

Chapter Six

AFRICAN MYTHOLOGIES AND ECO-SPIRITUALITY

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Executive Summary

African myths are invented stories about the African gods in which they behave like human beings, however, with superhuman powers. Closely associated with this sense of the word is its usage to refer to the stories which may accompany and allegedly form the basis of religious rituals in African traditional religion. African myths are thus symbolic stories about the origins and destiny of human beings and their world. They relate human beings to whatever powers they believe ultimately govern their destiny, and explain to them what those powers expect of them. Unlike the contemporary English use of myth to indicate an untrue story, African myths convey the eventual truths of life. They not only provide the symbolic categories by which Africans understand the organization of their universe, but also suggest patterns by which they try to maintain the balance and the harmony of the world. They define the nature and the powers of beings in the universe and their relationships; they suggest rituals by which the human person tries to relate with them and the universe as a whole. While there are a few papers written on African mythologies, there is hardly literature that discusses its relationship with the eco-system or its ecological relevance. This understanding, therefore, formed the background of this work studying the following African

mythologies in relation to African eco-spirituality: the Nri myth of the Igbo, Ife myth of the Yoruba, Efe myth of Congo, the Basare and Wassa myths of Ghana, Nyanweze myth of Tanzania and the Abaluyia myth of Kenya. The purpose is to study the relationship between these African mythologies and ecological spirituality as they form the basis or source for African eco-spirituality, with the aim of finding alternative solutions to the emerging ecological crisis in Africa and beyond. Its concern borders on how African mythology can contribute or have contributed to the understanding of the African environment and the preservation of the same. The phenomenological and analytical methods of inquiry were patronized for the achievement of the purpose of this study.

Keywords: African mythologies, Eco-system, Eco-spirituality, Cosmogonies, Creation

Introduction

Most African mythologies are stories which were articulated by African ancestors as responses to questions bordering on the nature and origin of the universe, the origin of the national god, origin of the world, the origin of humanity, its place in creation, the deity that governs the land, the temple, the cult, etc. These responses are articulated and preserved in myths so that they might continue to be a source of knowledge for generations to come. In using these myths, these traditional African thinkers attempted to explain historical institutions and developments by appeal to non-historical factors and forces within and outside the human world (Kanu 2021; 2015 a&b).

Because of the nature of the African worldview that is deeply religious, responses to the questions bordering on the relationships in the universe through mythologies are largely religious. God, gods, ancestors, spirits, religious figures, etc., are

always at the centre of these mythologies. Thus, Marshall (1988) refers to them as the stories of the gods: “The word ‘myth’ is used to refer to stories that are fictional, and hence, it has come to have a pejorative sense. Traditionally, it refers to invented stories about the gods in which they behave like human beings with superhuman powers. (p. 449). Contrasting them with legends, Gunkel (1901) posits that they are “Stories of the gods in contradistinction with legends (better, sagas) in which the actors are men” (p. 14).

While discussing the Yoruba myth, Idowu (1962) speaks of the capacity common to all myths, “... Odu myths enshrine the theological and philosophical thoughts of the Yoruba” (p. 45). The implication is that myths are veritable sources of African philosophy and theology, and in this case, African eco-philosophy and eco-theology. Kanu (2013a-c) also holds that myths are a veritable mine of materials on African philosophy and theology. Gyekye (1995) describes them as “vehicles for abstract thought” (p. 14), and further advises that “To get at the full philosophical import of myths, however, requires detailed examination” (p. 15). This examination will involve penetrating the world of the African people from which they emerged. It is only at this level that one understands, contrary to some understandings, that mythologies are not untrue stories but the embodiment of the eventual truths of life.

The burden of this piece is to study the relationship between African mythologies and African ecological spirituality. That is, to see how African mythology can contribute or have contributed to the understanding of the African environment and the preservation of the same. To achieve this, some myths from different geographical and cultural areas in Africa will be studied. The purpose is to first introduce the reader to the overall outlook, common features and characteristics of African

mythologies from which ecological significances or implications will be drawn.

