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**Creation Stories:
Uniting Humanity to Educe a
Holistic Understanding of the African Worldview**

by

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“Th[e] fascinating exploration of African stories and myths tells us who we are as human beings—all of us.”¹

—Cornell West

Introduction

To truly understand and fundamentally know a “people,” it is crucial initially to study and understand the cosmogony of the people, that is, how those people view the creation of the world and how they view their relationship with and within it. Their theory of the origin of all life—where they believe they came from and how they came to be—directly influences their worldview. This central theme, telling the beginnings of the world, teaches the elemental events and ideas that made humanity what it is, thus everything is connected with its existence. For the purpose of this paper, I will refer to African cosmogony as ‘creation stories’.

Creation stories are categorized as mythology. Myth, from a Greek word meaning “story,” is defined as “stories with special significance that tell a society what is important for it to know, whether about its deities, its history, its laws, or its class structure.”² Myths, intended to narrate the origin of the world and all things in it, also tells of the events that shaped man/woman into what he/she is today—mortal, differentiated by sex, organized into a society, forced to work in order to live, and obliged to live in accordance with certain rules. When you think of myths, usually you think of untrue narrations, not to be taken too literally or as stories from the imagination, rather than a living “thing” that is built into our consciousness and has a genetic memory. It is important to note this significant distinction. African people make a clear distinction between “true stories” and folktales. Folktales or “myths” are finite, entertaining, and usually provide “a moral of the story” as in the case of Western nursery rhymes and fairy tales. True stories or “sacred narratives” are social stories that contain universal symbols of spiritual

¹ This quote by Cornell West is taken from the cover of the book written by Clyde W. Ford, *The Hero with an African Face: Mythic Wisdom of Traditional Africa* (New York: Bantam, 1999).

² Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 2.

significance. They are social stories that heal. As richly described by Clyde Ford in *The Hero with an African Face*, these narratives “bring us into accord with the eternal mysteries of being, help us manage the inevitable passages of our lives, and gives us templates for the relationship with the societies in which we live and for the relationship of these societies to the earth we share with all life.”³ Creation stories, typically handed down orally to succeeding generations by the elders, contain enough information in them to constitute a people. The key to the sacred tradition is the ability to decipher all the meanings of the narrative, both literal and figurative. With that said, please note that throughout the paper, the terms ‘creations stories’ and ‘sacred narratives’ will be used interchangeably.

This paper will investigate African creation stories chosen from five regions of the African continent: North, South, East, Central, and West. The five regions were selected based on customary, general geographical boundaries in order to incorporate and represent the whole of the African continent. It will also analyze, compare, and contrast the creation stories of the different groups within the same language family that will provide a general overview of the creation story of that particular region. The following societies characterize different perspectives present in northern, southern, western, eastern, and central Africa:

Northern Africa: Ancient Egypt, Shilluk of the Sudan Region, (Amazigh) Berbers

Southern Africa: Zulu of South Africa, Shona of Zimbabwe, Tswana people of Botswana

Western Africa: Yoruba of Nigeria, Akan of Ghana, Fon of Benin, Ijo of southern Nigeria

Eastern Africa: Oromos of Ethiopia, Wapangwa of Tanzania

Central Africa: (Bushoong) Bantu of the Congo, Bulu of Cameroon

³ Clyde W. Ford, *Hero with an African Face: Mythic Wisdom of Traditional Africa* (New York: Bantam, 1999), viii.

I will begin with classical Egyptian creation stories as these stories are widely accepted—amongst most Egyptologists and Africana scholars—as the most ancient (beginning about 2345 B.C.E.)⁴ and purposeful stories of creation in the world. Although considered ancient stories, they still surround, embrace, imbue, and color our consciousness because they are intrinsic of who we are at birth, built into our minds, our genes, and flows as blood through our veins—a genetic memory. With an analysis of these stories, I wish to show how these stories are of significant influence on the culture⁵ of the people it defined. Having insight and appreciation for creation stories can give a preview of how people believe, live, and govern, along with what they think about laws, morals, truths, and values.

I am confident that this investigation and analysis will show the cultural succession that connects us all as Africans. These oral and written traditions that were passed down for generations may uncover the secrets of the essence of humanity, that is, humanity to be one people. This approach may help to know what it truly means To Be African: “. . . sharing socially and culturally conditioned biological characteristics, cultural traditions, and historical experiences”;⁶ possessing the vigor that gives us the innate ability to view the world as a continuum and to recognize the living, the dead, and the unborn as elements of a whole; the propensity to rely on the interdependency of nature because we understand that everything is connected.

⁴ Robert A. Armour, *Gods and Myths of Ancient Egypt*, 2nd ed. (Cairo, Egypt: The American University in Cairo Press, 2001), viii.

