

## The Use And Interpretation Of Myths

### *I. Myths and Oral History*

S. O. Biobaku

Van Loon, in his 'Story of Mankind', says we live under the shadow of three gigantic question marks—'Who are we?' 'Where do we come from?' and 'Whither are we bound?' These may well remain conundrums for all time; but there is no more fascinating problem than tracking down the origins of various peoples. For West African origins we need intensive research. The normal material on which historians work is written documents. It is clear that we can receive only a limited help from written sources in our search for West African origins; for prior to the advent of Europeans only Moslem Africa possessed highly-developed system of writing. The rest of West Africa we a non-literate society, with only one or two exceptions where the art of writing was the jealously guarded monopoly of a few priests. It will be a mistake, however, to conclude from this that the people had no history. It is natural for a literate society to conceive history as a written record; but it is mere snobbery to deny the name of history to unwritten accounts of the past. The indigenous African history was *oral* not *written*.

African history was (and is still largely) *remembered* history, handed down from one generation to another. The technique was constantly to keep alive the memory of the past. This was done several ways; indeed; it is true to say that the African sows his history broadcast in all his traditional institutions and that his innate conservatism stems from the need to preserve the past consciously in the present. All peoples *live* their history, but those who do not write it down live it more consciously than those who do.

Take for instance the indigenous African religion which readily subserves the historical tradition. In this complicated and variegated polytheism there is one universal element; namely ancestor worship. Thus in the mystery of religion, the living community is drawn into communion with the dead; the inheritors with the owners of the land, the source of food, of wealth and well-being, of disputes and of war. Rituals are often re-enactments of historical events. For instance, the Woro ceremony of the first day of the annual Egungun festival in the Yoruba country is a procession of masqueraders re-enacting the arrival of the leaders of the migrations which gave home and hearth to the community; the shrine at which the Egungun now forgather annually was invariably the spot around which the Fathers encamped outside the gate in the days of yore. Or to take a similar example of historical re-enactment: in Ketu, now a town in French Dahomey, the new Alaketu ritually experiences during the installation ceremony all the vicissitudes through with

the founder-Alaketu passed on his way to Ketu. On the day an Alaketu dies, all the Yoruba in Ketu put out their fires and later rekindle them from a torch which is lit at a cave from which the Yoruba immigrants borrowed fire on arrival from their Fon hosts (whom they subsequently subjugated).

I shall not dilate on other elements of remembered history. It is well known that indigenous political institutions mirror the past leadership of the communities and that African art, functional in the main, provides visual aid to the oral historian in Benin bronze or Ife terre-cotta heads, such as that of the Olokun, or in stools such as the Golden Stool of the Ashanti. The chief characteristic of oral history, however, is that it is *recitative*.

Most African rulers keep professional oral historians at their courts. These men, sometimes with drums and trumpets, chant praise-poems and recite dynastic lists with consummate skill. They are usually carefully trained and their office is nearly always hereditary. At Ketu, the *Baba Elegun* is the official oral historian: he learns off by heart the list of Alaketus, naming the parents of each as the succession rotates between different Houses and teaches the list to his son, his destined successor. During the installation ceremony of every new Alaketu, the *Baba Elegun* recites the entire list before an assembly of all the people, knowing full well that if he makes a single mistake it would be regarded as bringing ill-luck to the people and may lead to his own death. It is said that no *Baba Elegun* has yet faltered and in this way the authenticity of a list involving more than 48 reigns and generations has been ensured.

The invocation of history is confined neither to royalty nor great occasions. The humble folk also invoke history in everyday life. In communities where society was never stratified into castes, everyone could legitimately lay claim to a glorious past or heroic ancestors, especially as the institution of polygamy widened the kinship of the illustrious. In innumerable land and succession disputes, history is needed to make good one's claim or refute that of another. In times of success, a man is judged to be worthy of his famed ancestors; in moments of failure, he is deemed to have disgraced their memory.

