



Philosophy, Mythology and an African Cosmological System

Amaechi Udefi

Department of Philosophy, University of Ibadan, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

There is a tendency by some scholars, especially those professional African philosophers who belong to the analytic school of African philosophy, to deny any relationship between philosophy, myth and cosmology. Their denial is based on their characterisation of philosophy as a rational and critical inquiry, while myth and cosmology are taken by them as belonging to the realm of stories, folktales etc. created by so-called primitive or traditional society to satisfy some emotional and instinctual need. Hence, they conclude that the concepts are unrelated. However, I shall argue that there is a deeper relationship between them than it is acknowledged since myth and cosmology constitute the raw material for philosophy. Again, both concepts offer a perspective for an interpretation of the world and the mysteries and phenomena of existence in general.

DEFINING PHILOSOPHY, MYTHOLOGY AND COSMOLOGY PHILOSOPHY

It is pretty difficult to give a precise definition of philosophy as a discipline unlike what we see in some other disciplines like sociology, history, economics, physics etc where there is a kind of straightforward definitions of them. This perhaps accounts for the apparent disappointment of a student taking a first course in philosophy as to the lack of agreement in the definition of the subject by philosophers. However, saying this does not mean that it is impossible to articulate “ideas and attitudes that could be regarded as philosophical¹.

- (a) Philosophy tries to understand the real nature of any given thing facts, or events;
- (b) It understand the object in itself.
- (c) Hence, the goals of any philosophical system consist on the one hand the inculcation of habits of clear, exact logical and critical thinking and on the other hand the avoidance, of blind indoctrination and the adoption of a critical attitude towards issues in life.
- (d) Philosophy is a form of rational activity, a critical and conscious effort to understand the universe, its origins, nature and man’s place in it.

Philosophy, Mythology and African Cosmological System

- (e) It is also a critical thinking about the concepts and principles we use to organise our experience in morals, in religion, and in social and political life, in law in psychology, in history, education and in the natural sciences².

What is obvious from the views articulated above is that philosophy is susceptible of two senses, one broad or general and the other technical or narrow. In the broad sense, philosophy is nothing more than world-view (Weltanschauung), culture, opinion, beliefs etc of an individual or a people. This sense of philosophy is captured by Nwala when he says:

Philosophy may mean a world-view..., that is, the basic beliefs which a people have or a person has about the origin, nature and of the universe, life or existence, whether the ideas are explicitly stated or implied in action stated in another ways, it could be basic ideas and beliefs which express a people's or a person's outlook in life³.

In this case, every society has some philosophy since there is a stock of beliefs, ideas, opinions that is commonly shared by the people of a particular culture concerning man, society and nature. In the technical or narrow sense, the practice of philosophy is now reserved for the professional philosophers who, in a critical and conscious manner, attempt to theorise about the world and reality. According to Kwame Gyekye, philosophy is essentially a rational, critical and systematic inquiry into the fundamental ideas underlying human thought, experience and conduct-an inquiry whose subject matter includes epistemological concepts and categories⁴.

This technical sense is what Odera Oruka prefers to call “exact” philosophy (in opposition to ‘debased’ or diffused philosophy) where philosophy is a rational and critical reflection on man, society and nature⁵. Similarly, Innocent Onyewuenyi contends that the standard definition of philosophy includes analysis, synthesis and the quest for meaning of life. For him philosophy is an unusually persistent criticism and analysis of beliefs, concepts and statements. Also, philosophy is an attempt to co-ordinate all experience and knowledge into one vision. Again, philosophy can also be defined as a search for meaning is life’. According him, in this case, all men are philosophers to the degree that they make decisions about the good life⁶.

The two senses of the term-philosophy stated above chime with what W.E. Abraham, in his highly illuminating book, *The Mind of Africa*, calls a “public philosophy” and a “private philosophy”. According to him, the former is concerned with the traditional society and the laying-bare of the communal mind while the private philosophy is the thinking of an individual philosopher⁷.