⁵ Culture as defined by Okot p’ Bitek, *Artist the Ruler: Essays on Art, Culture and Values* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1986), 13. He says, “Culture is philosophy as lived and celebrated in a society. Human beings do not behave like dry leaves, smoke or clouds which are blown here and there by the wind. Men live in organizations called institutions; the family and clan, a chiefdom or kingdom or an age-set system. They have a religion, an army, legal and other institutions. And all these institutions are informed by and in fact built around the central ideas people have developed, ideas about what life is all about; that is, their social philosophy, their ‘world view’.”

⁶ Lucius Outlaw, “African, African American, Africana Philosophy” in Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (ed.) *African Philosophy: An Anthology* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 30.

Creation Stories of Northern Africa

One general theme of the creation story, known as *ex nihilo*, has a deity creating the universe out of nothing. This theme is found in most monotheistic religions, and the “something” that is created out of “nothing” can often resemble the chaos of the cosmic egg. Creation stories may involve one creative event, or have creation occur in several stages. Sometimes a supreme deity will have offspring or create lesser deities that will continue the creation. Thus, the ancient Egyptian story—it is the predominant story of Northern Africa. The most popular narrative is that of Asur (Osiris) and Aset (Isis). The most discussed themes are the virgin birth of Heru (Horus)⁷, the soul’s journey after death, and the three realms of the world: underworld (departed souls), middle world (living beings), and upper world (gods and goddesses); however, for the purpose of this paper, the creation of the universe is the central theme:

Egypt

In the beginning, there was nothing but darkness and the Primeval Waters, named *Nun* (Nu). Out of the water, *Ra* (sun god) created himself and arose out of the darkness a great shining egg. *Ra* says that at that moment of his creation nothing else existed, neither the heavens, nor the earth, nor the things upon the earth. "I am *Kheperi* at the dawn, and *Ra* at noon, and *Atum* in the evening," he said. And the sun rose and passed across the sky and set for the first time. *Ra* then created Shu (god of air) and Tefnut (goddess of mist). *Ra* said that he embraced his own shadow during this remarkable act (masturbation and orgasm) and “poured seed into my own mouth.” Shu and Tefnut were formed and *Ra* spat them out. Now *Ra* was all-powerful, and he could take many forms. His power and the secret of it lay in his hidden name; but if he spoke other names—that which he named also came into being. Hence, Shu and Tefnut joined together and out of their union came Geb (god of earth) and Nut (goddess of the sky). After this, *Ra* named all things that are upon the earth, and they grew. Last of all he named mankind: *Ra* wept and the tears that fell gave birth to mortal men and women . . .⁸

Another general aspect of creation stories is the creation of humans by a deity. This connects the human world with the supernatural world. In addition, it also establishes the

⁷ Orisis, Isis, and Horus are the Greek-origin names given to these deities. Their original names are Asur, Aset, and Heru.

⁸ I have read numerous accounts of this creation story from different sources. This is a culmination and synopsis of all renditions. Although it is too numerous to cite individually, I will cite the source that the majority of the story came from. See Armour, *Gods and Myths of Ancient Egypt*, 7-9.

hierarchy of humans in relation to other creatures in the universe. Humans tend to view themselves as greater than animals or plants, although below the gods. Also, once created, the Divine would often find humans participating in unfavorable behavior, for example, killing your brothers; being quarrelsome, arrogant, greedy, or envious; possessing a god-complex. These inappropriate, yet inevitable acts of disobedience will then be used as explanations for “the way things are.” For example, through the Supreme Being humans are separated by language or skin color, or are subjected to sickness or labor due to these undesirable actions. These themes illustrate the creation story’s ability to explain the world and universe, as well as create the basis for social organization.

Thus, the creation story of the Ocolo people and its two main themes: the order of society and the world in which they live. The first part explains how *Juok* (the Creator) formed the different people of the Earth from the different types of land he found in their homeland. It also tells a compelling story of how all other races were created that explains the physical differences between all people and is proof that we are all one as part of the human family. The second part deals with the actual formation of the humans. The following Berber creation story follows the same vein with the telling of how the earth and all the peoples that inhabited the Earth were created including the plants and animals, in addition to the formation of society and community.

The Shilluk (Ocolo)⁹ of the Sudan Region

The creator *Juok* moulded all people of earth. While he was engaged in the work of creation, he wandered about the world. In the land of the whites he found a pure white earth or sand, and out of it he shaped white people. Then he came to the land of Egypt and out of the mud of the Nile he made red or brown people. Lastly, he came to the land of Col, and finding there black earth he created black people out of it. The way in which he modeled human beings was this. He took a lump of earth and said to himself, "I will make humans, but they must be able to walk and run and go out into the fields, so I will give each of them two long legs, like the flamingo." Having done so, he thought again,

⁹ Shilluk is the name of Arab origin. They call themselves *Col* or *Ocolo*, translated as ‘the children of *Col*’. See Godfrey Lienhardt, “The Shilluk of the Upper Nile,” in *African Worlds*, ed. Daryll Forde, 142 (London, Oxford University Press for the International African Institute, 1954).

