhood

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## Abstract

Nicoleta Popa Blanariu analyzes several idiomatic expressions from Romanian, French and English, and proposes some hypotheses on their origins in archaic mythical structures of the imaginary: firstly, dualistic myths about the brotherhood between the Trickster (as “Second Demiurge”) and “good God”, universally spread in ancestral traditions of many people; and secondly, myths of chthonian motherhood, occurring, in various forms, in almost all cultures. In Popa Blanariu's opinion, this is what happens with idiomatic expressions such as: a) Rom. *a se face frate cu dracul* (literally, “to fraternize with the devil” or, in the idiomatic sense, “call the bear 'uncle' till you are safe across the bridge”); b) Rom. *copil din flori*, Fr. *né(e) sous un chou*, Eng. *born under a rose* – all these three idioms having the same meaning in their corresponding languages which share the same Indo-European origin. (D)evil Demiurge and *Mutter Erde* are two (quasi)universal motifs of mythical imaginary, related to an archaic vision of cosmogony and anthropogony. Due to them, life on Earth appears as the creation of either an evil Father or a protective universal Mother. In terms of an ancestral ideology, this involves a radical dissociation between the essentially “evil” or, on the contrary, “good” nature of the life and its physical environment, of the human being and material body. Thus, two distinct principles of different trends of philosophical and religious thought, as well as idioms, such as the above-mentioned ones, are based on much more ancient structures of the mythical imaginary.

**Keywords:** myth; dualistic cosmology; chthonian motherhood; idiom; (D)evil Demiurge; *Mutter Erde*.

The Romanian idiomatic expression *a se face frate cu dracul* (literally, “to fraternize with the devil” or, in the idiomatic sense, “call the bear ‘uncle’ till you are safe across the bridge”) seems to designate a somehow epigonic act of human being, moreover one of *imitatio Dei*. More precisely, my hypothesis is that this Romanian expression, still used today, derives from and also reflects a layer of the collective imaginary – a set of beliefs and representations –, which is not strictly local or national, not even European, but (quasi)universal. The expression is a reminiscence, the verbal outcome of an archaic vision of the cosmogony. My lines of argumentation are particularly related to two aspects: on the one hand, the connection between the verbal structure and the collective mentality, in its mythical configuration; and, on the other hand, the continuity of certain archetypal structures of the imaginary, so-called “dualist”. With variations that do not change the essence of the issue, the latter may be found across vast distances of time and space, in the cultural geography of humanity. Thus, the Romanian expression *a se face frate cu dracul* (“to fraternize with the devil”) reminds of an original situation and, correlatively, of an archetypal act accomplished *in illo tempore*, which is the cosmogonic Creator's action, closely related to his ambiguous relationship with a “second Demiurge”. The latter is seen as a source of imperfection in the physical world and human nature. He is generically called Trickster or “charlatan Demiurge” (Culianu 1990). In particular, he may be the Devil or Satanael, as in Bogomil legends. The relative antagonism between the two Creators is the specific note of dualist beliefs and representations. It should be noted here the particular meaning of this concept in the history of religions, different from that in other domains. The term *dualismus* was proposed by Thomas Hyde, in 1700, to designate a characteristic of Persian religion: the opposition of two divinities, Ormazd and Ahriman, assimilated – at the ontological, ethical and cosmological level – by two principles: the Good and the Evil; so that a “good”, respectively “evil” creation corresponds to each of them. In Ugo Bianchi's definition, “dualist are the religions and life beliefs according to which two principles, coeternal or not, are the foundation of the real or ‘apparent’ presence of what exists and is manifested in the world” (Bianchi 1976: 39).

Dualism is particularly manifested as a relationship of both collaboration and rivalry; sometimes, of “consanguinity” and hostility (Eliade 1970), like in the Bogomil tradition, where Satanael is the first born of God, and Christ, the second one. Prior to the doctrinary, scholar versions of Gnostic dualism, this antagonism is imposed through more ancient popular traditions of Balkan and Eastern Europe, Asia, North America, Africa, Oceania, Australia. For instance, at the Dogon people from Mali, there occurs the same ambiguity of the “charlatan Demiurge”, Ogo-Yurugu, the Pale Fox which is a contesteer, nevertheless an absolutely necessary one for the development of life on earth (Bianchi 1978).