Mythology

It is a difficult task to give a precise definition of myth because it is prone to many definitions and interpretations as there are myth analysts. In other words, each analyst or scholar tries to give a definition of myth based on a certain perspective. Some might adopt a dismissive attitude towards myths and deny them any truth-value, while others might be charitable and accord some cognitive-value to them. According to Martin S. Day, “definers of myth are so varied and irreconcilable as delegates to the United Nations”⁸. However, we shall attempt to give a characterisation of myths or its collective mythology following its etymology and other relevant literature. Before we proceed, it is important to note that man from the pre-historic times has been grappling with some perennial and perplexing problems like the origin of the world, man and things as well as the question of existence. The responses to these are usually encapsulated in the stories, narratives and cosmogonic myths of the people or culture group. It is important to note that the term myth is derived from the Greek *mythos*, meaning ‘word’ or ‘story’⁹. We shall, however defined myth following Mercatante as:

...traditional story, orally passed on from one generation to the next, believed to be literally true by the culture that produced it, about gods and goddesses, heroes, heroines, and other real and fantastic creatures, taking place in primeval or remote times¹⁰.

For the functionalist theory whose Chief advocate is Malinowski, myths are like songs and fairy tales which are owned by certain sub clans. According to him, it is a rule that a myth will be best known in its locality, that is, known with all the details and free from any adulterations or not quite genuine additions and fusions¹¹. In the same vein, Isidore Okpewho defines “myth as a set of ideas about man and his environment”¹². What unites the above definitions is that myth is concerned with the traditional tales of a people, gods, nature and the universe¹³.

Thus, Levy-Bruhl in his book, *Primitive Mentality* believes that primitive people are unlettered since they are incapable of purely abstract reasoning. Hence they are regarded as being pre-logical. And their myths are mere stories or narratives devoid of any truth and cognitive ‘cash-value’. However, some scholars, like B. Malinowski, have challenged the above and similar views and consequently described “myths in primitive culture as a pragmatic charter for primitive faith and moral wisdom. According to him, a myth serves as a clear presentation of the outlook of the life of people living in communities as well as objective and permanent philosophy of life. This point is well taken by Ikenga Metuh when he says:

Myths definitely do tell us about certain realities including religious truths, people’s understanding of them environment,

Philosophy, Mythology and African Cosmological System

their geography history, medicine and their social and political institutions could very easily be revealed in their myths¹⁴.

Mythology and the Evolution of Philosophy

In order to do justice to this topic, we need to go into a brief examination of the roles or influences certain people might have played in the course of philosophy's evolution and historical development. In all fairness, the present day philosophy or art of philosophizing started from the pseudo-philosophical speculations of the Greek poets. Even though the poets did not receive sufficient training in philosophy, they nonetheless reflected and wondered about the origin of the gods (theogony) and that of universe (cosmology) almost in the same manner the Ionian philosophers did later. But the only problem with their type of philosophy is that it was suffused with fantasy or superstition characteristic of the ancient Greek cosmology. Hence their system of thought could be classified as *mythology* and *anthropomorphism*. However their endeavours sparked off the latent philosophical firmament in the Ionian philosophers towards a pursuit of systematic philosophic thought. The Ionians marked a point of departure from the mythic and anthropomorphic speculations of the Greek poets and started reflective inquiries that formed, as it were, the bedrock of present day philosophizing. Such philosophers include Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes. These Ionians, who were also called cosmologists, made a remarkable contribution into philosophical thinking by delving into the origin of the whole world and the ultimate causes of things. Apparently amazed by the phenomena of birth and death, the movement of ocean, the amazing variety of things, the concept of time, the basic unity in the apparent diversity, they asked: what is the first principle from which all things draw their origin at birth and whence do they so at death? That is, what is the original stuff that underlies the universe? The leading figure of Ionian philosophers was Thales, who posited that the ultimate constituent of the universe was *water*. According to him, water is the primordial substance underlying all things in the world. Understandably, Thales may have come to this conclusion because of the importance of water to the Milesians, who were largely sea-going fishermen and peasant farmers. Again on a more theoretical level, water is the only substance capable of changing from liquid to solid and gaseous state.

