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Myths in African Concept of Historical Reality

Jaja, Jones M., Ph.D.

Senior Lecturer

Institute of Foundation Studies

Rivers State University of Science and Technology

P. M. B. 5080, Port Harcourt

Email: jonesalali@yahoo.com

Tel: 08033168998; 08056049778

Abstract

Myths are accounts of the origin of societies and institutions not subject to rationalization but often used by historians and philosophers in their quest to study African history; for it is only thus that we can comprehend the various aspects of the continents history and culture. This paper examines the concept of myth in African history, the critical understanding of African world view based on myths, the Eurocentric argument that African philosophy is non-existent and concludes by showing that African philosophy indeed exist, the place and significance of African philosophy and myths in the reflection of African Historical experience.

Introduction

Philosophy as a discipline is the reflection of mankind on the ideas and institutions guiding their existence. Philosophy as Staniland (1979:3) defines it is “the criticism of the ideas we live by”, it is the criticism of the ideas and

material inventions that a particular society originates for administering itself.

It is important to emphasize that philosophy ideals with culture met in the descriptive sense but in the critical and prescriptive sense. Where the anthropologist celebrates culture, the philosopher improves it. It is this critical essence of philosophy in relation to culture that informs William James' conception of philosophy as the habit of searching for alternatives. The critical nature of philosophy in relation to culture can be explained more aptly with the clarification that Staniland gave. According to her, philosophy is a critical enterprise. She explains that by philosophy being critical, she does not mean the negative destruction of culture, she explains:

By criticism I of course mean not negative appraisal; but rational, impartial and articulate appraisal, whether positive or negative. To be critical of received ideas is accordingly not the same thing as rejecting them; it consists rather in seriously asking oneself whether the idea in question should be reformed, modified or conserved, and in applying one's entire intellectual and imaginative intelligence to the search for an answer (Staniland 1979:4).

Philosophy is actually a personal reflection about all aspects of reality. It is an exercise in which one tries to give meaning to the world from his or her own standpoint given the prevailing circumstances and environmental influences. Philosophizing in the experience of the traditional African takes the character of critical reflection of the African understanding of reality and world view. Myths, Folklores proverbs therefore become the major sources of African philosophy (Jaja 1995:28). Moreso, myths encode the traditional settings of the African and their belief system.

However, ardent critics of myths have branded them pre-philosophic, irrational and devoid of authenticity. This paper show that myths are constructs meant to interpret reality. They portray the African way of thinking and as vehicles for preserving and transmitting valued knowledge of philosophical and moral truths.

Myth: An Explanation

Generally, a myth is a story which is believed to be true and has its origin in the far distant past history of a people. Alagoa (1978:9) argued that they are historical information transmitted orally by processes peculiar to each

community. Myths are man-made stories that play explanatory functions in the African understanding of reality. The Encyclopedia Britannica defined myth as;

... a story handed down in oral form from our forefathers which explain reality, concepts and beliefs and further serve as explanations of nature events such as creations, origin of things, history of a race or a people (1133).

This shows that myth is not just a product of human imagination but a direct expression of historical reality. Anyanwu (1987:241) citing Houndtonji says that “man cannot live without myths”. The reason is quite obvious, man is a being that cannot bear to live with certain questions unanswered that is why he sits down to formulate myths to make those questions answerable. Thus man is a myth-making animal (Anyanwu, 1987:280). Some thinkers have rightly observed that myths are pre-philosophic in nature, that philosophy started where myths stopped, which presupposes that philosophy has its roots in myths (Jaja, 1994:125).

It is pertinent to point out that myths are results of the revelation of “thou” and are often founded upon an original experience that reaches beyond the sensorial and rational, but they are not illogical. They are mostly susceptible to rational analysis and logical interpretation. An analysis of many myths as shown here, indicate that actions of gods and heroes in the past often presuppose a keen analysis of given circumstances and are based on rational decisions (Kirk, 1974:60). It can be argued that some myths represent complex logical systems which are different from those which are usually found in contemporary western societies. Nevertheless, according to a common view, there is a radical separation between mythos and logos, between myth and philosophy. Myth is associated with the mysterious and illogical, and philosophy with the rational and logical (Apostel, 1981).