The dualist myths are reckoned as an “enigma” of the history of religions (Culianu 2002) due to their wide diffusion, endurance in time and the difficulty to accurately establish their origin or centre of occurrence. In turn, this has been located in Iran, at Slavs and Bogomils, at the Finno-Ugric and the Ural-Altaic peoples; there is also the added hypothesis of “independent genesis” in various ethnic areas (see Veselovsky qtd. in Culianu 1990). Eliade agrees with the idea of a unique centre of irradiation of dualism, but at the same time, he confirms the difficulty to locate it. Briefly, this is one of the unclassified files of the history of religions. Eliade (1970) does not exclude the fact that certain ‘dualist’ beliefs spread across the Balkans and the Carpatho-Danubian regions may represent remains of religious beliefs of the Thraco-Scythic substratum. Hence, prior to the Bogomil influences from the 10<sup>th</sup> century and even to possible Slavic folk impact; the latter could not have arrived earlier than the 6<sup>th</sup> century, in these regions. In any case, the way in which Bogomilism entered Europe is not fully explained (Culianu 1990), and regarding its belonging to dualism, there is a significant difference of views. Thus, Culianu sees in the movement of the Bogomils a case of “pseudo-dualism”, because its premises are similar to the Orthodox ones, although from them derive “ethical and anthropological consequences” with a “strong dualist aspect” (1990); moreover, followers of Bogomilism declared themselves Christians (Culianu 1990), which could also constitute an argument. But Ugo Bianchi, Italian master of Culianu, has a different perspective; he believes that Bogomilism is an authentic form of dualism, as long as this is the Devil of Bogomils who organizes the world. In fact, dualist cosmogony is among the mostly spread ones, especially in the Eurasiatic area. It is, in fact, the only popular cosmogony from South-Eastern Europe, whereas non-biblical cosmogonies have disappeared from the folklore of Western Europe (Eliade 1970). It should be

noted here that for Eliade, the presence of some dualist elements is not a powerful enough premise to deduce the primacy or influence of the Gnostic-Manichaeism speculation upon the South-Eastern European beliefs. In his opinion, it is more credible that these “influences” may have consolidated and extended, in the dualist sense, a religion already existing in the South-Eastern European popular environment; more precisely, one in which the “antagonism” of “polar” characters such as the two Creators, had an essential role (Eliade 1970).

Eliade (1970) – who exploits previous research of Jordan Ivanov and others, and whose observations are also developed by Culianu (1990, 1992) – notices several elements shared by the Balkan folklore, the Iranian tradition, the Gnostic-Manichaeism doctrines and the myths of the Amerindians. For example, in the structure of these myths, the Devil from the Balkan dualist cosmogonies are partially similar to the “Prince of Darkness” from the Gnostic and Manichaeism beliefs. The latter is the second Demiurge, author of this imperfect world, which he has created and governs with no contribution from God; otherwise, he is the creator – “Evil Demiurge” – of the material world and mortal condition, while God is “the unknown Father”, absolutely transcendental and “good”, with no connection to the sordid condition of a failed creation, the outcome of a mistake which had occurred in the spiritual world of the Eons. In the north-American versions of dualist cosmogony, Trickster is involved under various forms, such as Coyote, Raven, or Hawk. Adversary and collaborator of the Creator, even His continuator, after the latter’s retreat to heaven, the Amerindian Trickster frustrates the attempt to improve the world. Therefore, through his direct contribution, the human condition is irreversibly altered, subjected to death and suffering (Culianu 1990). Particularly, in the Californian cosmogony, the Creator wants to make the world paradisiacal and man immortal (Eliade 1970, Culianu 1990, Culianu 1992); but the Coyote brings death and destroys the Earth. Similarly, in some Romanian, Russian, central-Asian and Siberian legends, Trickster as Devil or as the Romanian “Nefârțatul” is the source and principle of the material world; he knows where and how is to be found the material needed to make the world (Eliade 1970). Sometimes, the connection between the rivals is no longer that of “consanguinity”, but contractual, which occurs in Bulgarian and Iranian versions. Thus, in a Bulgarian legend, Satan is born from the shadow – even at the command – of

God and proposes to the latter that they both share the world. In the Iranian version, Ahriman (the Evil) obtains from his brother, Ormazd, the right to do evil, and this agreement is reached in the presence of two witnesses (Eliade 1970).