"They must be able to cultivate millet, so I will give each of them two arms, one to hold the hoe, and the other to tear up the weeds." So he gave humans two arms. Then he thought again, "They must be able to see the millet, so I will give them two eyes." He did so accordingly. Next he thought to himself, "They must be able to eat their millet, so I will give each a mouth." And a mouth he gave accordingly. After that he thought within himself, "They must be able to dance and speak and sing and shout, and for these purposes they must have tongues." And tongues he gave accordingly. Lastly the Deity said to himself, "They must be able to hear the noise of the dance and the speech of the great ones, and for that they need two ears." So two ears each he gave, and sent them out into the world as perfect humans."¹⁰

The Amazigh (Berbers) of the North

In the beginning there were only one man and one woman and they lived not on the earth but beneath it. They were the first people in the world and neither knew that the other was of another sex. One day they both came to the well to drink. The man said, "Let me drink." The woman said, "No, I'll drink first. I was here first." The man tried to push the woman aside. She struck him. They fought. The man smote the woman so that she dropped to the ground. Her clothing fell to one side. Her thighs were naked. The man saw the woman lying strange and naked before him. He saw that she had a *taschunt*. He felt that he had a *thabuscht*. He looked at the *taschunt* and asked, "What is that for?" The woman said, "That is good." The man lay upon the woman. He lay with the woman eight days. After nine months the woman bore four daughters. Again, after nine months, she bore four sons, And again four daughters and again four sons. So at last the man and the woman had fifty daughters and fifty sons. The father and the mother did not know what to do with so many children. So they sent them away. . .¹¹

I included the Berber creation story as representative of North Africa. The Berbers were a nomadic, indigenous people that traveled across Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt. What is particularly unique about the Berber people was their ability to resist Islam and Christianity the longest given their geographic location. The other ethnic groups of North Africa are not specifically included because I was not able to obtain documented history of their creation stories. Their societies have a tendency to be Islamicized¹², which profoundly influences their cultural perspectives and practices. In other words, the process may have suppressed the pre-Islamic traditions.

¹⁰ J.G. Frazer, *Folklore in the Old Testament*, vol. 3 (New York: Hart Publishing, 1975), 22-3.

¹¹ Leo Frobenius and Douglas C. Fox, *African Genesis: Folk Tales and Myths of Africa* (New York: Dover, 1999), 49-61. The Dover edition is an unaltered republication of the work originally published by Stackpole Sons, New York, in 1937, under the title *African Genesis*.

¹² This is a term borrowed from the master teacher Dr. Ali Mazrui.

Creation Stories of Southern Africa

The stories are told in the form of animals or/and insects instead of people. The mantis and the eland are two of the most prominent stories. It tells of adventures in the heavens and the underworld of the departed spirits. It includes monsters of the abyss and heroes/heroines endowed with supernatural talents. Another common theme is the symbolism of the sun and moon, as representatives of consciousness (immortal vs. mortal). The Zulu story represents the idea that the earth or parts of it, or the universe are the transformation of a deity. For instance, a deity may turn into the sky, fire or rock.

Zulu of South Africa

“He who appeared first,”¹³ *Mvelinqangi*, also known as *Unkulunkulu* (the very great), is the Zulu creator. He and his wife came from the reeds or the rock of all rocks (*uhlanga*, means source) and the sun was on his chest. “They came out of the ground like a mushroom, both of them.”¹⁴ The reeds suddenly exploded¹⁵ scattering his seed and from them he brought forth the people and the cattle. He created everything that is by his breath and word of mouth: elephants, stars, moon, mountains, streams, and snakes. He taught the Zulu how to hunt, how to make fire, and how to grow food. He is considered to be the First Man and is in everything that he created.

Shona of Zimbabwe

Mwari, the Supreme Being, is the god of fertility, the sower, the rain-giver. One of his praise names is *Dzivaguru*, great pool, because he supplies the people with rain. *Mwari* is both male and female. As a female, *Mwari* is merged in the pool with its darkness and mystery; this is the god of below. As a male, *Mwari* is owner of the skies, the god of light, the father of creation who manifests himself in lightning or the shooting star; this is the god of above. He is an ambivalent god, both immanent and transcendent. He is ever present in his own creation. *Mwari* put his creation, *Musikavanhu*, into a deep sleep and then let him drop from the sky. While he fell, *Musikavanhu* awoke and, in the distance,