Myths are part of a way of life and state precedence and models for human actions, but they do not seek to explain them on a rational basis. Myths use images, philosophy, concepts. Philosophy asks generalized questions, relies on systematic reasoning, and rejects the supernatural explanations of the world, but mythological society, is unsystematic and deal with the sacred (Apostel, 1981).

Myth is a wholeness attained to the world as a whole, because those who live in myth and are guided by it are engaged on many different planes with the

whole of which the myth is an integral part. By teaching man and by regulating the way of his living in devotional engagement with the whole and by gradually disclosing many layers of its meaning, myth reveals the knowledge of the whole. But the knowledge of the whole is not merely theoretical. It is not merely a partial, intellectual knowledge, but it embraces the whole of life. Myth reveals the knowledge for which philosophy in a proper sense looks. But it does not disclose this knowledge without appropriate devotional engagement. Myth is completed already at the beginning, whereas philosophy seeks to be completed at the end. Mythical societies live in eternity rather than in historical time. The societies in which philosophy or science plays an important part constantly seek their completion and are in a permanent dissatisfaction with the results of their findings. They live in history and are time oriented. Myth corresponds to eternity, philosophy to the discovery of history.

Myths are seen as vehicles conveying certain facts or truths about man's past experiences in his encounter with the created order and its relation to the super-sensible world. For Abanuka (1994:45), myth tells of the super human experiences of the community. Myth exposes the fact that man's misfortunes on earth, as well as his hardships are attributed to disobedience to the divine commands and moral codes of the deities as a point in his life.

Generally, myths contain three kinds of stories namely, stories of origin, explanatory stories and didactic stories. Each of these stories is meant to explain a particular phenomenon. Myth is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery but living chronicles in the minds of Africans. They contain and express the history, the culture and the inner experience of the African himself. Africans use Myths to explain how things came to be, through the efforts of a supernatural being. It is concrete and expresses life better than abstract thought can do.

Myths as expressed in African History and African experience are no longer in doubt. What is now in contention among some scholars is, if there exist an African philosophical thought.

It is indeed surprising that up till this age (2011), some scholars still doubt the existence of African philosophy. The reason being that some philosophers having basically studied Western philosophy treated African philosophy from a typical western standpoint. It is necessary to remind this class of scholars that in traditional Africa there are individuals who are capable of critical

coherent and independent thought. This school of thought is the philosophic sagacity.

Philosophic sagacity retains the basic tenets of the professional school. However, unlike it, it is an exposition of the wisdoms and beliefs of the individuals who have not been schooled in the formal educational system. It consists of wisdoms and views of those who are professionally trained philosophers that is neither classroom – taught nor self taught. A sage can be a very formally educated and literate person (Oruka, 1995:177) philosophical sagacity is an expression of the view that amongst the various African communities, exists individuals who despite the fact that they have not had the benefit of having contact with the so-called western philosophers (such as Plato Aquinas, Russell, Kant etc) are nevertheless, critical independent thinkers who guide their thought and judgment by the power of reason and inborn insight rather than by the authority of communal consensus (Oruka, 1990:16).

The professional school had also produced professional philosophers with Eurocentric standpoint. Some of whose scholarly works are as follows:

Apostel, L. (1981). *African Philosophy Myth or Reality?* Gent: Story-Scientia; Bodunrin P.O. (Ed) (1985). *Philosophy in Africa*. The Ife-Nigeria: University of Ife press; Bodunrin P. (1981). *The Question of African Philosophy*, in *Philosophy* Vol. 56; Eboh, M. P. (1998) *Introduction to Philosophy and Philosophizing*, Snap Press, Enugu; Marrow, L. (1992). *The Idea of African Philosophy: A Critical Study of the Major Orientations in Contemporary African Philosophy*. Ibadan: Molecular Publishers; Onyewuanyi I.C. (1986). *African origin of Greek philosophy*. Owerri-Nigeria. Black Academic Press; Udoidem, S.I. (1992) *Understanding Philosophy*. Lagos, Nigeria: African Heritage Research Publications and Veren, P.D. (1980). *Philosophy and an African Culture*, Cambridge University Press.