Here are some other samples of dualist reminiscences in popular traditions of the Eurasian and North-American areas. Yet in a Bulgarian legend, the Earth created by God had spread too much and the Sun could no longer cover it. God created the angels and sent the angel of war to Satan, to ask for his advice. The angel never managed to approach the Devil. So, God commanded the bee to sit on the devil's shoulder and take heed of what he says. The Devil wondered: "Oh! God is so stupid!", "he does not know that he has only to take a stick, draw the sign of the cross to the four winds and say: «This much earth is enough!»". Thus, God found the solution to the problem (see Eliade 1970). In a cosmogonic myth from Moldavia, a north-eastern region of Romania (see Cartoian), there occurs the motif of ambivalence in a similar way – collaboration and adversity – between Satan and "good God", partaking of the creation of the world. Thus described, their relation is symptomatic for dualist cosmogonies. "When God decided to create Earth, he sent Satan to the bottom of the sea to fetch from there, in His name, a seed of earth and bring it to Him at the surface of the water". Satan dives two times, but does not take "seed of earth" in the name of God – as the latter had commanded – but only in his own name. Therefore, at the surface of the water, all the "seeds of earth" fell through his fingers (Cartoian). Only the third time he took it *also* in the name of God. Like in the Iranian myth of the adversary brothers – Ormazd and Ahriman –, even in the more ancient *Enuma Elish*, the Mesopotamian myth of creation, the world here is a mixture of good and evil. It is the product of a double contribution: of God and of his partner, Trickster (the "charlatan Demiurge"). According to some Finnish versions (Eliade 1970), before the creation of the world, God was sitting on a column of gold, in the middle of the sea. Seeing his image in the water, God cried: 'Rise!'. The image was the Devil whom God asked how could he create the world.

In another Romanian legend from Transylvania, the Devil greets God with the formula: "Good day, brother!". But the devil is a form of alterity in which divinity refuses to see a dimension of its own nature. Here it is a typical dualist partnership. In the beginning, there were only the waters. God was thinking about making the world, but knew neither "how to make it, nor for what reason" (Eliade 1970). He was annoyed because he had no brother, no friend.

Angrily, God threw his cane over the waters. It turned into a big tree and under the tree, God saw the Devil, who said to him smiling: “Good day, brother! You have neither brother, nor friend. I will be your brother and friend!” God was glad and said: “You will not be my brother, but my friend. I do not need a brother” (Eliade 1970). Together, the two will create the world. But, not without the well-known treason committed by the Devil. Similarly, in a Russian version, the devil proposes to God to become his sworn brother: “You shall be the youngest, and I the eldest brother!”. As God bursts into laughter, the Devil is satisfied with the position of the youngest. God performs the sign of the cross and the interlocutor disappears (Eliade 1970). The legend contains the old motif – here Christianized – of the enemy brothers, which is also documented in Iranian Zurvanism: Ahriman the dark is born first, through an artifice meant to endow him with absolute power; and Ormazd the luminous, is born the second. On his turn, Pamfile (2006: 13) mentions an old belief from Oltenia, a southern region of Romania, which he regards as an “accidental scholar influence”, in fact a surprisingly eclectic mixture of mythological and religious matters, from Bogomil dualism to classic myths and Christian beliefs: “the oldest God is Sabaot, after him there came Amon”, after whom there ruled Apolon, “who was succeeded by God, the forbear of Jesus”. There are also other versions of the Romanian dualist cosmogony, particularly those having as protagonists *Fârtatul* and *Nefârtatul* – approximately translated, “Sworn Brother” and the “Non-Sworn Brother” (see Pamfile 2006: 17–29) – which are a specifically Romanian expression of the dualistic couple of creators, God and Trickster. Thus, the expression under discussion – *a se face frate cu dracul* (literally, “to fraternize with the devil”) – and its relationship with very ancient popular beliefs, myths and legends confirm Lucian Blaga’s conclusion (1969: 187): “generally, the Romanian performs no leap in the spiritual schism. This temptation is exhausted in our popular soul through a process of sublimation, on the level of legendary and poetic imagination. The schismatic tendency, so general in Europe”, is manifested at Romanians through a special type of creativity: “creations which do not go beyond” a “certain game of imagination and which can circulate without a name, paternity or responsibility”. Therefore, “the schismatic temptation is sublimated in a free dream and visions”; it “does not

grow into a doctrine and does not reach sectarian creation, of new nests of religious life” (Blaga 187).