African Creation Myths

Before analysing the ecological values and implications of African mythologies, cosmogonies, that is, myths that explain the origin and organization of the universe from the simplest possible elements or from some first principle will be discussed. The presentation of these mythologies is very important because as Metuh (1987) writes:

African mythologies not only provide the symbolic categories by which Africans understand the organization of their universe, but also suggest patterns by which they try to maintain the balance and the harmony of the world... By defining the nature and the powers of beings in the universe and their relationships, they suggest rituals by which man tries to relate with them and the universe as a whole. (p. 41).

These mythologies, will relate what should constitute the nature of African eco-spirituality based on the understanding of the relationships between the different dimensions of the created universe. Thus, the Nri myth of the Igbo, Ife myth of the Yoruba, Efe myth of Congo, the Basare and Wassa myths of Ghana, Abaluyia myth of Kenya and Nyanweze myth of Tanzania will be presented below. The beauty of these myths is that they go beyond the creation of the human person to relate to the creation of the moon, stars, sun, land, water, trees, animals and other realities of the African universe.

1. The 'Nri' Myth (Nigeria)

Nri myth occupies a fundamental place in the Igbo story (Madubuko 1994). Tracing this history, Afigbo avers that Eri clan originated from the regions of Omumbala River, in Aguleri; from there they fanned eastward and

established various communities (Afigbo 1981). Uzuoku describes Eri as the father of all Nri; and tradition says that he came from *Chukwu* (Uzuoku 1994). It is reported that the earth was not firm when he came into it. To solve the problem of flood, he employed blacksmiths from Awka to use their bellows to dry the flooded land. There was also no food for people on earth to eat. To provide food, he prayed to God and God demanded that he should sacrifice his first son and daughter to him. After the sacrifice and burial of his son and daughter, yam and palm tree began to grow out of the place where he buried his first son, while vegetables and cocoyam grew out of the place where he buried his daughter. If yam germinated from where Eri's first son was buried, it means that yam is the resurrected son of Eri, given to man to sustain life. Yam is also regarded as life (Madu 2004).

In this myth, there is a cosmic drama between God, human beings, land and crops. Eri, the civilization hero enjoys a special relationship with *Chukwu*, and through Eri's sacrifice, humanity now enjoys a special relationship with the land which offers food for its sustenance. The ritual act performed by Eri established a covenant between Eri, his descendants and *Chukwu*. This explains why yam is very prominent in Igbo sacrifice and life, one which warrants its annual elaborate festival throughout Igbo land.

2. The 'Ife' Myth (Nigeria)

Very interesting is the Yoruba mythology of creation, which can serve as a basis for an African theology of collaboration. The myth holds that *Olodumare*, the Supreme God, originally lived in the lower part of heaven,

overlooking endless stretches of water. One day, *Olodumare* decided to create Earth. He sent an emissary, the *Orisha Obatalá* to perform this task, giving him what he needed to create the world: a bag of loose earth, a gold chain, and a five-toed hen (Vega 2001).

These different elements had their purposes. *Obatalá* was instructed to use the chain to descend from heaven to the water below. When he got to the last link of the chain, he poured the loose earth on top of the water and placed the hen on the pile of earth, and ordered it to scatter the earth with her toes across the surface of the water. When the hen was done, *Obatalá* climbed the chain to heaven to report his success to *Olodumare*, who then sent his trusted assistant, the chameleon, to verify that the earth was dry, after which *Olodumare* gave the earth as name: *Ile Ife*, the sacred house.

After the creation of the earth, *Olodumare* returned to the uppermost part of heaven. However, before his retirement, he distributed his sacred powers to *Obatalá*, the *Orisha* of creation, and *Yemayá*, the orisha of the ocean, who gave birth to a pantheon of orishas, each possessing a share of *Olodumare's* sacred power. *Olodumare* gave *Obatalá* the sacred power to create human life. *Obatalá* was the divinity that created our ancestors, endowing them with his own divine power.