It is evident that the question of the existence of African philosophy like African History can no longer be questioned as Africans independent thought can be found in the philosophic sagacity and professional philosophers with the European tradition. But what is the essence of African philosophy? This we will presently address.

What is African Philosophy?

Indeed, that African philosophy exist is manifestly obvious. There is however some confusion as to its nature, this has made the comprehension of African philosophy more problematic. To ease the problem Russell (1974:14) opined that “to understand an age or a nation, we must understand its philosophy” conversely, he observes that the circumstances of men’s lives do much to determine their philosophy.

We need to understand the history of the intellectual processes and ideas generated in Africa, the culture, history and experience of the people, to appreciate and connect to the African intellectual explanation and reality of Historical existence. African philosophy therefore is the reflections based on the experiences of ancestors. It is the intellectual development, the how and why they think in a particular way in a particular period. It is the socio-cultural and economic thoughts of the people.

African philosophy is the circumstances and environment that have shaped the lives and conditioned the ideas of Africans. No wonder, that Sogolo (1993:6) argued that “traditional African philosophy is communalistic... It is a body of thought attributed to the community rather than to individual”.

It is taken to mean a world-view (*Weltanschauung*) a way of life, that is, the fundamental beliefs of the African about life, its origin and end, the universe and the entire reality. It is the identified way of life which is specific to the African. “African philosophy is the reflective inquiry into the marvels and problematic that confront one in the African world, producing systematic explanation and sustained responses to them” (Iroegbu, 1994:16).

Its subject matter is African Historical reality, African experience and how the African understand and interpret these experiences. Momoh (1998:40) states that African philosophy is: “African doctrines or theories on reality (Being) and the Universe which is made up of things like God, gods, life, life after death, reincarnation, spirit, society, man, ancestors, heaven, hell, things, institutions, beliefs, conceptions, practices, etc.”

On his part Okolo (1990:10) opined that African philosophy is “A path to a systematic coherent discovery and disclosure of the African as a being in the African world. Through this knowledge or disclosure of himself and his world by critical reflection, the African grasps reality that is to say attains the truth about man and the cosmos in its entirety.”

In other words African philosophy is essentially an activity, a systematic and coherent inquiry into African Historical experience and how an African conceives and interprets the world. In the words of Etuk (1993:63), “It is the application of the philosophical tools of analysis, criticism and logic to the problems of Africans in all aspects of life.”

These views of African philosophy to a large extent re-echo Oruka’s (1990:13) claim that African philosophy is a way of thinking that is uniquely African and which radically avoids the European style of thought. It is communalistic.

Unfortunately however, researchers in the History of African philosophy will notice that while there exists a draught of literature on the history of African philosophy down the ages, the same cannot be said of the 19th centuries and 20th centuries.

Attempts made so far on writing aspects of the history of African philosophy have focused largely on the contemporary era. History of African philosophy is taught in the University of Ibadan, Department of History. The course begins with a brief introduction, while it covers philosophy in Traditional Africa (Jones, 2010). Amongst the African philosophical ideas are those of kwame Nkrumah, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Leopold Senghor etc. An examination of the History of African philosophy encompasses other socio-political and economic thought of the people.

Furthermore, even published works on the history of African philosophy tend to also concentrate on the recent past. The point being made here is that a large chunk of the history of African philosophy has not been written. The vast pre-colonial era and the intellectual ferment of the period is yet to be given adequate attention by scholars. In fact, the history of African philosophy in all its ramifications, even political philosophy, have received little or no attention but that does not in any way imply that it is non-existent. Indeed, it is this issue of existence that informed Makinde’s statement:

So much debate had been made over the existence or non-existence of African philosophy that one may be tempted to think that perhaps what is known as African philosophy is nothing more than a controversy about whether or not there is indeed an African philosophy (Makinde, 1989:89).