Confirming an archaic and universal structure of the collective imaginary – the motif of chthonian motherhood – the child born “under a rose” was seen and designed to many people as a *Terrae fillius* (Eliade 1975). It is to be assumed that the equivalents of this expression in different Indo-European languages – among which (Fr.) *né(e) sous un chou*, (Eng.) *born under a rose*, and (Rom.) *copil din flori* (literally, “born under flowers”) – were built on the basis of the same mechanisms of the imaginary. (This does not exclude, however, the hypothesis of the metaphorical evocation of certain particular circumstances of birth). The French expression is documented in the general dictionaries of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as in *Robert* and *Grand Larousse de la langue française*. Thus, the archaic mentality associates, in the same paradigm, (what constitutes) earth, as well as what surrounds it: waters, vegetation, mineral structures, land forms. That is, “everything which is on earth is together, making a great unity” (Eliade 1975). According to an original intuition, the earth meant everything that existed around man. For the archaic mentality, Rom. “*a fi om al locului*” (literally, “to be a man of the place”, in the idiomatic sense, “to belong to a place”) meant not only belonging due to residence – as it means today – but also a product of the place, in the proper meaning of the expression. Native earth would actually be involved in ontogenesis. According to A. Dieterich, the earth represents the place where the child sits before he is born; “not symbolically”, but as “Mother Earth, in the material sense”, like it is also the abode of the dead (Dieterich; see also Genep). In some German, Australian, African beliefs, the “souls” which will be born live under or inside rocks (Genep). Different peoples held the belief that they live in trees, bushes, flowers or vegetables, in fountains, springs, lakes, running waters etc. (Genep). Hence, my hypothesis is that the expressions such as (Rom.) *copil din flori*, (Fr.) *né(e) sous un chou*, (Eng.) *born under a rose*, as well as other similar ones, may have derived from these beliefs. Therefore, the individual is not only a biological, but also a “cosmo-maternal” product (Eliade 1975). The father is a parent only in the social, not biological meaning. He only recognizes his children – gives them a social identity – through a ritual which, at many peoples, takes place like an adoption. Raising his child from the earth (*de terra tollere*), as a sign of recognition, the father takes the child from his “true” mother (Eliade 1975). Men “of the place”, individuals exist and are constituted in the

surrounding cosmic environment or are “brought” by the aquatic fauna (fish, frogs, swans etc.). Probably, that is why it is sometimes said that the new-born is “brought by the stork”, for instance in Romanian. The “souls” pass from their native natural environment into the mother’s womb and complete their human form without paternal contribution (Genep). According to these beliefs, any new-born is a child of the earth (*Terrae fillius*), of vegetation in general, be it “cabbage” (Fr. *chou*), “rose” as in English, or “flowers” as in Romanian idiom. What makes the distinction is the social order; otherwise, the assumption by the father.

As a summary and conclusion, my object of analysis – several idiomatic expressions from Romanian, French and English – may be connected to certain mentality structures, which have generated it and, hence, may account for its history and semantism. In such cases, the verbal is a reminiscence; as a proof, it has kept its formula, but its origin is often obscure. Otherwise, the extralinguistic reality, initially designated, lies outside the mental horizon of most of the speakers today. The latter ignore it, but guess the context meaning of the expression. This is what happens with idiomatic expressions such as: a) Rom. *a se face frate cu dracul* (literally, “to fraternize with the devil” or, in the idiomatic sense, “call the bear ‘uncle’ till you are safe across the bridge”); b) Rom. *copil din flori*, Fr. *né(e) sous un chou*, Eng. *born under a rose* – all three equivalent and connected, due to a universal paradigm of the mythical imaginary, to expressions such as Rom. *a ieși (ca) din pământ* (literally, “to come out (like) from the ground” or, in the idiomatic sense, “to appear/to come/to materialize out of nowhere”) and *to be brought by the stork*, having the same meaning as Rom. *a-l aduce barza* (about a newborn). Briefly, we have proposed several hypotheses on the origin of these expressions in archaic types and mythical structures of the collective imaginary: firstly, dualistic myths – universally spread in ancestral traditions of many people – about the brotherhood between the Trickster (as “Second Demiurge”) and “good God”; and secondly, myths of chthonian motherhood, occurring, in various forms, in almost all cultures. In dualist cosmogonies of the Bogomils and in the folk south-eastern European legends, God creates the world with devilish help, because he does not know otherwise. Similarly, the human being – overcome by the difficulty of the attempt – fraternizes with the devil. Which is, after all, a way of understanding – sarcastically

misinterpreting, through linguistic game – the imperative *imitatio dei*. In the traditional cultures, this is correlated with the exemplary value of the myth and guarantees the efficiency of human activity: “This is how the gods did, this is how men do”, “We should do what the gods did from the very beginning” (see Eliade 1963). Resorting to the authority of tradition justifies mythically various practices from traditional communities. Thus, Rom. *a se face frate cu dracul* (i.e., “to become brother/to fraternize with the devil”) is yet double talk, which enriches the autochthonous paremiology with a vestige of archaic mentality and belief, not only Balkan but quasi-universal.