¹³ The Zulu creation story as told by the Zulu prophet, Laduma Madela from the Ceza Mountains in Zululand, South Africa. See Katesa Schlosser, ed., *Zulu Mythology* (Kiel: Schmidt & Klaunig, 1997), 38.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁵ Geoffrey Parrinder, *African Mythology* (London: Hamlyn Publishing Group, 1967), 65.

saw a white stone which was also dropping from the sky at great speed. Musikavanhu fell softly onto the stone, and the first spot his feet touched softened and emitted water. Musikavanhu, bored, began to wander about. When night fell, he sat down near the stone from which God had spoken, and slept. In a dream, he saw the birds in the air, and many animals on the earth that were jumping from stone to stone. When Musikavanhu awoke, he was surprised to see that all he had just dreamt had become reality. God told Musikavanhu what he was allowed to eat, and what food was forbidden. He was free to eat vegetables, and fruit from the trees, but not to kill and eat animals. Nor were the animals allowed to eat each other. One day, while Musikavanhu slept, a snake crept over his loins and left its marks. When he woke up, he was overcome by a strange feeling; he had trouble breathing and his penis moved like a snake. A voice told him to go to the pool, and the pain would pass. On his way there, he saw a beautiful young woman sitting on a stone near the pool. She looked like him, but she could neither speak nor move. Again, Musikavanhu heard the voice; it told him to touch her with his hand. He did, and the young woman came to life, and a snake moved across her loins, too. She was overcome by the same emotions as Musikavanhu. The voice spoke and told Musikavanhu to be kind to his wife, and to all the animals too. He was also to set aside one day a month for the honor of God. When Musikavanhu had completed the tasks set by God he had to return to heaven. Before he went, he told his children to observe God's laws, or God would punish them.¹⁶

Creation Stories of Western Africa

Some of the most compelling and complex “sacred narratives” come from this region. The universe is said to emerge from a root sound. Creation begins through a series of Divine Words. “Every divine word came into existence by the thought of the heart and the commandment of the tongue. When the eyes see, the ears hear, and the nose breathes, they report to the heart. It is the heart that brings forth every issue, and the tongue that repeats the thought of the heart. Thus fashioned all the gods, from *Atum* on.”¹⁷

The most frequent theme is known as the cosmic egg, which exemplifies the idea of a featureless, undifferentiated universe. It can often be linked to a watery existence. Many times, this primordial substance may contain everything in the universe and a deity will be responsible

¹⁶ Harold Scheub, *A Dictionary of African Mythology: The Mythmaker as Storyteller* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 134-135.

¹⁷ Stele 797 as translated by American Egyptologist James Henry Breasted in Alexander Eliot's “Creators of Nature and Mankind,” *The Universal Myths* (Markham, Ontario: Penguin Books Canada, 1976), 65.

for separating the chaos, thus creating a thing. Also one of the major motifs is that of lineage and the importance of Ancestors. After creation is complete, the creator also referred to as the “First Ancestor,” “came forth all the wonders we see and use.” In Yoruba, lineage is represented through a palm nut sent down to earth and eventually grows into a tree with sixteen branches, to establish kingdoms.

Yoruba of Nigeria

In the beginning was only the sky above, water and marshland below. The all-powerful, supreme god *Olorun* ruled the sky, and the goddess *Olokun* ruled what was below. Obatala, another god, reflected upon this situation, then went to *Olorun* for permission to create dry land for all kinds of living creatures to inhabit. He was given permission, so he sought advice from Orunmila, oldest son of *Olorun* and the god of prophecy. He was told he would need a gold chain long enough to reach below, a snail's shell filled with sand and baobab powder, palm nuts, maize, and the *egg*: it contains the personalities of all orishas, both male and female, all of which he was to carry in a bag. All the gods contributed what gold they had, and Orunmila supplied the articles for the bag. When all was ready, Obatala hung the chain from a corner of the sky, placed the bag over his shoulder, and started the downward climb. When he reached the end of the chain he saw he still had some distance to go. From above he heard Orunmila instruct him to pour the sand from the snail's shell, and in doing so shattered *the egg*, freeing Sankofa. He did as he was told, whereupon the bird landing on the sand began scratching and scattering it about. Wherever the sand landed it formed dry land, the bigger piles becoming hills and the smaller piles valleys. Obatala jumped to a hill and named the place Ife. The dry land now extended as far as he could see. He planted the palm nuts, and saw them grow to maturity in a flash. Many months passed, and he grew bored with his routine. He decided to create beings like himself to keep him company. He dug into the sand and soon found clay with which to mold figures like himself and started on his task, but he soon grew tired and decided to take a break. He made wine from a nearby palm tree, and drank bowl after bowl. Not realizing he was drunk, Obatala returned to his task of fashioning the new beings; because of his condition he fashioned many imperfect figures. Without realizing this, he called out to *Olorun* to breathe life into his creatures. The next day he realized what he had done and swore never to drink again, and to take care of those who were deformed, thus becoming Protector of the Deformed. The new people built huts as Obatala had done and soon Ife prospered and became a city. All the other gods were happy with what Obatala had done, and visited the land often, except for *Olokun*, the ruler of all below the sky.¹⁸

¹⁸ David A. Anderson, *The Origin of Life On Earth: An African Creation Myth* (Mt. Airy, MD: Sights Productions, 1991).