The philosophy of Nyerere, the Ujamaa and all it stands for cannot be non-existent. Ujamaa is a concept from the Swahili word meaning “family-hood

or brotherhood. It is essentially a rural development policy/philosophy on economy, politics and the involvement of the citizenry and their reactions to the socialist programmes. It sought to restore the egalitarian and humanistic principles of traditional African to modern Tanzania. It was with the Arusha declaration of 1967 that the United Republic of Tanzania formally set out on the path of socialism and self-reliance (Gabriel and Jaja 2000). Nyerere described his Ujamaa (communities) as a group of families who will live together in a village and will work on a common farm for their common benefits. He hoped to create village settlement where individuals would live and work collectively.

Similarly, Leopold Sada Senghor's Negritude is an African philosophy, which projects the Africaness in being black. It is a self affirmation of black people or the affirmation of the values of civilization of something defined as "the black world". It is a revolt against the historical situation of French colonialism and racism (Fanon, 1991). It was derived from Latin "Niger" meaning "black". Applied to a black person it has come to be charged with all the weight of racism to the point that the insult 'Sale Negree' (dirty negro) would be almost repugnant (Casaire, 2004).

Aime Cesaire, Senghor's associate confessed how violated they were too, by the word. He argued... "I confess that I do not always like the word Negritude even if I am the one, with the complicity of a few others, who contributed to its invention and its launching" adding that, "still, it corresponds to an evident reality and in any case to a need that appears to be a deep one" (Casaire, 2004).

On his part Senghor has insisted that negritude has a philosophical content, and "the sum total of "the values of civilization of the Black world", thus implying that it is ontology, an aesthetic, an epistemology or a politics.

Having examined some major ideas in African philosophy let us briefly examine the use of myths in African understanding of Historical reality.

Myths in African Understanding of Historical Reality

Myths play a very important role in the African understanding of Historical reality. African philosophy cannot operate in a vacuum; therefore myths provide the necessary analytic and conceptual framework for an authentic African philosophy. They provide the solid foundation on which African philosophy hinges (1994:119). One must note that they are the fertile ground for African philosophizing. They constitute expressions of the inner side of

individuals and their relationship with others, nature and with the supernatural. It is the philosophical reflections of the people in the past, preserved and handed down to society through myths, if indeed the past is unintelligible and conveys meaning only in the light of the present, then myths convey meaning only when they establish a coherent relationship between the past and the present.

The reason is quite simple. A people's world view cannot be studied in isolation of their past and the past is as important as the present in deciding the future. Given this scenario, we can deduce that Myths bring to light the past experiences of the people and from there the present African philosophy sees an avenue for philosophizing.

Uduigwomen (1995:40) observed, in African epistemology, myths serve as a means of acquiring and transmitting knowledge, for knowledge has a prominent place in the African mind. It enables the African to recollect past activities of men and societies which make it possible for the individual or societies to orientate themselves aimed and bewildering currents of the society.

There have been disputes and disagreements as to the role and place of myths in African philosophy. Some have argued that myths cannot be regarded as philosophy because they obviously fall short of empirical verifiability and logical consistency, but Horton, (1987:100) debunked this and admitted myths and rituals into the general corpus of experience which is capable of exhibiting a logical and consistent structure.

Similarly, if African philosophy is a reflection on African experience and myths are stabilizing factors to African experience; it then follows that African philosophy is a critical reflection on myths as stabilizing factors. So the critical analysis and the awareness of the relevance of myths, proverbs, folklores, etc. would go a long way in inculcating in Africans the habit of critical reflections on issues bordering on life (Jaja, 1995:29).

Myths are the essential and ready tools for thinking and communicating in African philosophy. Through their meaningful and communicative features, Myths exhibit and enhance the coherence, stability and continuity of the society. They play the role of literature and fill the lacuna created by lack of literature on past history and supplements the oral culture of African experience (Jaja, 1995:28) Myths connect the past with the present. The vestiges of what truth is in African epistemology are traceable to

mythological depositories and other conventional values. Hence myths serve as sources of truth. Some myths are authoritative and appear to have a compelling force of obedience on the people.