Liquid	=	Solid	=	Gases
Water	=	Ice	=	air (vapour)

The second Ionian philosopher was Anaximander, who like Thales, believed that there must be an original substance that constitutes everything in the universe. They however, disagreed on what the substance is. Whereas Thales claimed it was water, Anaximander argued that water was too specific and as such could not explain the various things in the world which present themselves in the form of opposites, like hot and cold, wet and dry, day and night etc. According to him, the only primary substance that could explain all

things is what he called *indeterminate boundless*. However he could not explain what he meant by this when asked to do so.

The third Ionian philosopher, Anaximenes criticised Anaximander for not being sufficiently explicit in what he meant by indeterminate boundless. He was inclined to Thales who chose a particular substance-water as the primary substance of the universe. He therefore attempted to take a middle-course between Thales' idea of one substance and Anaximander's notion of the boundless hence he posited air as the original stuff.

Cosmology

The term is derived from the Greek (*Kosmos*) meaning world and (*Logos*) which means discourse. Then it can be defined as the study of the origin, structure and development of the world or universe in its totality. Again it can loosely be defined as that branch of metaphysics after ontology (which is the study of the meaning and nature of being), which treats of the universe as an ordered system. Nwala defines the term as:

... that framework of concepts and relations which man erects in satisfaction of some emotional or intellectual drive, for the purpose of bringing descriptive order into the world as a whole, including himself as one of its elements. The resulting cosmology will accordingly reflect the sociological, philosophical or scientific predilections of the individual and his group¹⁵.

Both cosmology and myths are related since they attempt to address through narratives, the problems bordering on the origin and nature of the world, man and existence generally. These cosmogonic myths have to do with the treatment of "the origin of the world and other phenomena" contained therein.

The Interplay of Philosophy, Mythology and Cosmology

We stated above that the Ionian philosophers articulated the problems bordering on the origin of the world, man, phenomena of life and death and the stuff of the things which were indeed perplexing to man. From their reflections, whose grounds were already laid by the narratives of Homer and Hesiod among others in their wonder and interpretation of the origin of the world and gods emerged Greek cosmology. Now, philosophy began in wonder and like cosmology and mythology concerns the basic beliefs of the people about the world, man and existence in their totality. Granted that myths and cosmology may be said to characterise traditional or primitive society, but saying so does not imply that such society is impervious to some sort of rational or philosophic elements no matter how rudimentary. If philosophy, in its broadest sense, is defined as world-view and as certain basic beliefs and conceptions about the world, man and existence, then it makes sense to say that traditional society possesses some philosophy.

Philosophy, Mythology and African Cosmological System

According to Jacques Maritain, as quoted by Nwala:

... some of the most elementary truths with which philosophy deals were known long before philosophy itself had come to birth, and the more important of these are to be found in a more or less rudimentary form...among all peoples of antiquity, event at the most remote epoch... (Thus) the primitive tradition has preserved for mankind throughout the ages a deposit...of fundamental truths. In this deposit ...were included many philosophic conceptions¹⁶.

It is obvious that what Jacques Maritain is alluding to here is the relationship between philosophy, folktales and cosmological systems of societies and the imperative need to abstract philosophy from the mass of deposits of such societies. Also, Nwala seems to subscribe to the above view when he says:

If 'primitive societies could be said to possess cosmologies then there is also a sense in which we can rightly say that they too possessed philosophies. Cosmology ...is an integral part of classical philosophy. Their philosophies may not be systematised as ours but philosophers can draw out or abstract this philosophy from the life, culture and institutions of the people¹⁷.

