

NOTE AND DISCUSSIONS

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MYTHOLOGIES OF THE WORLD'S ORIGINS IN AFRICA

THE CREATION AND ORGANIZATION OF THE UNI"ERSE

The myth (whose different definitions we need not enumerate here) cannot be categorized. It has an autonomous status. Imbued as it is with religious ideas, it is in practice an indispensable part of the African liturgy. It is often a necessary component of the rite, sustaining the thread of certain ceremonies. What we call *drame sacré* is, with all its implied formalism, a dramatization of the myth, or what amounts to the same thing, an actualization of holy scriptures.

In Africa theology rarely resembles the ecclesiastical logomachy of the West. It is rather a collection of didactic experiences (which does not exclude their possible amorality), presented in an epic form. Backed up by other less expressive forms of

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the oral tradition, the myth or legend can fulfill the function of conserving an ethical heritage.

Explaining the origins of the world and instituting conceptual categories and systems of conventional representation, the myth of the creation defines the deity through his actions without describing his appearance precisely. It seeks at the same time the meaning of human existence in the whole of created things. As a result man assumes a truly cosmic role and even ventures into domains that are largely beyond his physiological means. Thus he plays the role of an amateur demiurge or a sorcerer's apprentice.

The use of symbols characterizes the particular hieratic language of the myth. We sometimes assist in the persistent intrusion of foreign symbolism, as when the South-Congolese peoples adopted in the fifteenth century for their own use the votive nails of medieval Christianity and even transformed the latin cross into a magic symbol. A profound understanding of signs and symbolism is revealed to man during the final stages of his initiation, and sometimes only to chosen individuals. But a superficial acquaintance with sacred texts—the Bambara describe it as "light knowledge"—is sufficient in the majority of cases for the layman's daily usage.

In the absence of a systematic science, a myth contains, beneath its allegorical mask, the essence of empirical knowledge relating to surrounding nature and to the entire universe. The method employed then usually proceeds from the concrete to the metaphysical, leaving large voids in the domain of the abstract, as is eloquently proven by the vocabularies of the majority of known African civilizations, which are obliged to borrow or assimilate numerous foreign terms.

Because of their incredible thematic wealth, their dispersal, and their easy corruptibility, African mythologies, offer a vast and difficult field of study. In spite of the already voluminous bibliography, as a result in particular—at least in what concerns the western part of the continent—of the work of the French ethnographic school under the direction of Marcel Griaule, this research in fact has only just begun.

In our opinion, the functional importance of the myth has been exaggerated by certain authors of this school, as opposed

to the German and Anglo-Saxon schools which for their part ignore it, sometimes to the benefit of other more constructive social factors. It seems to us, after all due reflection, that it is rather a question of emphasis than a real controversy... and, as often happens, the truth lies somewhere in between.

The material content of the myth is sometimes buried under poetic trappings or obscured by an overuse of metaphors which make it more a beautiful literary work than a philosophical scheme, properly speaking. But this is perhaps the result of its recent depreciation, and of the wear-and-tear of extensive usage.

At any rate, one of the principal objectives of the myth (in its effective original form) is to reconcile humanity with the rhythm of the cosmos by teaching it ways of utilizing the forces that the cosmos produces, by opening doors to sacred matters, and by imposing on it an eternal cyclical movement according to a chronology that does not depend on this world... If we have just expressed ourselves in the language of the theoretician, it is because the subject itself is situated, except for the terminology, squarely in the middle of a specific dialectic. It matters little, in principle, that this dialectic is relegated to very narrow and rigid logical compartments which leave only little room for speculation.

The idea of chaos, understood as a preexistent substance, is frequently found at the beginning of the story. Nevertheless, we know that certain South African ethnic groups, such as the Bassouto, say that the world was never created... because it has been here since time immemorial, with the exception of the shepherd and his flock, which came later. The paleonigrific peoples of the Cameroons, grouped under the inexact name of Kirdi, believe that fire was the initial element, later inundated by water, and that the first humans were post-diluvian creatures. Frequently, the world in its beginnings is envisaged as an immense sea of mud. This is particularly the case with the Sénoufo, Dogon, Kono, and Bozo. The Bambara, instead, imagine at the origin of things an emptiness in a rotating, generating movement. As we see from this, the images and parables veil the mystery which is rationally inaccessible, and this veil is raised only before very few initiates.

