

African Tales and Myths

Myths, traditional narratives common to members of a tribe, race, or nation; frequently include the supernatural and explain a natural phenomenon. Like classical myths, African myths were passed down orally from one generation to another. Although there are many different tribes and countries in Africa, scholars have identified common characteristics in the myths. All West African religions have a Supreme God, the name varying from one culture to another. There are basic questions, such as Who made the world? Who created man? Why does man have to die?

Unlike the anthropomorphic Greek and Roman gods and goddesses, the African Supreme God does not intervene in the lives of humans. The Supreme God is not worshiped directly; he is approached through lesser gods or orisha. In addition to the concept of polytheism, there is the concept of animism, the belief that everything in nature has a spirit.

Another part of the religion is ancestor worship which is vital to the well-being of the living. The prayer to a Christian saint can be compared, in some ways, to the invoking of the spirit of one's ancestors. There is the worship of the tribal ancestors, as well as ancestors of the family. Parrinder discusses African religion in terms of a triangle. As he explains, the worship of the Supreme God is at the top of the triangle; the belief in lesser gods and ancestor worship represents the sides of the triangle; at the base of the triangle, there are forces, such as animism, magic, and medicine. Man must place himself in the middle, by learning to live in harmony with the forces.

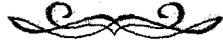
Obviously, there are many different versions of the myths in various African cultures. The myth "the Perverted Message" is just one example. The African creation myth "Life and Death," a Hausa Tale, and "the Origin of Death," a Hottentot Tale, are two other examples. In the Yoruba, one of the three major tribes in Nigeria, along with the Ibo and the Hausa/Fulani, the Chief god, Oludumare, or Olorun, has a different function from Obatala, the god of creation. Shango, the Yoruba god of thunder and lightning, is said to have been the third king of the Yoruba.

Myths are different from tales. There are two types of tales: *Tatsuniyoyi* are entertaining stories about animals and people; the aim of the tales is to teach lessons in social, moral, and personal behavior. *Labarai* are tales that are geared toward the male members of the tribe. These tales recount cultural, family, or tribal history. Parrinder explains that some animal fables have been exported, as well as imported. For example, there are versions of the stories from the Moslem world, stories from the *Arabian Nights*, especially from East Africa. Other stories can be traced from Africa to India in such collections as the Hindu *Panchatantra* or the Buddhist *Jataka* tales. Others, such as Grimm's *Fairy Tales*, are from Europe.

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Why the Earth Was Peopled



Efik

Abasi rose, sat there; made everything above and everything below, the water, the forest, the river, the springs, the beasts of the forest; he made every kind of thing in the whole world. He did not make man.

All the men lived up above, with Abasi. At that time there was no man living on the earth below, there were only the beasts of the forest, the fish in the waters, the birds which we see in the air and many other beings which we have no need to mention. But man did not exist on the earth below. All the men were in exile, they dwelt with Abasi in his village. When Abasi sat down to eat they joined him and Altai.

At last Altai called Abasi; he answered, and she said to him: "Things are not right as they are now. You have the earth down there, you own heaven here in which they live, you have made a whole large place to dwell in and unless you make a place for the men too it is not right. Find some way of establishing them on the earth so they can live there and light a fire that will warm heaven a bit, for it gets very cold up here when there is no fire on earth."

The Story of Creation



Fan

Before anything at all was made, Mbere, the Creator, he made man out of clay. He took clay and he shaped it into a man. This was how man began, and he began as a lizard. This lizard, Mbere put it into a bowl of sea water. Five days, and this is what happened; five days passed with him in the bowl of water, and he had put him there, inside it. Seven days passed; he was in there for seven days. And the eighth day, Mbere took a look at him, and now the lizard came out; and now he was outside. But it was a man. And he said to the Creator: "Thank you!"

The Story of the Beginning of Things



Fan

This is what my father taught me, and he had it from his father, and so for a long, long time back, since the very beginning.

