

ASTRONOMY 9: HISTORY OF COSMOLOGY

Handout #2

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Origin Myths: Africa

I. Introduction — Review

A) An Aside: Yesterday's Eclipse

- Anatomy of an eclipse
- Why a lunar eclipse is red (and the sky is blue)
- Scientific uses of eclipses
- Eclipses in mythology
 1. Asian dragons
 2. Fon: *The Great Gods*: celestial hanky-panky

B) "Truth"

1. Science

- No experiment/observation contradicts predictions of theory
- Proof vs. dis-proof; science must be falsifiable
- Domain of applicability
- Ockham's razor: *Plurality should not be assumed without necessity*
- Expt. results transcend culture, religion, ...

2. Myth

- Truth is existential, not theoretical
- Effectiveness of myth
- "Fingers pointing at the Moon"
- Culturally and temporally specific
- Conflicting meanings sometimes coexist

3. Science and myth are "Masks of the Universe"

4. Note: we read stories of the origin *in translation*

C) Myths from Africa

- "Positive being", creator(s)
- Theme of gods' retreat from the world
 1. Lozi (Barotse): *God Retreats to the Sky* (also Yao)
 - Kamonu (man) disrupts creation through hunting
 - *cf.* Western myths: expulsion from paradise
 2. Krachi: *Separation of Gods from Man*
 - Women knock and cook bits of him
 - Used as a towel, annoyed by smoke from cooking fires
 3. Ngombe: *Quarrelsomeness of Man*
 - Man's fighting drives the creator away to unknown realm
- Gods often fallible
 1. Lozi god can't flee his creation without Spider's help
 2. Khoikhoi (Hottentot) *Supreme Being* is vulnerable, defeated at first by evil chief ⇒ "Wounded Knee"
 3. Nandi: *When God Came to Earth*
 - Dorobos precede even ordering of the world
 - Thunder god fears their ability to turn while sleeping!
 - Elephant laughs at this but is killed by man: hunting destroys the natural harmony
- The Fall
 1. Ngombe: Woman is cast from heaven
 - Incites incest, and is the root of evil

- Ultimate fate: gods who hold up the sky via East/West poles will get tired, sky will fall, man will regress to a lizard!
- Man’s inability to be reunited with the divine
 - Lozi log tower (*cf.* Babel) collapses
- Creation as a struggle of dualities
 - Khoikhoi: battle of two good/evil chiefs; good fights because evil kills “his” people
 - * History of tribal warfare
 - * Displacement and enslavement by Dutch (c. 1650)
 - Fon: Sun (male, day, east) / Moon (female, night, west) gods
- Creation as procreative
 - Dogon: *The First Words*
 - * Cosmos as granary/woman/womb
 - * Sexual relations of heavens/earth gods
 - Mande: *The Creation*
 - * Cosmic Egg created by God
 - * Evil arises through leaving the egg prematurely
 - Bushongo: *Bumbu Vomits the World*
- Creation through divine sacrifice
 1. Mande
 - Primal man must self-sacrifice to atone for leaving the Cosmic Egg prematurely and to restore fertility
- Creative power of speech
 1. Mande: Revelation of sacred words, divine wisdom
- Water as the primal element
 - Pottery also important (Dogon: sun, moon and stars)
 - Dogon: Grasses clothe the earth, cosmic order
- Influence of the West
 1. Swahili: *Making the World and Man* (Islamic)
 - Creation out of nothingness/not-being by eternal, omnipotent, omniscient god; 7 creations
 - Ordering the universe, 7 heavens/hells (medieval cosmos)
 - Man as angel manifest in clay; purpose to be revealed in thousands of years (apocalyptic)
 2. Domination by Europeans
 - (a) Bulu: *How Zambe Created Man, Chimp, and Gorilla*
 - Chimp, gorilla, white/black man have equal origin and opportunities
 - Only white focuses on the Book ⇒ understanding, power, dominion over nature and blacks
 - (b) Bushongo: Bumba is white, perhaps signifying Euro domination