Myths also play an important role in the moral education of the society. Generally, beauty is regarded as a form of moral goodness. The value of beauty and goodness is mostly couched in myths. In conformity with this, African aesthetic value is circumscribed in moral beauty. This is epitomized in myths in African culture which focuses on values, virtues, attachments, loyalties, faithfulness, diligence and other social and religious virtues (Jaja, 2001:99). A few examples will suffice.

African vision of the universe is entrenched in various creation myths, which basically serve etiological purposes. They thus explain how and why the different natural phenomena came into existence, the forces behind their perfect working and the relationship that existed and still exist between man and the creator God and the universe. Articulations on African cosmology may differ from one locality to another, they varyingly depict God as the Supreme Being and that He created what comprises the universe, and that after creating the universe, God dwells in it and sustains its inhabitants. This speaks of God's imminence. And for the African, that is reality incontestable.

According to Yoruba myth, God dwelt in the sky (heaven) which was quite low. Men originally went freely to Him to tender complaints and He responded spontaneously. However, it is recounted that, after sometime and due to the disobedience of man, God withdrew and separated from the world He created and was no longer bothered about it. Instead, He sent His ministers, the divinities endowing them with various responsibilities. This explains the concept of a transcendent or withdraws God. God withdrew without informing his people. This is the idea of *Deus Absconditus* (or *Deus otiosus* or *Deus remotus*). Africans also see man as the center of the Universe. Every other thing was created for his use. He is the being that exhibits the "absoluteness of God".

We may now look closely at the cosmogony of some African societies to illustrate our point.

Among the Igbo, the Supreme deity to whom all power of creation is credited is known as *Chukwu*, *Chiokike* or *Chineke*. According to Nwala, the cosmogony of the Igbo is based on a theogony which views *Chineke* as self-creating; that has always been, will always be. *Chukwu*, the everlasting deity,

created the universe which includes the sky (*Eluigwe*), the heavenly bodies, the earth (*Elu-uwa*) and the spirits and earthly creatures. The myth has it that *Chukwu* is symbolized by all or *anyamvii*, which is believed to be the source from which all other reforms of life radiated. The first man that was created was known as *Ife-nta*, meaning junior light. This name places man very close to *Chukwu* (i.e. Sun, the great light) Man is thus “is” next to God in order of things in the universe. Furthermore, the first man to be created was *obo-omananya*. Other creatures that God made are animals, plants and spirits. All these creatures enjoyed an initial harmony with God. It should be stated that certain events were responsible for the distortion of this original cosmogonic harmony. In the first place, the Supreme deity granted man too much freedom in terms of action, and man abused it and this led to quarrels, acrimony and confusion among the created beings. For instance, the myth has it that there were constant quarrels among women and the careless use of kitchen utensils, particularly the pestle which was constantly hitting at the sky, the original abode of God. *Chukwu* was annoyed and thus the sky eventually moved away from the earth.

From the myth, we can learn the following. In the first place, there is the acknowledgment of a supreme deity with power of Creation and control over what he has created. Furthermore, man is very crucial in this creation. Man misused his initial freedom and restraints have to be imposed. It was on the basis of this that morality and the act of appeasing the Creator emerged. In Relation to this is the fact that it was man who distorted the original cosmic harmony and to correct this, he developed certain religious practices to placate his creator.

According to the *Ibibio* an ethnic group in *Akwa Ibom* State of Nigeria, the most dominant feature in human existence is the belief in the Supreme self-begotten being called *Abasi-Ibom*. *Abasi* in this context means “a divine being who always and will always be forever”, while *Ibom* refers to the limitlessness and infinite nature of this being. It is further held that *Abasi Ibom* created two offsprings namely: *Abasi Enyong* (male) with dominion over the sky (*Enyong*) and whose offspring include the sun, thunder and lighting, the second offspring of *Abasi Ibom* is *Abasi-Isong* (female), with control over the earth (*Isong*) and whose offspring include *Nidem* in charge of the waters and *Ekpo* in charge of the bushes.