In the beginning of everything, in the very beginning, before anything was at all, neither man nor beast nor plant, nor sky nor earth, nothing, nothing, there was God, and he was called Nzame. And the three who are Nzame, we call them Nzame, Mbere and Nkwa. And first of all Nzame made the sky and the earth, and the sky he kept for himself. The earth, he breathed on it, and under his breath were born the land and the water, each in its place.

Nzame made everything; sky, sun, moon, stars, beasts and plants . . . everything. And when he had finished everything, just as we see it now, he called Mbere and Nkwa, and he showed them his work.

“Is it all right?” he asked them.

“Yes,” they answered. “You have done well.”

“Is there something more to make?”

And Mbere and Nkwa answered. “We see a great many beasts, but we do not see their chief; we see many plants, but we do not see their master.”

So to give a master to everything, among all the creatures, they chose the elephant, because he was wise; the tiger, because he was strong; the monkey, because he was clever and quick.

But Nzame wanted to do better still, and so between the three of them they made a creature almost like themselves; one gave him strength, another power, the third, beauty. Then the three said:

“Take the earth,” they said to him “From now on you are master of everything that is. Like us, you have life; everything is subject to you; you are the master.”

Nzame, Mbere and Nkwa returned to their dwelling in the sky; the new creature stayed alone, down here on earth, and everything obeyed him. But among the animals the elephant was still the first, the tiger the second in rank, and the monkey third, for so it was that Mbere and Nkwa had chosen first of all.

Nzame, Mbere and Nkwa named the first man Fam, which means strength.

Vain of his power, his strength and beauty for in these three things he surpassed the elephant, the tiger and the monkey, vain of having conquered all the other animals, this first creature turned out badly; he became proud, would no longer adore the gods and began to despise them, singing:

Yeye, oh, la, yeye!
God above, man below,
Yeye, oh, la, yeye!
God is god, Man is man,
To each his own place, let him keep to it.

God heard this song; he listened.

“Who’s singing down there?”
“Find out!” replied Fam. “Who is singing?”
“Yeye, oh la, yeye!”
“I want to know who is singing?”
“Eh?” cried Fam. “Well, it’s me!”

In a rage, God called Nzalan, the thunder. “Nzalan, come here!”

And Nzalan came running, with a great noise: “Boo, boo, boo-oo!” And the fire from heaven swept the forest. Beside that fire, all forest fires since are only torches. Phew! Phew! Phew! . . . everything flared up. The earth was covered with woods, as it is now; the trees burned, the plants, the bananas and manioc, even the ground-nuts, everything was scorched up, everything dead. But unluckily, in creating this first man, God had said to him: “You shall never die. What God has once given he does not take back.” The first man was burned; what became of him after that I don’t know. He is living somewhere, but where? My forefathers never told me what became of him, so I don’t know. But wait a bit.

God looked at the earth, all black, with nothing at all on it, idle. He was ashamed, and wanted to make something better.

Nzame, Mbere and Nkwa made palaver together, in their council house, and this is what they did. Over the ground, all blackened and covered with cinders, they spread a new layer of earth; a tree sprouted, it grew. . . grew still more, and when one of its seeds fell to earth a new tree was born, and whenever a leaf fell off it grew and grew, and began to crawl, and it became an animal. . . an elephant, a tiger, an antelope, a tortoise. . . every kind of animal, And when a leaf fell into the water it began to swim, and there was a fish ... a mullet, a crab, an oyster, a mussel . . . every kind of fish. The earth became once more that which it had been and which it still is today. And the proof, children, that my words are true, is that if you dig up the earth in certain places you will sometimes find, right underneath, a stone, black and hard, but which breaks easily; throw that stone into the fire and it will burn. For you know very well:

When the whistle sounds
The elephant comes.
Thanks, elephant.

This stone is what remains of the ancient forests, the forests that were burned up.

Nzame, Mbere and Nkwa, however, consulted again.

“We must have a chief to command all the animals,” said Mbere.

“Certainly we must,” said Nkwa.

“Yes,” said Nzame, “we will make another man again, a man like Fam, with the same arms and legs, but we will give him a different head and he shall be death.” And so it was done. That man, my friends, was like you and me.