In spite of the astonishing elaboration of certain Sudanese

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doctrines, having benefitted from sympathetic analysts (sometimes too sympathetic, it seems to us), the African philosophical systems rarely appear as genuine unities. Their components are dispersed and lack a logical coordination. They exist in isolation or they are reduced to a single ethnic circle, as is the case of the proverbs that concern the scales used to weigh gold powder among the Akan peoples.

In its present state of conservation, all this knowledge appears fragmentary and filled with gaps. It is difficult to decipher, all the more since the keys to the treasures of the symbolism, often heavy and purposely esoteric, are now lost.

So that we may understand better the complexity of the language of myth, let us note briefly some well-known examples, widely referred to by the bibliography on the subject.

For the Bambara, the universe is animated by dynamic forces, divine in origin but which man can influence, gathering them and orienting them in the desired direction by the modulating action of blood sacrifices. The real world that we perceive is the third of a series; and the fourth (and last) is the world of the future. It is the result of a creative energy, the *zo*, produced by the vibrations—the *yéré-yéréli*—of the primordial void called *gla*. This mute substance gives out a sonorous reply in answer to the call of the “voice” emitted by the vibrations, and from the union of the two is born a humid substance called *zo soumalè*. The two *gla* then come into conflict and this conflict is followed by a cosmic explosion that ejects onto the earth (now fertile) a heavy and potent material which will be the future domain of Pemba. At the same time signs appear prefiguring things in gestation. After these preliminaries the work of creation begins under the supervision of the intelligence, called *yo*, and involves the ordering of life into twenty-two fundamental elements. In agitating the *yo*, the twenty-two fertilizing spires then give life, each in his specific morphological category, to beings, plants, and things. This laborious period is marked by upheavals and establishing order. And the appearance of man in no way settles the situation.

These complicated narratives seem however all to proceed from the following scheme: the creative spirit *yo* begets three

beings named respectively Faro, Pemba and Téliko. Faro, the first of the three, is the master of the Word. He creates seven heavens corresponding to the seven parts of the earth which he subsequently fertilizes with life-giving rain. Téliko is the spirit of the air, which, once liquified, gives life to creatures and conceives aquatic twins, ancestors of the fishermen, sorko-bozo, the first men. After whirling in space for seven years, Pemba creates the earth, with its mountains and valleys. He then transforms himself into a grain of *balanza*, or what the botanists call *Acacia albida*, and sprouts into a tree, its avatar. Mixing dust with his saliva, Pemba then creates a woman, Mouso koroni, and after breathing into her a soul, *ni*, and a double, *dia*, he makes her his wife. The animals and plants are the products of this marriage. Men, born of Karo but materially dependent upon Pemba, venerate the latter. They are immortal, becoming seven-year-old children again each time they reach the age of fifty-nine. They live unclothed, have no physiological needs, and neither speak nor work. Insane with jealousy, Mouso koroni attacks directly at the root of the evil. Roaming the land, she mutilates the sexual organs of both men and women, thus instituting the obligation of circumcision and excision. From then on, misfortunes, sickness and death befall humanity—the golden age is over. Untamable, dirtying the earth with her impure touch, Mouso koroni redeems herself, before dying, by teaching man to keep him from hunger the techniques of agriculture.

The reign of Pemba, which becomes tyrannical and increasingly blood-thirsty, ends when man, after having been instructed in the use of fire, returns exhausted to Faro who proves to be very accommodating and useful. He gives man, in order to assure his procreation, tomatoes which when eaten transform themselves miraculously into blood and a foetus. In the same way, women give birth for a period of time to twins with supple limbs. Longevity is regained and work is banished ... But not for long because Pemba, feeling himself overshadowed, re-introduces all the misery, but he is then defeated in a great battle with Faro. The latter rids himself in turn of the over ambitious Téliko who tries to take power over the world. Henceforth mortal and provided with articulated limbs in order

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to be able to subsist, man is then pitied by Faro, who by way of consoling him, teaches him to speak (and that of course causes other complications). Single births become the rule and twins, a rare blessing.

