

l'accouchement. À une époque où la médecine n'était pas assez avancée pour permettre un accouchement sûr, l'attachement des femmes à leurs enfants non-nés a pu devenir une source d'histoire de fantômes. Parmi ces histoires, celle du fantôme de « la femme accouchant » (Uzume) est très connue, bien que cela soit quasiment une adaptation d'une légende chinoise. Uzume est le fantôme d'une femme qui mourut avec son bébé durant l'accouchement, et qui apparaît en portant un bébé, la partie inférieure de son corps maculée de sang. Un thème similaire est développé dans l'histoire du « fantôme élevant un enfant », fort répandue au Japon, et aussi connue sous le nom de « fantôme achetant des bonbons ». Près du temple Chinkoji à Kyôto, il y avait une boutique de bonbons où chaque soir une femme apparaissait et achetait pour un sou des sucreries et ce, six jours d'affilé, mais au le soir du septième, elle dit ne plus avoir un seul sou, et demanda au tenancier d'avoir pitié d'elle et de lui donner des bonbons. Le propriétaire accéda à sa demande, mais jugeant la femme étrange, il la suivit jusqu'à ce qu'elle rentre dans un cimetière et disparaisse dans une tombe fraîchement creusée. De cette tombe, les pleurs d'un bébé pouvaient se faire entendre, et le propriétaire de la boutique convainquit le prêtre du temple Chinkoji d'ouvrir la tombe. À l'intérieur ils trouvèrent le corps d'une femme morte tenant dans ses bras un nouveau-né vivant qui avait un bonbon à la bouche. Selon les comptes-rendu de la boutique, le propriétaire adopta l'enfant qui devint un prêtre de haut-rang.

En 1953, le tribunal jugea un cas de profanation d'un corps. Cet incident impliquait un jeune homme dont l'épouse enceinte était morte. En ayant consulté sa famille et les villageois, le jeune homme fit appeler le médecin et lui demanda d'ouvrir le ventre de sa femme afin d'y enlever le

bébé et de l'enterrer avec le bébé dans les bras. À cette époque, on croyait que si une femme était enterrée avec le fœtus dans son ventre, elle reviendrait en tant que fantôme hanter sa maison. De plus, des cas similaires avaient été rapportés dans les hôpitaux et les hôpitaux universitaires dans différents départements, ce qui explique que les charges n'aient pas été retenues et que l'homme fut déclaré non coupable. Si cette pratique était encore d'actualité soixante dix ans, Nous pouvons donc présumer qu'auparavant c'était une pratique courante d'ôter le fœtus avant d'enterrer une femme morte en couche et que cela était sans doute à l'origine des histoires de fantômes élevant des enfants.

Traduit en français par Myrna Hombel

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**Ballad of the Fallen:
The "Table Cloth" of the Table Mountain
as the Spirits of the Dead**

ABSTRACT

According to local foundation myths, the Table Mountain in Cape Town, South Africa, is the metamorphosed body of the giant *Umlindi Weningizimu* (Watcher of the South), wounded in a fight between the giants and the Great Dragon of the Sea. The legend has spawned numerous myths about the phantoms haunting the mountain. The Portuguese poet Luís de Camoões gave in his epic poem *The Lusíads* another explanation: Table Mountain is the metamorphosed body of the cursed titan Adamastor, sent into exile for falling in love with the goddess Tethys. Nineteenth century people attributed the night lights on the Table Mountain to the bright carbuncle crowning the head of a mythical serpent. A later Afrikaner version relates "the table cloth" to the story of Captain van Hunks who beat the devil in a smoking competition, both being eventually transformed into a pall of mist. Whoever the cloud over Table Mountain might represent, it symbolizes the storms which Cape Town has always been associated with.

KEYWORDS

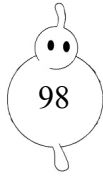
South Africa; Table Mountain; Watcher of the South; Adamastor; Captain van Hunks.

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Over the heaving plain's the great ship sped
Day after day: then towered, two leagues
ahead,
The Table of the Gods, its bright cloth
spread,
As though but yesternight they banqueted
Arthur Vine Hall, "Table Mountain!"