The retentive memory is stimulated in general ways besides by its constant exercise. Often events and circumstances are compressed into significant forms which are constantly used. One example is place names: Ilaro is Ilu Aro, the town in Egbado which was founded by Aro, a great hunter from Oyo. Another example of this is epigrams in which several West African languages abound. Gaha, a tyrannical Baṣorun of Oyo in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, usurped the powers of the Alāfin and reduced successive Obas to puppets. Eventually Abiḡdun overthrew his yoke and as a warning to all aspiring over-mighty subjects, Gaha was cremated alive in the Palace square. All this has been compressed into an epigrammatic warning for everyday use: 'Reflect upon Gaha's death and mend your ways.' Then there are *Oriki* in which selected episodes

from the lives of a person and his ancestors are compressed and woven into appellations used by fond parents and flattering admirers. Sometimes the history of a town gives a collective *Oriki* to its inhabitants; Ibadan, for example:

'Ibadan,  
 Ọmọ a j'oro sun,  
 Ọmọ a fi karaun fọri mu.'

This alludes to a past event when Lagelu and his people were beleaguered on the hill (Oke-Badan) and were gradually reduced to eating only oro and using snail shells for their maize gruels instead of pots.

I come now to the elements of oral history that have most bearing upon our search for West African origins. These are myths and legends. The human mind is prone to romanticising; it produces myths and legends in order to preserve ancient historical experiences or elucidate complicated abstract notions. As the past receded, the hero became a god, and memories of ancient migrations became identified with speculations about the tantalising subject of creation. Examples of creation myths and legends are found all over West Africa; I shall choose two from the history of the Yoruba.

According to an Ifẹ myth, Oduduwa, son of Olodumare (the Almighty), was sent from heaven to create the earth; Olokun, the goddess of the ocean, was his wife. Their son Ọranmiyan, on the death of his father, had only a bit of rag left him containing earth, 21 pieces of iron and a cock. The whole surface of the earth was then covered with water. Ọranmiyan laid his portion on the surface of the water and placed on it the cock which scattered the earth with his feet; the wide expanse of water became filled up and the dry land appeared everywhere. His brothers, preferring to live on dry land rather than on the surface of the water, were permitted to do so on their paying an annual tribute for sharing with their youngest brother his own portion. This myth accords with the subsequent glorification of Ifẹ, the Promised Land, into the cradle of mankind itself by the Yoruba and with the efforts by the Ọyọ to establish the supremacy of the Alāfin over other Yoruba Ọbas by making his ancestor the owner of the land. But it incorporates the biblical story of the Flood and speculates on the Creation.

Then there is the legend of Mọremi and her son. Mọremi, a virtuous woman of great beauty, was determined to help the Ifẹ to put an end to the constant raids of the seemingly super-human Igbo whom they were powerless to resist. She vowed to a river goddess that she would sacrifice her most valued possession if she would help her to gain the secret of the Igbo and so deliver her people from their menace. At the next raid she gave herself up to the Igbo, was appropriated to the household of their chief and soon gained his confidence. She became familiar with their customs and soon learnt all

their secrets. They were but mere men covered with raffia and bamboo fibres to terrorise their opponents by their wild appearance. She further extracted from her husband the information that they could not withstand an onslaught of people armed with lighted torches. Then she escaped back to Ifẹ and, needless to say, the next Igbo raid was their last. After saving her people, Mọremi repaired to the stream to offer her promised sacrifice: she tried lambs, rams, goats and even a bullock, but the goddess would not accept. The goddess demanded Mọremi's only son, Olurogbo, whom she finally gave up in fulfilment of her vows. The Ifẹ bewailed her loss and promised to be her sons and daughters. Yet Olurogbo was not really killed; he rose up after having been left for dead and climbed the rope into heaven. The Ifẹ are said to believe still that he will come to this world again and reap the rewards of his good deeds.

Here, at once, we see the early vicissitude of the Yoruba at Ifẹ poured into well-known moulds. Mọremi sounds suspiciously like Miriam (or Mary) and might well be Jephtha or Delilah; and the sacrifice of an only son who rose from death recalls Jesus Christ and the Christian story of the redemption of Man. Thus these myths and legends, by showing that the Yoruba were acquainted with biblical stories, provide important clues to the riddle of the Near Eastern origin of the Yoruba and other West African peoples.