The point being made here is that there is a thin line between philosophy, mythology and cosmology since both serve as a platform for the interpretation of man's experience about reality. This is perhaps what Bolaji Idowu intended when he said:

Myth (is) a vehicle conveying a certain fact or a certain basic truth about man's experience in his encounter with the created order and with regard to man's relation to the supra-sensible world¹⁸.

Again there are some moral lessons to drawn in both concepts, that is, through axiology and metaphysics which are basic themes in philosophy, we learn about those intrinsic values which are the imperatives for a good life and the structure of the world and the nature of being as well as the stories in form of myths that attend to them respectively.

Still on the link between the concepts, Dipo Irele and Okpewho, among others, have argued for a complementarity between them rather than being seen as a kind of binary opposition to each other. Specifically, Irele contended, following the insights of some philosophers of science like Thomas Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend, Mary Hesse, for the revision of the view (Enlightenment) which tends to deny any rational contents to myths and other forms of knowledge other than science. According to him, Ifa- a literary corpus in Yoruba culture contains certain basic ingredients of scientific and philosophic thought namely; conceptualisation of phenomena of nature, abstract causal thinking and abstraction of contraries in nature¹⁹.

Amaechi Udefi

Okpewho, on his part maintained that rationalisation and speculation which are the basic ingredients of philosophical activity are accounted for by the oral traditions,²⁰ contrary to the submissions of some scholars like Levy-Bruhl, Jack Goody, Karl Popper, Robin Horton, and Peter Bodunrin, Odera Oruka, among others, that literacy, criticism, argument etc are a precondition for a philosophic through".

Igbo Cosmology

Let us suspend our argument above and turn attention to Igbo cosmology to buttress the point about the link between philosophy, mythology and cosmology. We argued above that traditional societies possess philosophy and traditional Igbo society is no exception to this, since it possesses not only philosophy, but also there are "myths and ideas which embody and describe their cosmogony²¹ that is, belief about creation, origin of the universe and its constituents as well as the nature of man.

The Dual Nature of Igbo Universe

In traditional Igbo society, there is the belief that the universe is bifurcated into two, namely:

Elu – Igwe – sky

Elu-Uwa- (Ala) the Earth. The former is the abode of the spirits or supernatural entities- *Ala-Mmuo* and the latter is inhabited by human beings- *Ala-Mmadu* and other things like animals, plants, fishes, vegetables etc. it is also believed by the Igbo that the two worlds, though distinct, maintain a kind of correspondence or interaction with each other in order to guarantee social balance or order. This point is well taken by Mazisi Kunene as:

Common to all these bodies are two special laws (a) Continuous growth resulting in a expanding universe (b) The existence of cosmic boundaries enabling each entity to follow its own direction. A cosmic balance regulates all things from the smallest unit to the largest. The interplay among the cosmic entities aims at enriching each other²².

The channel by which this is transmitted from one generation to another is through any of these:

Akiko- Ifo: Folktales, stories with songs during moonlight plays essentially for relaxation and entertainment with strong moral lessons.

Akiko –Gboo: Legends which are stories about the distant past.

Akiko- Odi-nala: Myths, i.e. narratives about tradition and customs, *Omenala*, of *ndi- Igbo*-race.

The Igbo, for instance, can narrate how the world and man were created, through the platform of *Akiko-ifo*, (folktales) by saying that *Chukwu-okike, Chineke* (God the creator) created *Uwa* (world) and *Mmadu* (human

Philosophy, Mythology and African Cosmological System

being). The instruction by *Chineke* is that the world should provide a shelter or home for the human being and other things including plants, animals, vegetables etc. for consumption by man. What is of interest here is the philosophy underlying the story. The belief in a created universe is common to both the traditional society and finds supports or justification in the “creation stories in the Holy Books – Bible (Genesis) and the Qu’ran”.

Again, the story attempt to explain the place of man in the cosmic order, putting him at the centre of the universe. In his interaction with other forces in nature, man recognises his freedom and the sacredness of himself, gods, earth and other things associated with spirits. It is important to mention that within the universe of forces, man is not subservient to the gods. For he “appeals to the gods only when he needs them and may choose to denounce them when they fail²³”.