The long survival and wide spread of this mythical scenario requires an explanation. On the one hand, in the cosmogonic contribution of the Trickster (particularly, of the Devil), there was a cause of the imperfection of Creation and of the evil which it contains. So that, the origin of evil being somewhere else, God – *deus otiosus* – is no longer responsible for the wants of existence. Thus, the Devil/ Trickster/ “charlatan Demiurge” is a kind of scapegoat, while “good God” may come out safe and sound at his own judgment by humankind. Postulating the antinomy of the two principles – battling one another for the world domination and, at the same time, working together to build it – saves, through a speculative by-way, the idea of (and belief in) a supreme Good. On the other hand, the relationship between the two creators – such as “Satan and good God” – is one of fellowship, even brotherhood or only “consanguinity”. Thus, it transposes into mythical symbols the archaic principle of totality, *coincidentia oppositorum*. The dualist antagonism is inseparable from the Trickster, a version of the “necessary evil”, like in Goethe's *Faust*. In the popular imagination, God at bay – running out of ideas or construction materials – resorts to the help of whoever. In some versions, God falls asleep after the creation and/or is unable to complete his work by himself. “His mental inertia” (Eliade 1970) is compensated by the Devil's ingenuity, like in the case of the Iranian brothers, Ormazd and Ahriman. The imperfect and inferior nature of the physical world is an obsessive motif of a certain trend of the religious thought. It circulates and endures unflinching, often subversively, from the mythical archaic tradition to Manichaeism, Gnosis and Bogomilism from the area of lower Danube (in the 10<sup>th</sup> century) to the Cathar heresy from the Provençal area (the 12<sup>th</sup> century) and its echoes from the North of Italy (the 15<sup>th</sup> century), even further and later. Also, the

exegesis has highlighted “reminiscences” of Gnostic imaginary in literature, from Goethe and *Sturm und Drang* to the Romantics and modern authors (Culianu 1985, Bloom 1995).

Similarly, such expression as (Rom.) *copil din flori*, (Fr.) *né(e) sous un chou*, (Eng.) *born under a rose* may be interpreted not only as metaphors but moreover, as “reminiscences” of an archaic view upon ontogenesis: a man “of the place”, the individual, is rather a chthonian product *lato sensu* than a biological descendant of his parents. In certain forms, this representation survives in the classic mythology. Here are some of the best known examples. As an anthropogonic scenario, the myths of autochthony were familiar to the ancient Greeks and Amerindians (Lévi-Strauss 1958). One is related in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. After the deluge, Deukalion – the descendant of Prometheus – and the titanide Pyrrha recreate humankind, from the “bones of the great mother”, Earth, by throwing stones behind them. Also in the Greek tradition, the first inhabitants of Thebes (*Spartoi*, among whom the five founders of the Theban aristocracy) have come out of the ground – armed and ready for battle – on the spot where Cadmos had spread the teeth of the defeated monster. Similarly, the Giants (*Gegeneis*) appear on the field of Ares from Colchis, ploughed by Jason at the command of king Aeëtes. Also, we can add the related versions of the ancient Mesopotamian anthropogony, such as in the *Book of Genesis* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, where the human being – Adam or Enkidu – is shaped from clay. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is an elegiac epos of the detachment from nature and of becoming aware of this rupture; the drama of the two protagonists, Enkidu and Gilgamesh, is consumed between wilderness and civilization, between the life of nature and that of conscience.

Briefly, (D)evil Demiurge and *Mutter Erde* are two (quasi)universal motifs of mythical imaginary, related to an archaic vision of cosmogony and anthropogony. Due to them, life on Earth appears as the creation of either an evil Father or a protective universal Mother. In terms of an ancestral ideology, this involves a radical dissociation between the essentially “evil” or, on the contrary, “good” nature of the life and its physical environment, of the human being and material body. Thus, two distinct principles of different trends of philosophical and religious thought, as well as idioms, such as the above-mentioned ones, are based on much more ancient and (quasi)universal structures of the mythical imaginary.

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