One of the most spectacular sights in Cape Town is the steeply rising Table Mountain as a backdrop to the city which has given its name to a constellation *mons mensae* named by the French astronomer Louis de la Caille (March 15, 1713-March 21, 1762) who used the mountain as the basis for his scientific observations of the southern sky. Table Mountain was so named because of its appearance, the level plateau of approximately 3 kilometres (2 miles) from end to end which looks like the mensa of the table. It is 1,086 metres (3,563 ft) in height and is flanked by Devil's Peak (*Duiwelspiek*) or Wind Hill to the east and Lion's Head (*Leeuwen Kop*) to the west. The indigenous name of Table Mountain given by the Khoi inhabitants was *Hoerik-waggo* (sea-mountain). One of the most remarkable features associated with Table Mountain is the turbulent winds that wrecked ships in the Bay area, for this reason the Portuguese first named the area, the Cape of Storms before calling it the Cape of



Good Hope (*cabo de Bom Esperanza*). Peter Kolb, writing in the eighteenth century, reported about the ravaging winds in his book *The Present State of the Cape of Good Hope* as follows:

I have one particular more to mention with regard to this Hill, and that is, that during the dry season, from *September* to *March*, and frequently in the other months, a white cloud hovers on the top of the Hill. This cloud is look'd upon to be the cause of the terrible south-east winds that are felt at the Cape; which winds held the Cape, for a considerable time, in very ill repute with all the European trading nations. 'T is usually saying among sailors approaching the Cape, as soon as they discover the cloud: '*the Table is cover'd* or the cloth is laid on the Table; intimating, that they must prepare immediately for a storm; and accordingly to work, they immediately go, and that with as much activity as if the storm was already upon 'em.²

In spite of global climate change, the weather in Cape Town has not changed much or at all, as Nicolas Louis de la Caille's precise description of the formation of the "table cloth" the raging winds of Cape Town in his diary *Travels at the Cape 1751-53* attests it:

November 3. A violent wind got up this morning, continuing at the town all that evening and the next night. I noticed that first of all there was a series of small clouds which the wind drove towards the hills which run from the eastern entrance of the False Bay (Hangklip), and then as far as the Table Mountain where they came to a halt. These little clouds were followed by

somewhat larger ones, but well separated from one another, which also stopped on the Table Mountain by 4 p.m. All the hills were covered by a mass of clouds extending for some distance down their slopes but joining up with those covering the summit of the Table. At 5 o'clock the clouds seemed to become less dense towards the south, and to be almost all gathered together on the Table, which was then covered with a mass of very white but very dense clouds; the wind was then blowing violently at the town and in the roads. During the night, I observed that this large cloud covering the Table dissipated itself little by little and that the wind took some portions of it away towards the north-west, so that at 2 a.m. the thickness of the cloud decreased, and by 4 a.m. hardly any of it was left: the wind ceased to be violent, and blow only moderately during the rest of the morning, the barometer standing always at 28 inches and 3 lines. I observed also that a similar mass of clouds also formed on the Hottentot-Holland mountains, from Hangklip onwards; but these mountains did not remain covered so long as did those of the Table, all the sky not in the direction of the mountains remained perfectly clear.³

The calculated, rhythmic movement of the clouds from Hottentot-Holland mountains to Table Mountain and their hovering over the mountain on a daily basis around the same time resembles that of a living entity, like the tides of Mont Saint Michel, is mind-boggling and forms the basis of the origin of a myth or myths. Human imagination always associates such cosmic movements with the existence of the supernatural, the miracle, the magic or the sign of being haunted by an invisible spirit, a boggle etc.



In many mythical narratives, the divinities' appearances are always accompanied by ghastly winds which frighten the hero. The pun on the words "wind", "breath" and "spirit" or "ghost" should be noted well in this regard. The example of the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles in the form of "a rushing mighty wind" (*Acts of the Apostles* 2:2) can be quoted as one of the innumerable examples in this regard.

One version of the myths associated with Table Mountain identifies the "table cloth" or the clouds enshrouding the top of Table Mountain with a monster, a serpent. Kolb relates an incident of a night vision of the very bright carbuncle that is purported in myth and legend to crown the head of a serpent. The "apparition" was very frightening for the inhabitants of the Cape and it lasted for almost the whole month of the time of its appearance:

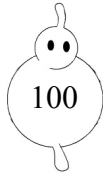
I was assur'd by several credible persons, that a little before my arrival at the Cape, there appeared in the night time, for near a month together, on top of this hill, something like a large carbuncle-stone: a resplendent something, resembling, in the imagination of many, a serpent with a crown upon its head, and by many taken for one, to their infinite terror and astonishment. Being seen only during the night, none were found hardy enough to venture up to the top at that time, to discover what it was; and in the day-time, it seems, nothing like it was to be found. I was assur'd likewise, that the same appearance was seen some years before, in the same place, and for about the same time. I must leave this matter with my reader as I found it, for I know not what to make of it.⁴