3. Efe Creation Myth (Congo)

The Efe creation myth has it that God created the first human being with the help of the moon and kneaded the body of the human person out of clay. After this, God covered the body with skin and poured blood into the body. The name given to first human person by God was Baatsi. After the act of creation, God whispered into his

ear to beget many children, but to ensure that he impresses upon the children the following rule: from all trees you may eat, but not from the Tahu tree.

Baatsi had many children and he made them obey the rule. When he became old he retired to heaven. His children obeyed the rule and when they grew old they too retired to heaven. However, one day a pregnant woman was seized with an irresistible desire to eat the fruit of the Tahu tree. She asked her husband to break some for her, but he refused. However, when she persisted, the husband crept into the forest at night, picked the Tahu fruit, peeled it, and hid the peel in the bush. While he did all these, the moon saw him and told God what the husband of the pregnant woman had done. This made God very angry with human beings, and so he sent death as a punishment among human beings.

4. Nyamwezi Creation Myth (Tanzania)

The Nyamwezi creation myth has it that Shida Matunda created all things. After making the earth and water and plants and animals, he created two women and took them as his wives. His favorite wife, however, died. Then Shida Matunda buried her in his house and remained at her grave watering it every day. After some time, a little plant began to grow from the grave. Then he was glad, because he knew that the dead woman would rise again. He did not allow his other wife to come near the grave.

But one day when Shida Matunda had gone out, the other wife was overcome with curiosity and she stole into the house. When she saw the plant, she was jealous and cut it down with a hoe. The blood of the dead woman poured out of the grave and filled the house. When Shida

Matunda returned and saw the blood, he was much afraid and said: "You have killed your co-wife and thereby caused all men, animals, and plants to die." It was from Shida Matunda and the surviving woman descended all other humans.

5. Wassa Myth of Creation (Ghana)

The Wassa people of Ghana have a myth of creation that traces creation back to Onyankopon- the great God of fullness and satisfaction who, before creation, was the only being in existence. He created the world to become a companion to him, a wife. Added to the world which he created were also spirits who would also keep him company. He ensured that the world was beautiful and he asked the spirits to visit his wife from time to time. They will make their journey to the world using a long chain that springs from his throne. He also gave the spirits permission to inhabit realities that are on the earth. Their major responsibility was to run errands for him (Abanuka 1999).

6. Basare Myth of Creation (Ghana)

The Basare are of the Upper Region of Ghana. They believe that God created the world in several stages. The first stage was the creation of heaven supported with several pillars. This was followed by the creation of the world which was in the form of lightening and from which the moon and sun were made. However, the sun and the moon quarreled and the sun threw the moon into the mud. This explains why the moon is less bright than the sun and shines only at night for thieves and witches. The third stage was the creation of the clouds and a red cockerel that crows whenever it thunders. This was followed by the creation of the rain and a male and female

rainbow. The last stage was the miraculous creation of two assistants by God to whom he gave the earth as a place to work. This came into being before the creation of mountains and valleys and the sending of rain to form rivers and lakes. Then he created human beings and animals.

7. Abaluyia myth of Creation (Kenya)

This myth holds that the world was created by the Supreme Being by name *Wele Xakaba* who is the source of everything that does exist. First he made the heavens within two days in a mysterious way through lightening. The heavens was support by pillars, that is, where he dwells. He further created two assistants: *Wele Muxove* and *Wele Murumwa*. He also created the moon, stars, sun, clouds and rainbows and fixed them in their places in the sky. The clouds were to bring about rain and the rainbows to stop rain. Everything had its place and responsibility in the workings of nature.