The man who was the first man on earth, the father of us all, Nzame named him Sekume, but God did not want him to live alone. He said to him: “Make yourself a wife out of a tree.” Sekume made himself a wife, and she walked about and he called her Mbonwe.

In making Sekume and Mbonwe, Nzame made them in two parts: the outside part, this which you call Gnoul, the body, and the other which lives inside the Gnoul and which we all call Nsissim.

Nsissim that makes the shadow; the shadow and Nsissim, they are both the same thing, it is this Nsissim which gives life to the Gnoul, it is Nsissim that wanders about in the night when one is asleep, but Nsissim never dies. While it is in the body, Gnoul, do you know where it dwells? In the eye. Yes, it dwells in the eye, and that little bright speck you see right in the middle, that is Nsissim.

The star above,
The fire below,
The embers on the hearth,
The soul in the eye.
Cloud, smoke, and death.

Sekume and Mbonwe lived happily on the earth, and they had three sons. They named them: the first Nkoure (the stupid, bad one); the second, Bekale (he who thinks of nothing); and this one bore on his back Mfere, the third (he who is good and clever). They also had daughters. How many? I don't know, but these three also had children, and these had children again. Mfere is the father of our tribe, and the others the fathers of other tribes.

Fam, however, the very first man, God shut him up in the earth, and then he took a very big stone and stopped up the hole. Ah, the wicked Fam! For a long, long time he dug away; one fine day he got out. Who had taken his place? Other man. And who is in a rage with them about it? Fam. Who is always trying to do harm to them? Fam. Who hides in the forest to kill them, and under the water to wreck their canoe? Fam, the famous Fam. Don't speak too loud; he may be there this minute listening to us.

Keep very still,
Fam is on the listen
To make trouble for men.
Keep very still!

Then God gave a commandment to the men he had made. Calling Sekume, Mbonwe and their sons, he called everyone, big and little, great and small.

"From now on," he said to them, "these are the laws which I give you, and which you must obey.

You shall steal nothing from your own tribe.
You shall not kill those who have done you no wrong.
You shall not go and eat other people in the night.

This is all that I ask; live peacefully in your villages. Those who give heed to my commandments shall be rewarded, I will give them their wages, but the others I shall punish. Thus."

This is how God punishes those who do not obey him.

After their death they go wandering in the night, suffering and wailing, and while the earth is in darkness, in the hours of fear, they enter the villages, killing and wounding all whom they meet, doing all the harm that they can.

In their honour we perform the funeral dance, the kedsam-kedsam; it does no good at all. We set out for them the most savoury dishes; they feast and laugh, but it does no good at all. And when all those whom they once knew are dead, then only do they hear Ngofio, Ngofio the bird of death; they become all at once thin, very thin, and they are dead! Where do they go to, my children? You know as well as I do, that before crossing the great river they stay for a long, long time on a big flat rock: they are cold, terribly cold. Br-r-r . . .

Cold and death, death and cold,
I would close my ears.
Cold and death, death and cold,
Misery, O my mother, misery.

And when all have passed over the sorrowful Bekun, then for a long time Nzame shuts them up in Ottolane, the bad place where they see only misery... misery.

As for the good ones, one knows that after death they return to the villages; but they are full of good feeling towards mankind, the funeral feast and the mourning dance rejoice their hearts. In the night-time they approach those whom they knew and loved, they bring them pleasant dreams; whisper to them what they must do in order to live long, to gain riches, to have faithful wives (just listen, now, you down thereby the door!), to have plenty of children and kill lots of animals when they go hunting. The very last elephant I killed, it was thus, my friends, that I learned of his coming.

And when all those whom they knew are dead then only do they hear Ngofio, Ngofio the bird of death; all at once they become fat, very fat—even too fat—and they are dead! Where do they go, my children? You know that as well as I do. God takes them up on high and sets them beside him in the evening star. From there they look down and see us, they are happy whenever we honour their memory and it is the eyes of all the dead people that make this star shine so brightly.

This is what I have learned from my forefathers. I, Ndumemba, was taught it by my father, who had it from his father, and where the first learnt it from I don't know; I was not yet born. So.

