

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

## AFRICAN MYTHOLOGY

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**Overview** The stories and tales, which we read in popular compendia of African myth, are like ancient Greek myths--they are fascinating insights, snapshots of human and cosmic inter relationships, charmingly dramatic--think of Homer's stories of Ares and Aphrodite, of the slippery old man of the sea, Proteus, or of the bow of Odysseus, which only he can string. Such tales as these--or African 'myths' like the tale of Huveanu, the first man, who created the people of Lesotho, but soon tired of their nonsense, and retired to heaven, pulling up the ladder behind him--pique our delight, give us a fresh angle onto the human situation, or just make us want to 'complete the story.' Unlike folktales, which are set in a never never time--once upon a time--myths are present and compelling. Unlike religious accounts--say tales of a people's origin--myths make a claim on the interest, and attentiveness, of the hearer, but not on his belief.

### Origins, learnings, tricks, destinies

**Origins** The always clever Dogon people, in Mali, speculate that the universe was born from a cosmic egg, whose shell split to allow creation to reveal forth; the Fon, of Benin, tell of God's representative, the first man Gu, who came to earth 'in the form of an iron sword,' then turned into a blacksmith--the Fon's central and revered activity--who was the tool maker on whose skills the creativity and civilization of mankind depend. (One thinks of Prometheus and his fire-gift to civilization, and of the crucial reflection, in African myth, of the growing significance of the Iron Age in Sub-Saharan Africa.) In Zulu thought it is commonly believed that the earth itself, a great mother, is the origin of all. Skipping the expected designation of a universe-creator who precedes time, the Fon embrace the conviction that the present, and the earth that overflows with it, is the origin.

**Learnings** Much that the African can appreciate about dignity and nature wraps up in a Kikuyu tale from East Africa. A man finds a discarded elephant skin in the jungle, then not long after finds a large but beautiful girl weeping on the path. They marry. One day the girl finds the discarded skin, where her husband has hidden it, and realizes something about what she is and where she is from. As the story develops, she takes to going off into the jungle, and one day, grown enormous but elephant shapely, she walks back into her home, the jungle. Like all African myth, this one is retailed without attitude, subtle and distant, itself its own commentary.

**Tricks** There are many trickster tales in African mythology, and they all go to make the point that the little guy with brains can come out of top. A single example will do. The hare wants to get married, but in order to do so he needs to clear a field where he can put his house. Unfortunately, though, he is too lazy to do this work. Taking a long rope from the bush, and going to Hippopotamus, the hare tells his friend he wants to see if he can pull the large creature. Though the hippo knows he can out-pull hare, he agrees, and is told that when he sees the rope move, he is to pull hard. Meanwhile hare goes to elephant and tells a similar story. Hare then goes to the mid point of the rope, and jerks it, at which a gigantic tug of war ensues, all over the field hare needed to clear. By day's end, hare's land-clearing job is complete and he can proceed with his plans to build a house for his wife.

**Destinies** Destinies are inscribed on every face of African daily life. Someone dies: what destiny lay behind that event? What had he done? What had others done to him. We're in a world where you can't die 'a natural death.' African myth is plotted against the grid of fate. Why was the seemingly propitious marriage of Adama and Precious ruined, asks this entry writer, recollecting a tale told him by Adama himself. The perplexing figure of Mama Wata, who bedevils and charms the waters of many Nigerian villages, is the subtext. When he married Precious Adama had known, he told me, that she was already betrothed to a water deity who had long ago claimed the right to spend one night a week with her, for the rest of her life with Adama. This claim, which Adama explains to me, is enough to ruin the marriage for him, and he flees to safer ground, marriage with an unattached woman.

**What kind of thinking is African mythical thinking?** Mythical thinking is not folklore relating, and is not involved with statements of belief about who one is and who created one. Mythical thinking is letting the mind play over possible interpretations of perplexing events in the world. It is perplexing that the world is here at all. It is perplexing that brains can beat brawn. It is perplexing that the mysteries of animal nature close us off from much

that we cannot understand, it is perplexing that a person we love can belong to another sphere of reality. Myth plays over these issues like fiction, and might be characterized as fragmentary mini novels of interpretation.

**Why myths?** If all that is plausible, how would we explain the huge worldwide proliferation of myths--not least in Africa--and the enduring fascination of this thought and art form? Myth is an early form of scientific thinking. Myth imagines to itself a story about an intriguing mystery presented by daily existence, and narrates that story in a what-if mode--that is in the mode of inquiring about this or that interpretation of events. The what-if mode is the mode of experiment--trying out a new explanation of the state of things--which drives scientific inquiry from Thales' first head-scratching inquiry into what was going on as water maintained its consistency, while submitting to the different forms of it so conspicuous on the rainy Asia Minor coast.

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### **Discussion questions**

Is myth universal? Does every culture generate myths? If so, why should they be so important to a culture?

Why are the myths discussed here not examples of folklore? Has it something to do with the temporal setting of the tales in question?

Do the myths of a given culture fit together with one another, to establish general points or attitudes? Or are a culture's myth-tales totally independent of one another?

How do African myths compare to those of some other culture you may know--Greek, Indian, or Australian Bushman? Does each culture create myths fundamentally rooted in its own natural and cultural environment?

Does the contemporary postmodern-industrial world have and live off of myths? What would be an example of such myths? Are urban legends a kind of myth? Is rapping a kind of myth making?

Is mythical thinking at all related to religious belief? Does the thinker of myth feel personally involved in the narrative of the myth he entertains? For the user of myth, is there anything at stake in the outcome of the myth's narrative?