The creation of heaven was followed by the creation of the earth. The earth was meant to be the abode and working place of his assistants and other things that he has created. In the earth were trees, mountains, valleys, depressions, etc. He then created the human person who will enjoy the beauty of the earth. The first man was Mwambu to whom he gave a wife called Sela. God created animals and asked the human person to eat animals with hoofs and avoid those that creep and the scavengers among the birds. Gradually human beings multiplied.

Implications of African Mythologies for Ecological Discourse

There are several implications that these mythologies have for the preservation of the eco-system. These implications are taken

from a profound understanding of the spiritual dispositions of the myths. These implications include:

1. Creation as sacred

In all the creation myths enumerated in this work, God is presented as the Creator of the universe and everything that is in it. This explains why some Africans refer to Him as the Creator, Originator, Carver, Inventor, Architect, Potter, Maker, Moulder, Constructor, Fashioner, etc. His being at the centre of all that has been created confers sacredness on creation itself. This has implications for the management of the eco-system. It echoes that creation must be treated with the respect it deserves. More so, if God is the Creator of the universe and all that it contains, it means that the human person cannot relate with creation without reference to the manual of the Creator. This respect given to the earth is based on the understanding that earth has a religious significance or religious values, thus, implying that humans have some religious obligations to care for the earth. Grim and Evelyn (2013) affirm that most religious traditions have developed attitudes of respect, reverence, and care for the natural world that brings forth life in its diverse forms. Consumerist, selfish, hedonist, among other modern approaches that excludes the creator in humanity's relationship with creation cannot but end in destruction. Enwereji (2004) avers that that sense of sacredness for creation is what the modern man lacks, and thus requires for the sustenance of the environment.

2. Creation as the home of the human person

In the Abaluyia myth of creation, after God had created the heavens where his home is, he created the earth that it may be the abode or the home of the human person and

the working place of his assistants (deities) and other things that he has created like trees, mountains, valleys, depressions, etc. There is an African proverb that says that: *a person does not begin to pursue rat when his house is on fire*. This means that the human person's priority is the care for his or her home and not what to eat or drink. The reason is simple, when the human person has gotten food and drink but has no home, it becomes a chase after the wind. The ecological implication for the modern man is that he or she must ensure that he or she preserves his or her home- the earth, before any other interests.

3. Man as a steward

In the myths of creation in world major religions according to Udodora (2011), man is created last and given the highest responsibility and authority to take care of and rule over all creatures including the earth surface (the land mass) on which he dwells. He is also to take care of the sea and all the creatures living in it. All religion teaches that the creator (God) is the owner of the world and everything that is in it including man. Therefore, man is only a steward given the authority to take care of what belongs to the creator.

The human person was not created to relate with the earth as he or she wants or outside of the intentions of God. The human person was created and placed in the earth to care for as the steward of the creation of God. His ability to account for what God has placed in his or her care will go a long way in determining the kind of contribution he or she makes to the creative act of God which ended in particular or specific days. The endowment of the human person with rationality is to ensure the maintenance of a

balance with other elements in the world. According to Pope Francis:

We human beings are not only the beneficiaries but also the stewards of other creatures. Thanks to our bodies, God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of the species as a painful disfigurement. Let us not leave in our wake a swath of destruction and death which will affect our own lives and those of future generations (no, 65).

Focussing on the Christian responsibility in stewardship, Akullah (2018) avers that while God made man in his image, man is to carry the image of God in his assignment on earth as his ambassador protecting the forests which are part of his created work. As God's stewards over God's creation man is like a business manager in an organizational setting whose functions include those of planning, directing, organizing, supervising and controlling the assets and liabilities of the organization (the universe) for growth and profitability. It would therefore be absurd and meaningless for the shareholders (God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit) of the organization (the universe) after setting up their business concern, hire people to only come and mismanage the business let alone destroy it.

The human person was, therefore, created to care for the earth as God's ambassadors, and not to tyrannize, oppress, misuse, destroy or degrade the environment. He was created as a servant to service in a manner that is consistent with the powers of the servant, and with the place which is assigned to him or her.