The Origin of Death



Hottentot

The moon dies and comes back to life again. She said to the hare: “Go to man and say to him: ‘Just as I die and return to life, so should you die and become alive again.’”

The hare came to man and, said: “Just as I die and do not return to life, so must you die and not come back to life.” When he returned the moon said; “What message did you give to man?” “I said to him: ‘Just as I die and do not return to life so must you die and not come back to life.’”

“What!” cried the moon. “You told him that?” And she took a stick and hit him on his mouth, splitting it open.

Lie and Truth



Malinke

One day Lie and Truth went on a journey together.

Lie said politely to his companion: "You must do the talking everywhere we go, for if I am recognized no one will receive us."

At the first house they entered it was the master's wife who welcomed them; the master came home at nightfall and at once asked for something to eat. His wife said: "I have not prepared anything yet." Now at midday she had prepared dinner for two, and had hidden half of it away. Though her husband knew nothing of this he was very angry all the same, because he had come in very hungry from the fields. Turning to the strangers he said: "Do you think this is the way a good housewife should act?"

Lie wisely kept silence; but Truth, obliged to reply, answered with sincerity that a good housewife, should have everything prepared for her husband's return. The wife of the host, very angry with the strangers who interfered in her household affairs, turned them out of doors.

At the second village they came to, Lie and Truth found some children busily dividing a sterile cow, very fat, which they had just killed.

When the travelers went to the chief's house they recognized the children, who had just brought the chief the head and other parts of the cow, saying; "Here is your share." Now everyone knows that it is always the chief who gives the shares in a distribution of this kind.

The chief, addressing the strangers who had watched all this, asked them: "Who do you think is in command here?"

"It seems," said Truth, "that the children command!" At these words the chief fell into a terrible fury and had the impertinent strangers driven away.

Then Lie said to Truth: "Really, I can't let you look after our affairs any longer, or we shall die of hunger. From now on I must provide myself."

At the next village, which they reached shortly after, they settled themselves under a tree near a well. Loud cries arose from the village, and they soon learned that the king's favourite was dead.

A servant, overcome with grief, came to draw some water. Lie said to her: "What disaster has happened, that you are weeping so and the whole village is plunged in grief?" She said: "It is because our good mistress, the king's favourite, is dead."

"What" said Lie. "All this fuss for a little thing like that? Go and tell the king to cease lamenting, for I can bring dead people back to life, even though they have been dead for several years."

The king sent a fine sheep to the strangers, to welcome them, and told Lie to wait a while, and he would call upon his talent at a suitable time.

The next day, and the day after that, the king again sent a fine sheep, with the same message to Lie. Lie pretended to lose patience, and sent word to the king that he was going to leave the next morning unless he were called upon. The king commanded Lie to appear before him next day

At the hour set, Lie appeared before the king. The king began by asking the price of his services, and at last offered him a hundredth part of all he possessed. Lie refused, saying: "I want the half of your possessions. Before witnesses the king accepted.

Then Lie ordered a large hut to be built just beside the spot where the favourite was buried. When the hut was built and roofed Lie entered it alone, with some tools for digging, and made sure that all the openings were well closed.

After a long spell of what seemed desperate work, they could hear Lie talking aloud, as though he were quarreling with several people; then he came out and said to the king: "Here's a pretty state of affairs! As soon as I had brought your wife to life again your father caught hold of her by the feet, saying. 'Let go of this woman! What use is she on the earth? What can she do for you? If, on the other hand, you bring me back to life, I will give you not one half but three quarters of my son's possessions, for I am far richer than he.' He had scarcely finished when his father appeared pushed him aside, and in his turn offered me even the whole of your possessions; then he in turn was pushed aside by his father, who offered me still more. The truth is that all your ancestors are there now, and I don't know which one to listen to. But to cut matters short, tell me one thing only: which shall I bring back to life, your father or your wife?"

The king did not hesitate an instant. "My wife," he said. For he trembled at the mere thought of that terrible old man, who had kept him so long in tutelage, reappearing once more.

"Doubtless," said Lie. "But you see your father offers me a great deal more than you promise, and I really can't let such a chance go by . . . unless," he added, seeing how frightened the king was, "unless you will give me the same sum to be rid of him that you promised to give me for bringing your wife back to life."