One other theme of creation stories involve the separation of nature, such as the seas from earth, the sky and the earth, and the celestial bodies like the sun and moon— as is the case in the following Akan sacred narrative:

Akan of Ghana

Nana Nyame, the supreme god, lived in the sky, though not the sky. The sky was very close to earth, occupied by an Old Woman (*Abrewa*) and her children. The only food they ate was fufu. But whenever she prepared the meal the pestle would strike God, meaning they could reach God whenever necessary. This went on for a long time until one day God asked her to stop or God would move to a higher sphere. But God's demands fell on deaf ears and rightly so since she and her children had to eat. So one day God ascended higher so that the pestle was unable to reach anymore. Undaunted by God's action the *Abrewa* instructed her children to pile up all the mortars they could find. Her aim was to restore the lost proximity to God and she almost succeeded. It got to a point where only one mortar was needed to reach God, and after a futile search for the last mortar she instructed her children to remove the original mortar at the bottom of the pile to be placed at the top. This, of course, proved to be a tragic blunder because as soon as the mortar was removed, the pile collapsed and fatally injured some of her children.¹⁹

Creation Stories of (north)Eastern Africa

The Oromo creation story seems to be an amalgamation of the themes discussed thus far. It has elements of the nature separation theme along with elements of deity transformation and deity creation of man/woman:

Oromo of Ethiopia

Waqqa was the creator god who lived in the clouds. He kept the vault of the heavens at a distance from the earth and covered it with stars. He was a benefactor and did not punish. When the earth was flat *Waqqa* asked man to make his own coffin, and when man did this *Waqqa* shut him up in it and pushed it into the ground. For seven years he made fire rain down and the mountains were formed. Then *Waqqa* unearthed the coffin and man sprang forth, alive. Man tired of living alone, so *Waqqa* took some of his blood, and after four days, the blood became a woman whom the man married. They had 30 children, but the man was ashamed of having so many so he hid 15 of them. *Waqqa* then made those hidden children into animals and demons.²⁰

¹⁹ Anthony Ephirim-Donkor, *African Spirituality: On Becoming Ancestors* (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 1997), 29.

²⁰ Untangle Inc., "African Creation Myths," <http://www.mythome.org/creatafr.html> (accessed April 25, 2006).

From the *Wapangwa people of Tanzania*, an account of creation begins like this:

The sky was large, white, and very clear. It was empty; there were no stars and no moon; only a tree stood in the air and there was wind. This tree fed on the atmosphere, and ants lived on it. Wind, tree ants, and atmosphere were controlled by the power of the Word. But the Word was not something that could be seen. It was a force that enabled one thing to create another.²¹

Here the ‘Word’ finds a similar position in the creation myths of the people of West Africa: the Mande, Dogon, Bambara, and Yoruba, where the Cosmic and Divine Word spoke the universe into existence. In these narratives, it is not simply a matter of the Word’s power of creation, but it also seeks to explain *how* the universe came to be.

Creation Stories of Central Africa

Again, we see the ex nihilo theme in the Bushoong creation story:

Bushoong of the Congo

In the beginning there was only darkness, water, and the great god *Bumba*. One day *Bumba*, in pain from a stomach ache, vomited up the sun. The sun dried up some of the water, leaving land. Still in pain, *Bumba* vomited up the moon, the stars, and then nine animals: the leopard, the eagle, the crocodile, the fish, the tortoise, the lightning (who was later exiled to the sky), the white heron, one beetle, and the goat. The last thing that he vomited was mankind. The animals and *Bumba's* three suns then created plants and the rest of the animals.²²

God, Supreme Being, Creator

There is no mistaking that all African peoples accept as true the existence of a Supreme Being, the creator of all things. “Belief in a Supreme Being is a thoroughly negro African conception, current long before there were any established Christian or Moslem [sic] missions in the interior regions of tropical or southern Africa.”²³ Although the names vary as there are languages in Africa, they all are equivalent in the conception of the Supreme Being or God. The word ‘God’ is of Indo-European origin in the Sanskrit root *gheu*, meaning “to invoke” and “to

²¹ Ford, *The Hero with an African Face*, 177.

²² Maria Leach, “An African Cosmogony,” in *The Beginning* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1956), 145-6.