Thus, contrary to Popper, Horton and others who maintain that traditional society is characterised by an absence of alternatives to established authority and as such largely conservative is to say the least, uncharitable and unilluminating. The traditional man is as innovative, creative, dynamic as any other in so-called modern, societies. This is attested to by Paul Radin, *Primitive Man as Philosopher* (1927), Marcel Griaud *Conversations with Ogotemeli* (1965), Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, (1969), E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion* (1956), John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969).

CONCLUSION

We can now conclude by reiterating the point that there is a link between philosophy, mythology and cosmology, since in both there are certain assumptions and conceptions about the universe, life and existence in general. The characterisation of traditional society as ‘closed’ and conservative is an exaggeration because how the traditional man arrives at these assumptions and conceptions is not fortuitous but embodies some speculative elements based on the ‘exercise on reason’. These assumptions and ideas may not have been written down in terms of systematisation, but this should not diminish the meaningfulness and aesthetic value of oral tradition.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. T. Uzodinma Nwala *Igbo Philosophy*, Lagos: Lantern Books, 1985; p.2.
2. J.O. Sodipo, ‘Philosophy and Culture’. An Inaugural lecture delivered at the University of Ife on 25th April, 1972, p.3
3. Ibid. p. 2

Amaechi Udefi

4. Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought the Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1995), p.4
5. H. Odera Oruka, Mythologies as African Philosophy in *East Africa Journal* Vol. 9, No. 10. October, 1972, p.7
6. Innocent Onyewuenyi, Towards An African Philosophy, a paper p.3
7. W.E. Abraham, *The Mind of Africa*, Chicago University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 104
8. Martin S. Day, *The Many Meanings of Myth* (New York: Lanham, 1987) p.2
9. Raphael O. Madu, *African Symbols, Proverbs and Myths the Hermeneutics of Destiny* New York: Peter Lang, (1996), p.232
10. Anthony S. Mercatante, *The Facts on File Encyclopaedia of World Mythology and Legend* (Oxford, 1988), p. xiv
11. Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (London: Routledge, 1922) pp. 327-329; see also his *Myth in Primitive Psychology*. New York: Norton, 1926.
12. Isidore Okpewho, *Myth in Africa; A study of its Aesthetic and Cultural Relevance* (Cambridge: C.U.P, 1983), p.1 For Illuminating views on myth, see Wole Soyinka *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: C.U.P, 1976), W.R. Inge, The Place of myth in Philosophy in *Philosophy* Vol. xi. No. 42, 1936); Dipo Irele, African Philosophy and Mythology in *Journal of Philosophy and Development* Vol. 4 Nos. 1 & 2, 1998), pp. 102-110, Richard Bell, 'Narrative in African Philosophy' in *Philosophy*, Vol. 64, (1989)
13. H. Odera Oruka, Mythologies As African Philosophy, p.6
14. Emetie IKenga Metuh, *God and Man in African Religion* (Enugu: Snaap Press Ltd. 1999), pp.2728.
15. T. U. Uzodinma Nwala, *Igbo Philosophy*, p.7
16. Cf. T. Uzodinma Nwala, *Igbo Philosophy*, p.6
17. Ibid, p. 7
18. Bolaji E. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion* (London) SCM Press, 1976), p.84
19. Dipo Irele, "The Cognitive claims of Myth" a paper, p. 3; "African Philosophy and Mythology", pp. 102-110.
20. Isidore Okpewho, Myth and Rationality in Africa, in *Ibadan Journal of Humanistic Studies*, No. 1 April, 1981, p.44
21. T. Uzounima Nwala, *Igbo Philosophy*, p. 29
22. Mazisi Kunene, 'The Relevance of African Cosmological Systems to African Literature Today' in *African Literature Today*, Vol. 11, (1980), p. 191-192.
23. Mazisi Kunene, p. 199.