The organization of the world under the aegis of Faro then progresses by stages and each upheaval is compensated for by the acquisition of new knowledge or technique. The present order is only a phase in the perpetual progression of the universe. Before attaining its final phase, of purity and perfection (as the creative spirit *yo* has imagined it), Faro will fertilize the earth with more water, words will be revealed to humanity, and other civilizations will follow.

The Dogon myth of creation uses allegories and symbols which differ according to whether it addresses itself to the layman or to the initiated, and it uses at the same time different epic themes. In the entanglement of sacred narratives the theme of the creative word, sensitive to magic arithmetic, seems to compose an independent cycle, which has perhaps come from abroad and has superimposed itself on themes that presuppose an intellectual substance more specifically paleo-African. In the minds of the Dogon theologians the coexistence of the completely impersonal idea of a supreme celestial god and of another god in the form of a male, a jealous husband, seems to confirm in effect the presence of two (or more) cultural strata from different ages. For the moment it is impossible to say more.

This primordial god Ama or Amma, undoubtedly in order to relieve his oppressive solitude, began one day to throw into space pellets of earth, thus creating the stars. He also molded two spherical vessels, one ornamented with spirals of red copper, the other with spirals of white metal. They are the sun, which favors the black generations, and the moon, which favors the white generations. Next the divine potter fashions the Earth, his wife, out of clay, but after the first embrace her clitoris, represented by a huge white anthill, raises itself to rival the male sex. She is crushed by Amma and from that time on all women must be excised as a sign of their submission.

From this first union an ungrateful son is born. He is the pale fox, *yourougou*, whose bad character is attributed to the fact that he was conceived by an unexcised mother.

Afterwards, Amma again fertilizes the earth with rain, and the earth gives birth to the twins *nommo*, the precursors of a human couple. But in reality they are not at all human, because they have red eyes, their limbs are not supple, and their bodies are covered with green hair, a promise of future vegetation under whose sign man as a cultivator will later build his future.

The mythical actions of the *nommo* in any case have lasting consequences for the world.

One of the twins, seeing his mother-earth naked, makes a skirt of the twisted damp fibers of baobab to cover her. But unfortunately, the *yourougou*—a bachelor in search of a woman—tears the dress away from the earth and penetrates into the anthill, thus committing the first incest and letting flow the first menstrual blood, which colors the fibers of the skirt red. At this moment the genius-children, *yeban*, enter the story. They are conceived on this occasion as are the *andoumboulou*, their children.

Following this incestuous act, the earth becomes impure and unworthy of her demiurge master-husband, who alone continues the work of creation. It is based, as with the Bambara, on a plan of twenty-two organic classes. He fashions out of clay the first human couple, which begets in its turn eight immortal characters, bisexual and parthenogenetic. From these eight ancestors are born eighty-four descendants who are dispersed throughout the world and who found the principal human branches.

The first eight ancestors are exact emanations of the great *nommo*, the personification of the fertilizing rain water and of the intelligent word. After going through many metamorphoses in the depths of the womb-anthill, they identify themselves with *nommo*, rejoining him in heaven.

Men, grouped into eight families, from then on suffer death, the punishment for violating a prohibition. They have a language, live from the eight grains of the divine fonio called *pô*, struggle against the intrigues of the pale fox, make sacrifices to their invisible masters and work at the industries taught them by their blacksmith forebear.

The grain of the fonio (bot: *Digitaria exilis*) plays together

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with the idea of the infinitely small an essential role in the cosmology of the fishermen Sorko-Bozo where it is considered the basic cell of the structure of the universe.

The number eight has a special significance for the Dogon philosophy. The eight primordial ancestors are the founders of the eight principal Dogon families (which makes one think moreover of the mystical structure of certain Akan societies, with the best-known example that of the eight ancient Baoulé tribes). Eight grains of different nutritious species were divided among these families.

Following a disagreement over these grains, two ancestors who have stolen the fonio are forced to leave the sky, thereby disturbing the balance of the eight. The first ancestor, instructed by one of the *nommo* in the use of the word and by a miraculous ant¹ in the skills of the trades (mainly weaving) then applies himself to the construction of the cosmic shell. This can be understood as an allegory of the Dogon ontological system.

