

‘A preliminary attempt to situate sub-Saharan African ‘creation’ myths within a long-range intercontinental comparative perspective ’

ABSTRACT: paper for the Kyoto/Harvard Round Table, comparative myth section, 6-8 June, 2005
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Subsaharan Africa has usually been left out from comprehensive intercontinental myth comparisons (e.g. Fontenrose, Ginzburg), for a number of reasons. Deriving from practically illiterate traditions, the construction of an African mythological corpus appears highly artificial – especially since dominant approaches to African religion have stressed ritual’s praxeological microdramatics over the *in vitro* logocentric verblatness of myth. The available African material tends to be fragmentary, heterogeneous, often poorly collected and poorly published, and rather inaccessible to non-Africanists. It often appears to be contaminated with Islamic, Christian, and general West- or South Asian influences, which may be held to obscure what may be assumed to be older, more original and local layers. Africanists have gone on to concentrate on more topical subjects, seeking to debunk modern myths with their respective disciplines’ North Atlantic rationality rather than studying old myths whose logic leaves them confused – confronting them with forms of African pre-modernity which political correctness has a problem appreciating. It is mainly in three domains, widely apart, that African myths still manage to captivate Africanist researchers: political legitimation, African literature, and rock art studies.

Now that the past two decades’ concerted efforts of geneticists, linguists, archaeologists, anthropological comparativists, and myth analysts is beginning to yield an increasingly coherent and convincing long-range picture of intercontinental population movements, cultural flows, exchanges and feed-backs with a time depth of tens of thousands of years and more, it is imperative that Africa’s myths are reconsidered from this perspective. All the more so, because the African continent plays a pivotal role in the geneticists’ reconstructions, both as the cradle of anatomically modern man (‘Out of Africa, ca. 150,000 BP), and as the scene of massive re-immigration from Asia in far more recent periods.

- a. *Was there really any original ‘Out of Africa’ package to spread across the world, and did it contain any detectable mythical material?*
- b. *Was any primal mythical material left to percolate inside Africa, and could we perhaps identify it through the analysis of verbal data from the historical period, in combination with archaeological material?*
- c. *What, if any, was the effect of (Eur-)Asian re-immigration on the corpus of African myths now available?*

These are questions that only a few years ago would be dismissed to the realm of science fiction. Yet it is with this kind of questions in mind – ultimately leading us to identify mankind’s oldest stories – that Michael Witzel (2001) proposed a radical distinction between the ‘Laurasian’ (Asia-North America) and ‘Gondwana’ (sub-Saharan African, cf. Australia and New Guinea) mythical complexes, to be compared not so much by individual traits but as wholes.

‘While Laurasian mythology can be described as being highly interested in origins, especially the origins of the universe and the succession of the various generations of the gods and that of four subsequent ages, the mythologies of Africa and Australia, New Guinea generally do not take notice of this question and generally confine themselves to describe the emergence of humankind in an already existing world. (...) It is significant that certain motifs are altogether missing in this Gondwana belt. Typical examples are the lack of creation myths that tell the origin of the world or of the lack of flood myths, or of details such as the lack of female witches.’ (Witzel 2001: 5). On the other hand, the notion of mankind’s origin from a tree-trunk appears a positive Gondwana trait, peripherally retained in some Laurasian contexts and perhaps revealing the oldest pan-Gaea layer.

What I propose to do in the present paper is to take a fresh (though necessarily selective, and methodologically tentative) look at ‘the’ sub-Saharan African mythical ‘corpus’; see if structural wholes can be reconstructed and compared; assess if the traits identified by Witzel stand out on closer scrutiny and if other such traits may be found; and finally address the three questions a-b-c as highlighted above.