²³ Parrinder, *African Mythology*, 18.

pour, to offer sacrifice.”²⁴ God is an abstract and philosophical entity that possesses divine attributes. It is very difficult to explain the concept of the Supreme; God by definition is beyond description, designation, and category. Each tradition opens the story with the Creator, the Supreme Being, albeit with different names:

Region	People	Name for Creator	Other references
North	Egypt	Khepri (AM)-Ra (Noon)-Atum (PM)	Sun God
North (Sudan)	Ocol (Shilluk)	Juok	Original God
South (S. Africa)	Zulu	Unkulunkulu	The Ancient One
South (Zimbabwe)	Shona	Mwari	“Father, Mother, Son”
South (Zimbabwe)	Wahungwe	Maori	
West (Nigeria)	Yoruba	Olorun	Olodumare
West (Mali)	Mande	Mangala	
West (Dahomey) (Benin)	Fon	Mawu-Lisa	Mawu=male, Lisa=female
West (Mali/ Burkina Faso)	Dogon	Amma	Supreme God
West (Ghana)	Akan/Ashanti	Nana Nyame/Abrewa	Nyame=“the fathomless Spirit”; Abrewa=“The Old Women”
West (Nigeria)	Ijo	Woyengi	The Mother
East (Ethiopia)	Oromo	Waqa	Creator God
East (Tanzania)	Wapangwa	Mulungu	
Central (Congo)	Bushoong	Bumba	The First Ancestor
Central (Cameroon)	Bulu	Mebee	The Creator

Table 1: Supreme Beings: Names for God among the different peoples and regions of Africa.

The stories told about the Creator, that is, creation stories seek to explain the *how* and the *why* of the origins of the world and man. The Creator, first and foremost, is the Molder of All, Giver of Breath and Life, Giver of Rain and Sunshine, One who Brings the Seasons, God of Destiny. God is Spirit, and the Spirit is often said to be transcendent, living in heaven where men/women naturally revere and recognize his greatness. The divine attributes associated with the Spirit usually include descriptions such as all-knowing, all-seeing, and all-doing, eternal. Physical human characteristics are also assigned to the Supreme Being: just, powerful, wise, and

²⁴ Ford, *Hero with an African Face: Mythic Wisdom of Traditional Africa*, 115.

benevolent. The First Ancestor, the Ultimate Great, the Great Spirit is best captured in the following creation story:

Tswana people of Botswana

Modimo was the Creator. He distributed good things, appeared in the east and belonged to the element water. At the same time he was a destroyer, a terrifying creature responsible for drought, hail, cyclones and earthquakes. When these things happened he appeared in the west and was part of the element fire. *Modimo* was also sky and light, earth and root. He was unique and singular. He had no ancestors, no past or future. He pervaded the whole of creation. His name was taboo and could be spoken only by priests and seers.²⁵

The African Goddess

Since the notion of the Divine, the Supreme Being is that of spirit and is limitless, then God is also beyond the human form—neither male nor female. So to merely attach the female gender to the concept of God and then use the term Goddess, will not somehow simply complete the definition or balance the history of the male God. It is important to note that the “Goddess is not simply the feminine face of God.”²⁶ It is interestingly odd that even within the context of most creation stories, the Goddess or female energy is somehow missing. How can we have a legitimate discussion of creation without the extensive mentioning of the woman (female energy)? Even Joseph Campbell concurs with his assertion that “woman with her baby is the basic image of mythology.”²⁷ The reference to woman or the lack thereof is indicative of the woman’s place and the power she has within society. This is one of the inconsistencies in the stories of each region—they range from the woman as central and powerful (Egyptian, Akan, Ijo), to woman as ambiguous (Fon, Yoruba, Zulu), to the non-existent (Bushoong). At this point, it would be a tragic mistake to not inject a possible and highly likely reason for the hidden or absent goddess. One major reason stems from how these creation stories were collected and

²⁵ Untangle Inc., “African Creation Myths.”

²⁶ Ford, *The Hero With an African Face*, 115.

²⁷ Joseph Campbell was an Western mythologist who wrote sparsely and often derisively about African mythology. See Joseph Campbell, *Transformations of Myth Through Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 1.

recorded. The earliest written forms of these once predominantly oral narratives were interpreted by missionaries, explorers, and colonizers (those that came to Africa on a so-called “civilizing mission”). These people were almost always male and Christian. With that said, one can deduce that they also had biases and motives that were present when recording such documents. Because Western Christianity’s Supreme Creator is male, it is possible and highly likely that they supposed that the African’s Supreme Creator was also male, even when the local African account may have suggested otherwise.