The ancestral demiurge then steals from the *nommo* the sacred fire in order to install the first forge on the surface of the cosmic shell. This fact irritates the *nommo*. They break his limbs and after throwing him down to earth, condemn him to work the fields perpetually. Out of a feeling of solidarity or for other reasons whose true nature escapes us the seven other ancestors descend in turn from the shell and establish themselves on man's earth. An incident then occurs between the last two participants in this massive parachute drop when the eighth participant arrives at the destination before the seventh, thus breaking the order of presence. Enraged, this seventh ancestor makes a decision which is quite beyond our comprehension: he changes himself into a snake which man kills and eats as a sacrifice. It seems, moreover, that this seventh ancestor offers himself as a willing victim only after swallowing the eighth

¹ In a general way insects often play an important role in this mythology, parallel to the civilizing ancestors. Thus for the Bochimán and the Hottentot, the praying mantis personifies the messenger of the celestial gods, mistresses of the elements, while the spider animates the folklore of many of the great ethnic groups of West Africa, as for example the Akan. For its part the lowly plant louse called *kpakpanvinidiepo* symbolizes, with the Bété of the Ivory Coast, human intelligence. These examples, it goes without saying, do not encompass the whole list.

member of the group, the possessor of speech. Evidently, he could not digest him easily because he vomited him soon after in the form of a pile of stones, which has become the altar of the *lélé*. This name in fact goes back to a being who later rejoins, as the ninth member, the group of the first ancestors... All this surely is very complicated, but it is normal in the mythical world, which always expresses itself in words that for the non-initiated are hard to understand. Let us retain for our purpose at least the use of the numbers seven and nine which frame, thus giving it more weight, the original mystical number eight.

On the popular level, however, such complex matters are simplified and the actors of the genesis seem less esoteric and condescend willingly to assume a quite familiar aspect. In upper Guinea and in the neighboring regions, far from enjoying the right of absolute exclusiveness, the divine authors of creation live out their adversities, anguish and joy as mortals do. Periodically some disputes trouble the precarious harmony of the young and fragile world. But since nothing happens by itself, the African demiurge, in spite of his power, does not have a magic wand and must consequently set himself to work.

Frequently—among the Kono, Guerzé, Mana, Dan, Toura and Diomandé, for example—the creative being divides himself into two principal rivals, complementary but in constant disagreement. This is easily explainable by the natural need in African thought to envisage the two aspects of every total spiritual phenomenon, both positive and negative, as the generating element of every dualist doctrine.

The principle of ontological categorization guides the epic thread of similar narratives with varying authority and only rarely does it operate with isolated, autonomous personages. Viewed in this light, the material universe appears on the contrary as a collective work with several clefs, whose adjustment (we have correctly noted it in the case of the Bambara and the Dogon) and technical perfection are realized by stages and not without difficulty. Humanity, represented by what the theory calls the civilizing hero, actively assists these tasks which have civilization as their ultimate aim.

Often the great and indomitable primordial divinity, symbol

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of wisdom, of life and death, takes his task rather lightly, sketching the universe only roughly and leaving it barely viable. Thus it gives the impression of being more a lighthearted caprice than a system. Not caring the least for the consequences of his undertaking, this archaic being, quickly wearied, withdraws to make room for a dynamic personage who takes it upon himself to complete the temporarily halted work of creation and to personally supervise the orderly workings of the world. With this sympathetic divine guardian man, finally organized into families and clans, maintains friendly relations through appropriate prayers and ritual sacrifices.

Nevertheless, the bitter, vindictive jealousy of the former, now retired god visits humanity with many misfortunes—an unhappy recollection of his long reign. From then on the curse of death weighs on all creatures and makes of life a simple passing, just one among the many aspects of existence.

To explain the organization of the world, the coming of races, of human civilizations, and the origin of death, the Kono of the region of Nzérékoré have a myth, which may be summarized as follows.