The fact that the apparition was seen at night confirms that it is a monster-ghost as

most spectral sightings usually takes place during the night. Historians, like Middleton, dismiss this vision as a figment of imagination which makes people think that they see a serpent crowned with a carbuncle on the summit of the mountain which is not only peculiar to the inhabitants of Cape Town. Middleton quotes the incident of a similar sighting in the Cape of Samoa during the journey to the Levant. He attributes it to an atmospheric electricity phenomenon which has not been clearly identified by physicists.⁵ Whatever the vision represented, the elements of myth (the serpent-phantom, the carbuncle, or the fabulous stone of fictitious narratives) and the writer's scepticism about the story are all present to make the anonymous serpent rival the likes of Nessie of Loch Ness and other aquatic entities who are neither fish nor fowl, nor good herring, evasive and illusive as the grail itself which shows itself only to the happy few.

A later popular Afrikaner version relating to the cloud spread across the top of Table Mountain attributes the "table cloth" to the story of a retired pirate, Captain Van Hunks who was married to a nagging wife and used to go to the slopes of the mountain to escape helping her with the household chores and enjoy smoking his clay pipe. One day, he was challenged by the devil to a smoking competition and they smoked for hours and even the devil could not beat him. It is said that the furious competition continued until they were both finally transformed into a pall of mist that now forms the famous "table cloth" of Table Mountain.⁶

According to the local foundation myth and legends the mountain is the transformed body of the giant known as *Umlindi Weningizimu* (Watcher of the South). Tixo (God of the Sun) and Djobela (Earth Goddess) gave birth Qamata who created the world. The Great Dragon of the Sea



being jealous of Qamata's creation tried to stop him they were locked in a battle.

Djobela, the Earth Goddess, came to his rescue by creating four giants to guard the corners of the earth. Djobela placed the biggest one at the gateway to the south, where Table Mountain is now located. After many battles, the giants died but before their death they requested the Earth Goddess to transform them into mountains so that they could guard the world even after death. The greatest giant became Umlindi Weningizimu which is now known as Table Mountain.⁷ This myth is probably not of African origin as it features a lot of European mythemes and has no other African variants. Permanent transformation of objects into something else does not feature much in African myths.

Over and above the local version of the myth, the great Portuguese poet, Luis Vaz de Camoões in his epic poem *The Lusíads* introduced another version in which Table Mountain is the transformed body of the cursed Titan Adamastor, who fell in love with Thetys and in retribution Doris (mother of Thetys) exiled him to the southern tip of the African continent and transformed him into Table Mountain. Postulating the above-mentioned myths it seems logical to consider the storms with which Cape Town has always been associated, as the frustrated spirit of the passionate Adamastor trying to come back to life and wriggling in excruciating pain.

The "local" myth as well as that of Camoões concerning the origins of Table Mountain are based on the narratives of metamorphosis as clearly exemplified in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and other similar narratives. The structure of this myth is a universal one of a churlish lover who pursues a beautiful maiden, meets the tragic fate of being changed into an animal or any other object, a mountain in the case of

Adamastor. Ovid's influence on Camoões is evident in Adamastor's telling how he was transformed into a gigantic mountain:

My flesh was moulded into hard clay.
My bones compressed to rock;
These limbs you see, and this trunk
Were stretched out over the waters,
The gods moulded my great bulk
Into this remote promontory,
And of all tortures, the most agonizing
Is that Tethys, surrounds me, tantalizing.
The Lusíads. Canto V, 59⁸.

Over and above the obvious use of the themes of metamorphosis or the death of the Titan as he is forced to revert to the primordial clay from which he originated and assume the gigantic shape of Table Mountain. The poet also makes use of the motif of the fairy kiss that leads to the enchantment of the Titan who having been hurled down from Olympus, is condemned to spend eternity at the furthest end of the African continent. Adamastor meets the same fate as Merlin and Vergil the magician: both are held captive by the spell of their lovers. As a result of his captivity, Adamastor is hostile to all the ships that drift to the shores of the Cape Peninsula. In the hands of the Portuguese poet, the "table cloth" of Table Mountain becomes the symbol of terror and hostility and portends of imminent tragedy, the death of sailors due to scurvy and other diseases:

A cloud above the mast loomed huge
and high
Blackening out completely the night
sky.
So fearful it looked, so overpowering,
It put great terror in our hearts.
The Lusíads, Canto V, 38.