The dangers and shortcomings of using oral history are considerable. It may produce a reliable dynastic list, but it leaves the important problem of dating unsolved. The 'long ago' of oral history must be translated into the appropriate calendar year. It is clear that the gods and giants of oral history must be divested of romance and be reduced to heroes and powerful men with concrete achievements, if any. Memory inevitably selects, and sometimes it falsifies, the past in order to serve personal ambition or political ends. So each piece of oral evidence must be checked and cross-checked against another, and both against any relevant written information. In short, oral history is by no means sacrosanct; oral historical material must be treated no less vigorously than written material; it must pass through the searching crucible of historical criticism and analysis if it is to be acceptable as authentic historical evidence.

The real contribution of oral history to West African origins is that it provides important clues to be taken up by the modern historians. Its evidence is valid but it must be stripped of its romantic accretions. It often over-simplifies but any historian knows that he must dig deeper than the mere surface of oral evidence. It is oral history that enables us to arrive at a statement such as the following made by Sultan Bello of Sokoto:

"The inhabitants of ... Yarba, it is supposed, originated from the remnants of the children of Canaan, who were of the tribe of Nimrod.

The cause of their establishment in West Africa was, as it is stated, in consequence of their being driven by Yaa-rooba, son of Khatan, out of Arabia to the Western coast between Egypt and Abyssinia. From that spot they advanced into their interior of Africa, till they reached Yarba, where they fixed their residence. On their way they left in every place they stopped at a tribe of their own people. Thus it is supposed that all the tribes of the Sudan who inhabit the mountains are originating from them."

Here provides a good jumping-off ground for an intensive research into the origin of the Yoruba. The well-known similarities of physical features which exist between the Yoruba and the African tribes inhabiting the Southern Provinces of the Sudan corroborates this statement. The highly-developed indigenous political system of the Yoruba might well have its prototype in the all-black Kingdom of the Meroe in Upper Egypt. Their migration links up with the well-known Kisra migration and might have been part of the general migration which took place in the 10<sup>th</sup> century and diffused the Moslem culture of North Africa among the peoples to the immediate south. Yoruba traditions regard these immigrants as remnants of those who had resisted the advance of Islam into their original territories and clung tenaciously to their own religion, a kind of polytheism into which had been incorporated, howbeit imperfectly, some Biblical ideas of the creation and the redemption.

## The Historical and Psychological Significance of Yoruba Myths

H. U. Beier

There is no doubt that the study of myths and legends can contribute a great deal to the study of history. But recently attempts have been made in this country to give too literal an historical interpretation to Yoruba myths. Similarities between Yoruba myths and those of Egypt or Palestine have been used to support the theory that the Yorubas have migrated to this country from the Near East. Now I do not wish to discuss this theory here, but I should like to point out that it is difficult to bring in myths in order to prove diffusionist theories.

The reason is that in the mythology of nearly all peoples of the world there are certain recurrent themes like the creation of man, the flood, the sacrificed son, the culture hero, etc., which bear certain resemblances to each other. But when resemblances are found between myths of West African Negroes and American Eskimos one must ask oneself whether this can still be due to diffusion of culture or culture contact or whether there happen to be certain questions to which speculating men all over the world have given the same answer.

Let me give some examples. It has been said that the Yoruba myth of *Qbat-ala* creating human beings and animals out of clay bears obvious resemblance to the creation story as related in Genesis and that that this points to some early contact of Yorubas with biblical countries. But this argument seems to lose its value if one considers that the same story is told by the Greeks about Prometheus and that the Eskimos of Alaska have a tale about *Tulungersaq* or *Father Raven*, who formed the first human beings out of clay.

Another Yoruba story relates that *Oduduwa* descended from heaven and found that everything was water. He placed a handful of earth on the water and a cock on top of it. Immediately the cock began to scratch and the land was thus spread over a wide area. Now it is clear there is a resemblance here with the biblical story of the flood. But the Greeks have a story about *Deucalion*, which is almost identical with that of the Bible. In Teutonic myth we hear that after the *Twilight of the Gods*, a new earth will rise out of the floods. Finally the Eskimos relate that at the beginning only a few mountain peaks looked out of the water and that there was no other dry land. One day a famous fisherman killed a huge whale that was so big that it filled the spaces between the mountain peaks; and thus the land was formed.

It looks as if the collective unconscious of mankind has a vague recollection of a flood.

Another story which has been made much of is the story of *Mọremi*. *Mọremi* was a heroine of ancient *Ife* who contrived to free her country from