The Fon people of now Benin, tells of their creation story of *Lisa*, who was the female energy of the Creator, *Mawu*; and the Akan people whose story includes *Abrewa*, identified as the “Old Women” or the Supreme Being in female form of *Nana Nyame*. This concept of the male/female god is reflected in the notion of Father-Mother God commonly used in Ghana and Zimbabwe within the West African and Shona traditions. The social order of women is also represented in the sexual act descriptions within Egyptian stories. For example, Aset’s position on top of Asur in the conception of Heru is evidence of the very power and influence of women in Egyptian society. In stark contrast, the Kenyan and Ethiopian creation story is all about man. Woman was created because “man” was lonely. In some cases, if women are mentioned, then they are usually given negative attributes or behaviors.

However, unlike the narratives of Eve and the like, *Abrewa* is highly revered even though she was solely responsible for the separation from God and bringing about death. She is never vilified; in fact, she is worshipped and respected for doing all she can for her children, for putting her children first, for feeding them and teaching them all that there is to know. The Old Woman

is thought to be courageous, wise, omniscient and just. She is consulted when there is no other solution. She is the beneficent Mother.²⁸

In the same vein as the Akan sacred narrative featuring *Abrewa*, The Old Woman and her children, I discovered this story from the *Ijo of southern Nigeria*:

Once there as a large field, and in this field stood an enormous iroko tree with large buttresses. One day, the sky darkened, and there descended on the field a large table, a large chair, and an immense “creation stone.” And on the table was a large quantity of earth. Then there was lightning and thunder, and *Woyengi*, the Mother, descended. She seated herself on the chair and placed her feet on the “creation stone.” Out of the earth on the table *Woyengi* molded human beings. But they had no life and were neither man nor woman, and *Woyengi*, embracing them one by one, breathed her breathe into them, and they became living beings. But they were still neither men nor women, and so *Woyengi* asked them one by one to choose to be man or woman, and she made them so, each according to his or her choice. Next *Woyengi* asked them, one by one, what manner of life each would like to lead on earth. Some asked for riches, some asked for children, some for short lives, and all manner of things. And these *Woyengi* bestowed on them one by one, each according to his or her wish. Then *Woyengi* asked them one by one by what manner of death they would return to her. And out of the diseases that afflict the earth they each chose a disease. To all of these wishes *Woyengi* said, “So be it.”²⁹

Community and Complementation

Another focus of analysis centers on the concepts of complementation and community. Whether it relates to god/goddess, good/evil, earth/sky, sun/moon, mortal/immortal, etc., the theme of balance is paramount. It shows that one cannot exist without the other. The introduction of twins within the sacred stories is the foremost example of balance. In some stories, they are

²⁸ Ephirim-Donkor, *African Spirituality*, 31-2.

²⁹ This story was adapted from Ulli Beier, ed., *The Origin of Life and Death: African Creation Myths* (London: Heinemann, 1966), 23-24.

brother and sister who unite in marriage, such as Shu and Tefnut or Geb and Nut of Egyptian mythology; in others, they seem to be two sides of a single being, such as the Nommo of Dogon mythology. The supreme god of the Fon people of West Africa is *Mawu-Lisa*, usually described as brother and sister twins who became the parents of all the other gods, also born as twins. Many African peoples regard twins as special, almost sacred, beings. Twins represent the duality—the interdependency between paired or opposing forces—that is basic to life and science. Some ethnic groups of the Niger and Congo regions believe that twins of opposite sexes are the utmost symbols of this duality.

The community is also connected to this concept of balance. Hence the South African proverb, “I am because you are, because we are; therefore I am.” The Ocolo (Shilluk) story exemplifies community with a socio-political foundation. *Juok* is said to have created each race from the colored clay of that region, a detail that further underscores the importance of political balance and consensus. The Col people divided on the basis of descent through the male’s lineage, trace their ancestry to Nyikang, their first king. Similarly, “. . .the [Akan] story of God, the primordial Old Woman, and Her children points to a conception of community. . .[They] were the First Community or *ebusua*.”³⁰ This ideal community was headed by the Old Woman who taught her children language, morals, and respect for elders. The throne or stool belongs to her and only her children and the children of her female descendents. This is the political structure and thus the matrilineal system practiced by the Akan was established.

³⁰ The *ebusua* is the extended family and members of an *ebusua* are siblings. See Ephirim-Donkor, *African Spirituality*, 33.

Closing the Sacred Circle

Death is the last phase of the creation cycle. Death appears in many of the African creation stories; it provides a summary of the creation cycle and the human spiritual adventure. In many narratives, death appears simultaneously with the manifestation of a woman—the Divine Womb of creation becomes the Divine Tomb of conclusion.