While exploiting the myth of the transformation of the Titan into Table Mountain,



Camoões amuses himself by playing on the universal relationship giant-mountain which is found in many myths and folktales, a technique that Durand correctly terms “gulliverisation”⁹. In *Gulliver’s Travels* for instance, the Lilliputians refer to the gigantic hero as Man-Mountain and in Chrétien de Troyes’ romance *Yvain or the Knight of the Cart*, the giant’s name is Harpin of the Mountain (Harpin de la Montagne). Evidently, the giant feels at home in the mountain.

Adamastor’s brutality is linked to the hostility of the inhabitants of the land who resisted colonisation and attacked the imperialist. This is probably what led to the origin of the notion of the *swaart gevaar* (black danger) which has influenced a number of Afrikaner writers. Adamastor has also fascinated many writers such as Victor Hugo in *Les Misérables* as well as Alexander Dumas who evokes him in his novel *The Count of Monte Cristo*¹⁰. In Camoões poem he is portrayed in an ambiguous manner, a theophany and a horrific ghost, extremely repulsive and fearful:

Even as I spoke an immense shape
Materialised in the night air.
Grotesque and of enormous stature,
With heavy jowls, and unkempt beard,
Scowling from shrunken, hollow eyes,
Its complexion earthy and pale,
Its hair grizzled and matted with clay,
Its mouth coal black, teeth yellow with decay.
The Lusíads, Canto V, 39.

Adamastor’s portrait in the strophe quoted above reads like a palimpsest. The reader can see the vestiges of the Olympian origins of the fallen deity, through his gigantic size. On the other hand his captivity makes him look like a savage being. His condition as a revenant is explained by “hollow eyes” and hair “matted with clay”

and that he can only be seen at night, the appropriate time for the sighting of the spirits of the dead.

Notes

¹ Arthur Vine Hall, *A Voyage to Cape Town and other Poems*, London, Longmans, Green, 1937.

² Peter Kolbe, *The Present State of the Cape of Good Hope*, London, West End of St. Paul’s, 1731, New York, Johnson Reprint Corp, 1968, Volume II, p. 14.

³ Nicolas de la Caille, *Travels at the Cape 1751-53. : An Annotated Translation of Journal historique du voyage fait au Cap de Bonne Espérance*, Translated and edited by R. Raven-Hart, Cape Town and Rotterdam, A.A. Balkema, 1976, pp.13-14.

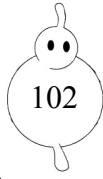
⁴ Peter Kolbe, *The Present State of the Cape of Good Hope*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

⁵ See M.F. Hoefler, *L’Afrique australe*, Paris, Didot Fermin, 1848, p. 6.

⁶ See Penny Miller, *Myths and Legends of Southern Africa*, Cape Town. McManus Bros (Pty) Ltd. 1979, p.61.

⁷ See Carnic Hampton and Andrew McLleron, *Table Mountain to Cape Point*, Cape Town, Struik Publishers, 2006. “This may not be an African legend as the Chinese practice *feng shui* (or geomancy) also refers to dragons of water and mountain. Water that flows down the ridges of a mountain is called Dragon’s Veins, and the point in which water accumulates is the Dragon’s hair, a rich store of *qs* (energy, pronounced “chec”. Table Mountain is a living dragon, and in *feng shui* is indeed considered the protector of the south, known as the Black Warrior”, p. 6.

⁸ All quotations from *The Lusíads* are taken from the following edition: Luiz Vaz de Camoões, Translated with an Introduction and Notes by Landeg White, Oxford University Press, “Oxford World Classics”, 1997.



⁹ See Gilbert Durand, *Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire: Introduction à l'archétypologie générale*, Paris, Bordas, 1969, pp. 239-243 and 325-329.

¹⁰ Alexandre Dumas, *The Count of Monte – Cristo*, Illustrated by A A Dixon, London and Glasgow, Collin's Clear Type Press, 1995: "They were within fifteen miles of Monte-Cristo when the sun began to set behind Corsica, whose mountains appeared against the sky, and showing their rugged

peaks in bold-relief. This mass of stones like the giant Adamastor, rose threateningly before the bark, from which it shaded the sun that gilded its lower parts.p.83. He also mentions him in his other works such as *Vingt ans après*, (Chapter LXXVII), *Georges* (Chapter I), *Causeries* (Chapter IX) and *Mes memoires*, (Chapter CXVIII). Adamastor also features in Voltaire's *Essai sur la poésie épique*, in Victor Hugo's *Les misérables* (Chapter III).