4. The Human Person as a Being-with-others

In the Ife creation myth, the Supreme Being used different element in the work of creation, which include: a bag of loose earth, a gold chain, chameleon and a five-toed hen. As insignificant as any of these might look, God considered them very fundamental in his act of creation, and his use of them points to the fact that everything in nature has its place and its purpose just as the human person has his or her place and purpose. This helps the human person to understand that he or she is not the only being in the world, but a being with others which goes beyond physical realities but also encompasses spiritual forces, of which sometimes, the physical realities are manifestations of their presence and power. This understanding of the human person as a being-with-others and not the only being in creation requires that the human person treats other beings with respect and relates with them in manner that shows understanding of the rules of negotiation.

5. Ecological Crisis as a Consequence of Mismanagement

The presence of deadly reactions from the Supreme Being as a result of human disobedience points to the disastrous consequences of mismanaging God's creation. Herein, it is clear that God who is a kind Father can also manifest hostility through the use of non-rational dimensions of nature like lightening, rain, thunder, etc. The consequences of the human person closing his or her ears to God is always death, sickness, disorder, destruction, disharmony, etc. The present ecological crisis emerging from humanity's mismanagement of the earth's resources propelled by greed, consumerist/hedonist philosophies and modern technology is not very strange to the African

people. In the Nyamwezi myth, when the second wife of *Shida Matunda* destroyed the plant which symbolized the other wife and blood flowed, he said to her: "You have killed your co-wife and thereby caused all men, animals, and plants to die." The management or mismanagement of the plant had consequences for the future generation, so does the mismanagement of any dimension of the human world.

It is part of African traditional religious beliefs or teachings, that the human person is a component of the environment, which means that any harm carried out against the environment is invariably against the human person, because environment is the basis for the human person's existence. Any harm done on ecology will bring untold hardship and problems to mankind. The human person should, therefore, explore, develop and use with moderation all the available natural resources to enhance his being. Greed and destructive tendencies are condemned, while restraint and protection are affirmed by Africa Tradition Religions.

6. Personification of the Environment

In Nri myth, vegetation which includes Yam, Cocoyam, Plantain, etc., which also constitutes a part of the environment is personified as the resurrected son and daughter of Eri the proto ancestor of the Nri people- given to mankind for their sustenance. Within this context of personification of creation, creation is presented as deserving of respect and honour. This explains why every year, the Igbo celebrate the New Yam Festival. It is not only a celebration of the harvest but an honouring of the first son of Eri. This also explains why in some substitutionary sacrifices, the yam is brought as an

offering. At such offerings, what is presented is more than just tubers of yam. It is a person that is presented for the sacrifice.

Conclusion

The foregoing has studied selected African mythologies: the Nri myth of the Igbo, Ife myth of the Yoruba, Efe myth of Congo, the Basare and Wassa myth of Ghana, Nyanweze myth of Tanzania and the Abaluyia myth of Kenya, with the understanding of African myths as invented stories about the African gods in which they behave like human beings, however, with superhuman powers. The study of the relationship or implications of African mythologies for the preservation and management of the eco-system is because of the place that African myths occupy in the African's effort towards understanding the organization of his or her universe and the patterns by which he or she tries to maintain the balance and the harmony of the world. The definition of the nature and the powers of beings in the universe by African mythologies help the African know how to relate with the environment.

It is, therefore, not surprising that several implications often neglected by or lost in the agenda of the modern consumerist approach to the management of the environment have been derived from these myths. These implications include: the understanding of the universe as sacred, given that it was created by God; the understanding of the physical universe as a manifestation of spirit beings; the understanding of creation as the home of the human person, which must be preserved; the understanding of the human person as a steward and who must give an account of his stewardship; the understanding of the human person as a being-with-others. This calls for a high level of sensitivity to the being of others. These understanding

introduce a more profound and spiritual concept of the earth, and therefore, requires a more humane approach.

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