In the beginning there was nothing. In the infinite muddy obscurity lived the old man Sâ with his wife and his only daughter. One day the god Alatanga, during an inspection tour, visits the sad dwelling of Sâ, and sternly reproaches him for having created an uninhabitable milieu, without vegetation, without light, and without living creatures. To remedy this state of affairs Alatanga asks Sâ on the spot for permission, then promptly sets to work hardening the mud and installing nature.

The peevish Sâ, satisfied with the changes, cements his friendship with the good artisan and offers him generous hospitality. During his stay Alatanga falls in love with Sâ's daughter and asks for her hand in marriage. But the father refuses. Alatanga then marries her in secret and they flee far away to escape the wrath of Sâ. They live happily and give life to seven boys and seven girls, of different colored skin and speaking unknown languages, not one word of which their astonished parents understand.

Annoyed and prodded by his wife, Alatanga, who imagines

this to be Sâ's vengeance, decides after some hesitation to consult the old sage. The father-in-law welcomes him coldly, as is to be expected, and admits that he is the author of the punishment. But he finally gives advice to resolve the situation. This is the origin of human races who, obeying the ordering of Sâ, are dispersed to all corners of the world but continue to live, like worms, in total darkness. On their request, Alatanga, in distress and having no remedy, turns again to Sâ. But lacking the necessary will, he returns home, and after prudent reflection entrusts two birds of his following, the roller *toutou* and the rooster *té siné* to consult Sâ in his stead. After hearing what they have to say, Sâ tells the two messengers, "Go back to your house. I will grant you song and through this song every morning you will call the light of day, so that men are able to go about their tasks in order to continue their existence."

As a result of appeals made by the two messengers, the first day dawns, and the first sun begins its movement across the celestial vault, to be relieved at night by the moon and stars.

Having accomplished this for the benefit of Alatanga's children, Sâ, still rancorous and bitter, summons the latter, for he believes the moment is ripe to settle his accounts. He says to him, "You stole my only daughter while I in return have done you good. It is now your turn to do something for me. As I am now without children you must offer me one of yours every time I ask it. It is I who will choose them from a dream, and they must always obey my call."

After this episode death decimates the world. However, it must be stressed again that for the Kono death signifies only a change of the human condition, a particular moment in its cyclic movement. This conception is common to most of the African philosophies. It justifies in particular the ancestor-cults as agents of regeneration.

With the Sénoufo the mythological themes of the creation of the world support the initiating rites of the poro. The dominant character of the Sénoufo narratives lies in their great phraseological malleability and their epic extensibility so that it is always permissible for the narrator to make some of the sequences contemporary. Besides, it is not inconceivable that

some extrinsic elements, due to the proximity of the Islamic groups and Christian evangelizing activity, filtered into one or another local version, without however altering the basic thread. We are also able to detect several traces of a parallel concept of creation, developed (on the Sudanese model) without however establishing a clear picture. But these traces practically disappear in the most southern areas.

For the Sénoufo the world in its present form still remains the result of a long series of works performed by a superior will called Koulotiolo. The genesis comprises two stages, the first devoted to fundamental installations, while the second is marked by the active presence of men under the direction of the Kâtiéléo, who are dedicated to the rational organization of existence..

In the central areas around Korhogo groups, led by the Tiembara, affirm that the preparatory period of their genesis lasted six days. Simplified, the gist of the story is as follows.

On the first day Koulotiolo is born out of nothing, and with his divine words erects his celestial home. He lights the sun in order to illuminate the day and creates the moon and the stars to illuminate the night.

On the second day Koulotiolo lets fall a part of the firmament, creating the earth and raising the mountains.

On the third day he sends rain to the earth and makes the rivers run.

The fifth day he creates the first man, a kind of superman who here is called Wouloto. He is tall, white, naked, and mortal, but he possesses a "soul" called *pil*. This being drinks only water, the symbolic avatar of life.

From the sixth day the earth is populated with animals and the running rivers are filled with fish. All these creatures do not yet know material want and, not knowing murder either, live in peace.

The seventh day there are many changes: trees begin to bear fruit and animals to reproduce. Wouloto, for the first time feeling the pangs of hunger, tastes the fruit, becomes a vegetarian and from then on is subjected to physiological laws, at the same time losing his superhuman condition.