"That would certainly be best!" cried all the marabouts, who had helped in the assassination of the late king.

"Oh, well!" said the king with a deep sigh. "Let my father stay where he is, and my wife with him."

So it was settled, and Lie received, for not having brought anyone back to life at all, one half the riches of the king, who promptly remarried in order to forget his loss.

The Human Race



Masai

Three men went one after another to Ouende, to tell him their needs. The first one said: "I want a horse." The other said: "I want some dogs to hunt with in the jungle." The third said: "I want to refresh myself."

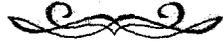
And Ouende gave to each what he wanted: to the first, a horse; to the second, some dogs; to the third, a woman.

The three men went away. But the rain fell, so that they had to stay in the jungle for three days. Meantime the woman prepared food for them, for all three. The men said: "Let us return to Ouende." And they went.

All three of them then asked for wives. And Ouende willingly changed the horse into a woman, and the dogs into women.

The men went away. Now, the woman who came from the horse is greedy; the women who came from the dogs are spiteful; but the first wife, she whom Ouende gave to one of them, is good; she is the mother of the human race.

The Spider and the Mason-fly



Ngbandi People

The spider and the mason-fly went to the forest to hunt. The mason-fly discovered a dead elephant and told the spider. Spider said: 'Remember, I found it, not you, I want all that meat, not you!'

The mason-fly was sad and went to his uncle: 'Uncle, what shall I do to get some of that elephant's meat?' His uncle told him, and Mason-fly went back to the elephant, crept into the body through the hole the arrow had made, and waited.

Soon, Spider arrived and started carving up the elephant, wanting to carry all the meat home that day. Then the mason-fly started making noises from inside: 'Hooo, Hooo!' Spider was terrified, for he thought it was the spirit of the mighty elephant. So Spider shouted: 'All right, all right, Mason-fly found it, he may have it all.' And he went away.

Spider Tries His Wives



Spider had two wives, Dale and Kondo. He loved Dale more than Kondo. Dale always got what she wanted. One day Spider decided to try his wives to see who loved him most. He pretended to be terribly ill, thrashing his hands and feet like an animal in the throes of death. Then he lay quite still. As soon as Kondo realized that her husband was dead, she wept bitterly. Dale, however, did not cry at all, she only wailed a little, because it was the custom, but Spider could hear that she felt no grief. So, Spider got up, and Kondo was overjoyed: 'You are cured!' Dale was chased away for good. Spider now gave all his favours to Kondo.

The Dog and the Cock



Long ago, the dog and the cock lived together in the forest, for in those days they were still wild animals, and did not belong to Man.

One day they decided to go and steal Woman, so they went and abducted her. Man went to his uncle and asked him what to do. Uncle told him, for he was very wise. Man took four bags of maize and pounded them. Then he went near the village of the cock and scattered the maize on the road. Then he went to the village of the dog, took the bitch and all the puppies and put them in a bag.

The dog came back from hunting just at that moment, and tried to stop him, but Man wounded him with his spear. The dog howled with pain, and the cock, on hearing this, decided to go and help his ally. On the way from his village, however, he found the maize and could not resist the temptation. He ate it all up, and by the time he arrived at the dog's village, Man had gone with his bag.

Next day, Man went to the forest and shot a deer; then he went to the dog's village and put the dead animal down on the road. That done, he went to the village of the cock, took the hen and the chicks and put them all in his bag. The cock came flying home and attacked the man, but the spear wounded him. The dog in his village heard the Cock crow and came running to help him, but on his path he found the carcass of the deer and he could not resist the temptation, so he ate it all. By the time he arrived at the cock's village, the man was gone with his bag. The cock and the dog then decided to go to the village of Man to beg for their families to be returned. They understood they had to bring Woman, so they took her out of the dog's house where they had hidden her and went with her to the house of Man.

Having received his wife back, Man said: 'You may stay here, for I will keep your wives and children with me, just in case you deceive me again.'

This is how the dog and the cock became domesticated.