The *Ibibio* believe that this high God (*Abasi-Ibom*) created all things including *Indemo* to whom he also gives charge of the different aspects of

human affairs. Thus, there is *Ndem Isong* (fertility deity) to look after land fertility; *Ndem Udua* (market deity) to protect the interest of traders; *Ndem Ikot* (*farmland deity*) who is supposed to dwell in the farmland to look after the growth of the crops.

According to *Udoidem*, *Abasi Ibom* having created Himself caused the sky (*enyong*), *Isong* (earth) and *Inyang Ibom* (the waters) by mere verbal command. At the time of creation, the earth and the sky were separate entities that got struck together to satisfy their natural sexual desire. However, conflict later resulted between them and the sky moved away. It is reported that separation must have been caused by the earth kids who normally rub their dirty oily hands on the face of the sky after eating and thus forced the sky to move upwards.

To effect the separation, *Abasi-Ibom* sent a giant with an axe to force away the sky from the earth. The *Ibibio* still hold that despite this separation, the conflict between the earth and the sky persist and this is manifested in the alternation of days and nights. Night reflects when the earth has overpowered the sky, while 'day' reflect the reverse.

From the foregoing, we have shown that Myths represent the African spirit and the African view of Historical reality. Therefore for African philosophy to be authentically African, it must operate within the conceptual framework of myths which represent the African reality and they are authentically African in nature. The use of Eurocentric yardstick to judge African philosophy is unacceptable and immoral. The fact that African societies were pre-literate does not negate the existence of a truly African philosophy based on the environment, experience and culture of the people. It is worthy to remember that even in Greece, the emergence of philosophy was preceded by the rationalizing and systematizing of myths, such as we find, for example, in Hesiod's *Theogony* (Kirk, 1974:60). The process by which myth gave way to philosophy is thus not straightforward, extending for centuries. Now, have those who question, African philosophy taken into consideration the centuries of pre-literate isolation of African societies, in which African myth and philosophy have spread among African peoples, but have not been documented in written form?

It is a great tragedy and disservice to intellectuals if these sort of views continue among intellectuals. This essay is not intended to provide easy answers to problems which are immense. Even if we do like to think about this we are probably all aware of our prudent human condition. As in the

Greece of Xenophanes, Heraclitus and Plato there are still temples, but merely as something that reminds us of the past. Myths also remind us of the past, the past in its real existence. In the proper sense, philosophy is the love of wisdom, pursuit of the knowledge of the whole. But when it turns to "be scientific" and attempts to look at the world "objectively", that is, as if it were an object, it arrives only at the partial knowledge of a part.

Conclusion

Myths tell us about the Historical reality of the universe and all its components. African myths explain in the context of African cultures, great human concerns and realities such as death, creation, the evolution of living things, man's relationship with other living creatures etc. However, the purpose of a myth is far more than being explanatory. It has many values in the African societal setting. It acts as a socializing agent. It is used to nourish and to buttress the traditions of the ancestors. Myths are also educative in that it teaches people especially the younger ones the meaning of the universe and man's place in it. It places the world before us as an object of indifferent investigation, a world to be known not just as an abstracted object but as a wholistic real entity. A universal knowledge arise from man's effective engagement with the world and myths help explain the great human concepts of his time.

It is therefore difficult to imagine a world without myths and African History will definitely note be complete with these means of transmitting and educating especially the "unbeliever" in the existence of African philosophy the philosophic sagacity of our past.

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About the Author

Jones, M. Jaja is a Senior Lecturer and teaches History and Philosophy in the Institute of Foundation Studies, Rivers State University of Science and Technology, Port Harcourt, Nigeria. Dr. Jaja has written many scholarly papers in cultural history and philosophy both within and outside Nigeria. Some of his publications are in Philosophy and Social Action, India and Dialogue and Universalism, Poland, Journal of Alternative Perspectives, USA and International Journal of Current Research in the Humanities, Ghana.