Beginning on the following day, in order to satisfy his instincts, Wouloto, tired of looking far for his food, discovers the usefulness of agriculture, invents the hoe and becomes a farmer. His tools, which are first made of wood, are later made of helved stone and finally with iron. A great tree called *séritégué* provides Wouloto with fibers for making his clothing.

In certain myths, however, the idea of a couple composed of two partners of distinct sex is replaced by the archaic notion of an androgynal single person or double (like Siamese twins with the lombar parts joined together), testified to by some sacred effigies belonging to the inventory of the circle of initiates, the *sinzanga*.

The ninth day marks the awakening of the sexual instinct. Feeling lonely, Wouloto asks the creator to give him a female companion. She is called Woulono. Woulono is as white as her husband, whom she aids in the fields and with whom she goes to drink at the river when the sun goes down. In order to understand each other the two partners of this first couple for the first time use an articulated language.

Finally, on the tenth day, the married couple build themselves a house with lumps of earth and thatch, to shield themselves around their hearth from inclement weather. The woman invents the first pot to transport water from the drinking trough.

Thus the first household is founded and the first stage of creation is completed.

But there still remains, as one can well imagine, a good deal of work to be done. In this phase the myth of the origins comes under the sign of the female being, the *Kâtiéléo* already encountered who, seen close by, seems to be none other than a direct emanation, that is to say a hypostasis, of the original male force, the *Koulotiolo*.

Setting all theoretical considerations aside, let us now see what turn events take. At first, on the eleventh day all mythical chronology in the strict sense of the word disappears (that which pertains to the idea of incommensurable time, without beginning and without end) and a historical period opens which evolves and continues up to our time. The myths of this late cycle relate the progress of civilization and can be defined, within the limits of all proportion, as the fabulous annals of human

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pre-history. The different episodes of this cultural adventure are loaded with symbols. It is undoubtedly only because of the need for order that the narrations of these series usually present the subject divided into ten successive days, which we must understand more as simple epic divisions intended to make the scheme more balanced and comprehensible.

Complications arise at the same moment that man begins to intervene in the movement of the world. Woman, simply by her presence, contributes—insofar as she is an impure element—to the deterioration of the primordial harmony.

For their part, certain animals become dangerous for man, who in order to defend himself invents the first weapons: the bow and arrow, and later a rifle. Hunting is thus added to peaceful agricultural pursuits. When her husband kills a bird and attempts to eat it raw, Woulono has the idea of making it edible by grilling it on the fire. Since the result is good, she does the same thing with vegetables, boiling them in a pot. Pursued and reduced in number, game becomes more difficult to find. A hunter until then, Wouloto subsequently becomes a stock breeder. He adds to his menu fish that he catches in the river, at first simply by hand and later with the aid of a fish net invented by his ingenious wife. Already skilled at making pottery, she now applies herself to basket weaving.

Having mastered the principal handicrafts, the primordial couple give birth in the course of time to numerous children. Among these children of different colors and languages is a black boy from whom later descend all the African races. Unfortunately these children do not understand each other. As soon as they become adults they disperse to all corners of the world. One day the quarrels between neighbors degenerate into a war that claims many victims. A man named Gbé, moved at the sight of the corpse of his friend Ngolo, who had been devoured by hyenas, covers it with stones and constructs the first tomb, a symbolic miniature of the *koubélé kâ*, an underground place where the immortal souls of the dead assemble. This act of piety coincides with the beginning of the ancestral cult.

The first sacrificial act, however, is attributed to the children, who every time they catch an animal, spill its blood on a stone (this is the first altar), convinced of its propitiatory effects.

Funerals first appear with the coming of the blacksmith, the *fono*. Making his appearance after the civilizations of stone and at the onset of the iron age, he assumes from then on a dual role, both industrial and that of a priest.

With the Anyi, the creative god Alouko Niamié kadio appears as the sole individual responsible for the other gods, and for man, animals and things. After creating the world, he descends on a Saturday from his heavenly dwelling, visits the earth and teaches humans all they must know in order to live, as well as all that they must conceal. According to others, his oneness is in appearance only, because in reality he is a twin, although he is alone. For this reason he is also called *Aflawi Niamié Nâa*: the one-who-is-born-a-twin-but-remains-single.