Conclusion

We are living in a time when individuals are diligently searching and asserting their own identity. This has become increasingly more difficult as the world is becoming smaller; it is especially done through culture. If a people fail to anchor themselves in their culture, they can be easily uprooted, alienated from themselves, and reduced to a people without a past—a floating identity lost from the factors that define their worldview and protect their humanity. If we allow this to happen, all our ancestral wisdom and experiences will be washed away in modernity and lost in technology. We will forever seek our identity, but will find it nowhere, which is consequently, the motive for this investigation of African creation stories.

Indeed, we are all connected— by ‘we’ I refer to humans, animals, plants, celestial bodies, and the environment; and this thesis was substantiated through the study of African cosmogony represented by the five regions of the Continent: North, South, East, West and Central. Although there were differences in the telling of the story, the concepts are all the same: One Supreme Being; the Sacred, African Goddess; Balance and Duality; and Ancestors and Community.

Because Africa is so diverse, with numerous ethnic groups and an abundance of languages spoken, this paper is limited. Although a representative sample was taken from all

regions, there is no way I have captured all the creation stories and there is no one correct way to analyze these stories. Since they are living, oral stories, interpretations can vary depending on the people and the culture which they came from. There is also the challenge of remembering the meanings of the “old stories,” and not everyone will understand and relay the traditions in the same way at the same depth. Myths should also be explored on two levels: by the fundamental themes and by the underlying psychological and spiritual meaning expressed. For the scope of this paper, the creation stories were only explored by their fundamental themes based on elemental ideas. Exploration of the psychological and spiritual in detail is outside the scope of this paper. My assumption was that the creation narrative in its entirety will encompass and reflect the government, economic, and moral structures of the society. I was wrong in this assumption as there are many, many sacred narratives that cover these topics in even more detail than the creation story.

The creation stories used came from a variety of sources. My goal was to use the stories already present prior to Africa’s exposure to European Christianity and Islam. However, we must take into account that the observers, transcribers and translators of these stories were usually men who do not share the same beliefs as the people whose stories they are describing. This can result in omissions or misinterpretations based on biases, both deliberate and unintentional, which can greatly change the meaning and ideas of creation. This paper is limited in the exploration of this possibility as discussed in detail previously. In spite of these limitations, this paper has shown that African creation stories are more than naïve, archaic attempts to explain the phenomenal world. Rather, they engage in the fundamental questions all creation stories seek to answer: How is something created from nothing? How is order formed from chaos? How do many come from one? How does the sacred circle of life close and continue to infinity?

African creation stories are not available to us merely for the sake of telling stories or to be consumed by those that hear or read them; they are to be digested and *lived*, shared throughout the African world and passed down through future generations. “When one understands *why* a person does the things one does, it is quite exhilarating . . . That is, finding an anchor for some of the innate depositions a people have [is the quintessential motive for this study].”³¹ This is what truly unites us, instills value in our humanity, and allow us all to identify ourselves as African people—regardless of our geographic dislocations—so that we can properly negotiate our place in the modern world and educe a holistic understanding of the African worldview. Marimba Ani states:

African-Diasporic humanism is derived from the humanistic nature of the African world-view, and grows out of the African conception of the human being. It is an attitude toward life that stresses the importance of human spiritual/emotional experience. It places emphasis on the human spirit. The essence of the human is understood to be her *Soul* and not her conscious intellect alone. The ability of a human being to have power over and to exploit others is not paramount. Rather, human interrelationship and interdependency are recognized as primary needs and part of what validates human experience. African humanism in the Diaspora places value on achieving a special quality of life; on living life to its fullest; on feeling pain and joy deeply. All of that is life. . . African humanism puts value on the survival of the group . . . [it] expresses itself as a concept of the universe in which spiritual realities can be perceived and in the belief in spiritual forces that interrelate all beings and effect us in our daily lives.³²

In closing, this inspiration is best described by the creation story of the *Bulu people of Cameroon*:

A chimpanzee, gorilla, elephant, and two men (a European & an African) were created and given the tools of survival—fire, water, food, weapons, and a book. The Creator returned and asked each where the tools of survival were now. The chimp and gorilla discarded all but the fruit. The elephant could not remember where the tools were. The European discarded the fire and kept the book. The African discarded the book and kept the fire. The book is symbolic of human efforts to control the natural world and humanity within it through reason and intellect—this is the course that Western civilization has taken. On the other hand, fire is a portion of the sun—the giver of life. Fire is symbolic of

³¹ Ephirim-Donkor, *African Spirituality*, xi.

³² Marimba Ani (Dona Richards), *Let the Circle Be Unbroken: The Implications of African Spirituality in the Diaspora* (Trenton, NJ: The Read Sea Press, 1994), 50.

the undying cosmic energy that informs all life, it represents the sacred power that brings forth life through creation and a symbol of sacred wisdom that sees beyond the created world of humanity to the Divine mystery which is its source.³³

Let us all keep the Fire burning!

³³ Ford, *The Hero with an African Face*, 15.

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