Confronted with this conception of the supreme divinity, the Baoulé theosophists appear to recognize two clearly distinct stages in their creation, the first under the influence of a primordial god, Odoudoua, and the second under the influence of a couple, composed of an Ouranian being called Niamié and of a Chthonian called Assié. Can we see in this, as has been suggested by certain ethnological schools, a kind of infiltration of paleomediterranean cultural elements? Or can we see traces of the Christian dogma as we have been able to do with some Bantu of the southern Congolese region where, from what it appears, the figure of Christ has been blended with an ancient celestial god and the Holy Virgin with the earth goddess Bounsi? In the case of the Baoulé, the presence of a "divine child," Assassiwa, is evidently disquieting. However, it is not necessary to look far for an explanation. Certain thematic details indicate that it is very probably part of a philosophical content that is authentically African. It is sufficient to think of the origin of cultivable land as emanating from a particle of the sky, torn away during a marital argument by Niamié with the intention of throwing it at his recalcitrant wife...

An analogous plan exists, moreover, with the Dahomian Fon, for whom the great divine couple Mawou and Lissa owes its existence to an archaic androgyne being called Nana Bouloukou. It was she who actually prefabricated the universe, leaving to her two successors the task of its completion (accomplished within the customary week numbering four days).

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The Lobi myth of creation conceives of the celestial vault as a solid canopy, inhabited by red people and resting on the earth which shelters the black races. The character of the creator is hardly known, although he is logically presumed to exist.

Certain Yorouba of the West say for their part that the earth and the heavens resemble each other, as a gourd and its cover which float on the water, the submerged part corresponding to the other world, or the home of invisible forces.

The creator god of the Mandia of Oubangui resembles in this particular trait the divine potter of the civilizations of the banks of the Niger. He makes out of mud the first couple who then found the first human race. It is later destroyed by a terrible disaster from which only a man named Séto and his sister survive. From their incestuous marriage descend all present-day races. Séto is a hero; he kills a monstrous beast, the personification of death, which nevertheless continues to ravage the world, although only by becoming invisible. After building a suitable civilization for the use of his descendants, and after putting the surroundings of his dwelling in order, Séto dies and goes to heaven in the form of the constellation of Orion.

The Bantu populations of the Kavirondo affirm that in order to perform the enormous work of creation, their supreme god Wélé Khakaba thought it well to secure two assistants. Thus aided, in the first two days he constructs his heavenly abode, including the moon—an elder sister—and the sun—a younger brother. Finally he solidifies the soil and places on earth, one by one, large animals such as buffaloes, elephants, hippopotamuses, and rhinoceroses (others follow later). He also places on earth the first man, whom the Vougooussou call Mwambou, and the first woman, called Séla. From their union the human race is born.

All together the particulars of the myth of creation make up a vast tableau, ranging from the almost total absence of a system, encountered by observers among the Bassouto (although we are rather sceptical as to the value of this observation), to the refined systems of the Dogon, the Bambara, the Sénoufo, and certain Congolese Bantu.

In the origin of the organized world we can therefore depending on the case find the following, sometimes individually,

sometimes in association: an impersonal creative force, either non-representational or more or less anthropomorphic; a single creative god, morphologically well defined and at times playing an active role in symbolic disguise in the sacred tales; a primordial father of heavenly nature, image of the king or chief; a primordial mother, goddess of the earth, dispenser of all material goods and patroness of agriculture (for example, with the Bantu who have matrilineal tendencies); a civilizing hero with divine attributes; and finally, but rarer, a first human race spontaneously coming out of the earth, a mountain, a cavern, a hole, a white anthill, or out of the depths of the forest, the sea, a river, or a marshland.

THE GREAT ARCHITECT AND THE DIRECTORS OF THE WORLD

The mythological illustrations described in the preceding paragraphs give us above all the impression of widespread thematic instability. They permit us nevertheless to disengage a few guiding concepts from the documentary material that we have gathered. There is first of all the principle of disassociation between the two logical stages that we can designate respectively by the modern terms of *construction* and *functioning*.

Contrary to the portrait of the revealed god, omniscient and omnipotent, as held up to us by the great ethical religions, the supreme god of the African tradition does not possess anything as absolute, in spite of his extraordinary powers. Thus, one of the principal characteristics of this personage rests in the descending curve of his energetic capacities, which after reaching a culminating point at the time of the works of creation, remain motionless at a very low level. This divinity resembles in short an individual who has lived a brilliant but tiring youth, and who today disenchanted and a little bitter voluntarily retires. For its part, mankind, that is, his children appear to respect his desire for peace—unless it can be interpreted as indifference to a useless person. But they have not yet forgotten his great deeds, and they know well that if he is asleep, he is nonetheless still a redoubtable power. Thus, while bringing offerings to the creator's subordinates who have taken over the power in this interim, man

presumes, and expressly states, that his offering will in the end reach the supreme being.

In many religions of black Africa the author of the universe thus exists only in myth, while the direction of the world is in the hands of a being who occupies mainly a place in the liturgy. This structural disassociation is not necessarily retained by the theology whose problems are placed by definition on a more elevated plane. We mean to say by this that two beings which in practice are considered independent, partake of the same common substance and consequently can be envisaged as two aspects of the same god. The active god with a positive temperament is not really the opposite of the creator: he is rather (and this in spite of inevitable differences of opinion) his fully entitled spiritual continuator.

That is clearly expressed in the Kono myth in which death, represented by Sâ and life, represented by Alatanga, jointly comprise a closed cycle.

The religious speculations of the Kono of upper Guinea are thus literally impregnated with belief in an after-life. The idea of death, situated at the same metaphysical level as the idea of life, is understood as a logical, inevitable, and even desirable continuation of terrestrial existence in the interest of the society. However, death is not only a fine paid to the creator in compensation for some mythical fault; it constitutes the condition of the renewal of vital forces. In the eschatological system of the Kono the souls of the ancestors *nî*, assembled in the underground *niamata*, exclusively comprise this source of energy.

The world of the dead resembles exactly the world of the living, without having the intensity of the original, as an image that is reflected in a mirror. In the course of their eternal exchange the two ontological spheres resemble two parts of a contract, one fatally dependent on the other. This dual regime explains perhaps why the supreme divinity who is in charge of their functioning in the sacred imagery wears a mask with two faces.

In spite of his specific attitude the Sâ, in the example we gave, symbolizes in fact the more somber side, esoteric and mystical, of a single organic unity, whose light side, or material existence, is represented by the outgoing dynamic Alatanga. At

times, Alatanga gives the impression of being a parvenu for whom the formalities of enthronement are just now taking place. His arrival, if we believe the myth, is preceded by pitched battles against the old sovereign, reinforced in his resistance by the innumerable mass of *nî*, the dead ancestors of his court of shadows.

The sacred history of the Kono is rather silent on the subject of the assuredly long period of divine battles for power, which involved, without doubt, some frightful agricultural goddesses, and some vagabond gods of the old pastoral civilizations. But a discussion of this would lead us into unknown terrain. What is sure is that the evolution never admits definitive situations, and that we are consequently correct to suppose that the conqueror is in reality only a vassal of the extinct divine generations. He represents in this respect the last episode of the film, for which the spectators have not yet applauded the director.

We must add that the spectacle presents some obscure sequences that could bother us. Actually, the scenario however is simple and even banal. *Sâ*, this unique two-faced god, who is the architect of the universe, is tired of governing ungrateful humans, and retires from active affairs soon after the first realization of the scope of his power. Alatanga takes over with much good will but unfortunately without the technical knowledge of the old *Sâ*. Yet he wants to take things into his own hands. And he establishes himself in the underground with the *nî*, in order to better control the workings of the great machine.

In other cases that we discussed above the author of the world gives up his place to a pair of divinities who share the jurisdiction, the husband over the celestial sector and the wife over the affairs of the earth. It is the Akan civilizations that give us the most edifying example of this in the figures of *Niamié* and *Assié*, but, if one wanted to search for others, the list would certainly be quite long.

With the help of documents that have been gathered so far by the ethnologists, one can then claim that there exists in paleo-African religious thought a principle of separation between the level of conception and the level of action. However, the two divided sectors remain complementary, and the term *separation* certainly never implies a cleavage.

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