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 10th 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

the raids of a neighboring tribe, the Igbos. The raids of the Igbos were not resisted by the Ifes because they were believed to be supernatural beings. Mọremi went to the river Esinmerin and promised that if he would help her to free her country she would sacrifice her dearest possession on earth. During the next raid she was taken prisoner and given as wife to the king of the Igbos. During her captivity she discovered that the dreaded enemies were human beings who covered themselves with grass to look like spirits. She escaped, and told the secret to the Ifes, who received the enemies at the next raid with fire-brands and thus defeated them. Fulfilling her vow, Mọremi sacrificed a sheep and a bullock to the river. But the river refused these sacrifices and demanded Mọremi's only son Olurogbo. Mọremi brought the sacrifice and her loss was mourned by the Ifes. Olurogbo, however, ascended to heaven on a rope. This is briefly the story as told by Johnson and it was Johnson who first suggested that there was a resemblance to the story of Mary, who also sacrificed her son.

But here again the sacrifice of the son is nothing peculiar to either Yoruba mythology or Christian mythology. Frazer, in 'The Golden Bough', quotes examples from Sweden, Greece and the Near East of royal sons being sacrificed in order to redeem the people from some impending danger. He explains the custom as one which came to supplant the sacrifice of the king himself for the benefit of the nation. The resemblance between the names of Mọremi and Mary does not seem very convincing, but recently deliberate attempts have been made to identify the two women. In a version given to me some months ago in Ife, Mọremi was said to have had a virgin conception, a detail of which Johnson, significantly, knew nothing. This shows us how careful we must be in stressing resemblances between myths, because often a deliberate identification with a foreign myth takes place. I have heard similar attempts to identify Ifa with Christ. The reason for such identification is not far to seek. When one religion is being supplanted by another, a guilt feeling is often created in people who subconsciously or half consciously believe in the old religion. Such a guilt feeling is relieved by the attempt to create a connection between the old form of worship and the new. The same psychological condition which prompts the Yoruba today to identify Olurogbo or Ifa with Christ prevailed in Germany during the early Middle Ages when Christ was frequently called the new Baldur.

Deliberate modifications of myths are particularly frequent in political myths. According to Johnson, Oduduwa emigrated from mecca. This story is widespread today, but it is not found in many of the smaller towns. I have frequently heard the story that Oduduwa came from across a big river, but with no special place mentioned. It is not at all uncommon for people to link up their history with some other place of renown. The Roman tradition, for example, that they descended from Aeneas, the hero of Troy, is known to be

fictitious. The Roman myth of Aeneas, the hero of Troy, is known to be fictitious. The Roman myth of Aeneas fleeing from Troy and settling (after an adventure in Carthage) in Italy, does not reflect an historical truth, but simply the desire of the Romans to link up their own history with that of the much admired Greeks. In the same way it was possible that the Yoruba drummers telling the story of Oduduwa added the name Mecca to their story, *after* Mecca had become a place of legendary fame through Yoruba pilgrims who had returned from that town.

A good example of a deliberate modification of myth for political reasons is furnished by the story of Oduduwa creating the earth, as quoted above. In Qyọ the same story is told as in the rest of Yoruba country, but the great deed is ascribed to Qranyan (Qranmiyan), instead of Oduduwa. Now Qrānyan is the forefather of the Qyọ people and, by ascribing the creation of the earth to him, the Qyọs were able to substantiate their claim to be the owners of the earth and therefore entitled to tribute from the other Yoruba tribes. It is most likely that this modification of the myth was made after the Qyọs conquered the other tribes.

I have so far tried to show what kind of history we can *not* infer from myths. But there is another kind of history which is buried in the mythology of a nation. While I do not believe that we can get *reliable* information from mythology about migrations, racial affinities, battles, etc., I believe that we may often learn from it much about the history of the thought or philosophy of a certain people.

A very fruitful field of study is opened when one examines and compares different versions of the same story or contradictory accounts of the same hero or god. Where contradictory accounts exist, it is likely that an older story has survived side by side with the newer version which has begun to supplant it, and we may thus be able to trace the development of thought and change in the attitude to life.

A most interesting example is once again provided by Oduduwa. Oduduwa is commonly considered the legendary ancestor of the Yoruba race who led them to Ife from the East and from whom all Yoruba Obas still descend. But Archdeacon Lucas quotes another story—which I was also given in Ife recently—according to which Oduduwa is a female deity, an earth goddess in fact, and the wife of Qbatala. This second Oduduwa story is an interesting survival, because earth worship has practically died out in the Yoruba country and has been superseded by the present anthropomorph Orisha system. It seems likely, however, that when the Yorubas first settled and took to farming, earth was the chief goddess worshipped and the sky was a subsidiary deity. This story indicates that the Orisha Qbatala has developed out of an older conception of a sky god. It is possible that early Yoruba society was matriarchal for a time

after the introduction of farming, and that the chief deity therefore was personified as a woman. But when society gradually changed to a patriarchal system, the great mother earth was changed into the male warrior leader. The connection between the old and the new Oduduwa becomes clear in the history of Oduduwa descending from heaven to create the earth. Here Oduduwa has already changed sex, but he is still connected with the earth; the story in fact marks transition from one philosophy of life to another, from an older to a newer social order.

I have said that early Yoruba society may have been matriarchal after the introduction of farming. This statement may need some further explanation. Farming was in many countries introduced by women and for a time practiced by them alone. The art of farming was connected with important magical rites and therefore gave women a very prominent position in society while they were the holders of the secrets connected with the propitiation of the earth. Since magical power can be used not only to benefit but also to damage society, the men, when re-establishing their superiority in society once more, would accuse many of the former priestesses as witches.

All this development may be read out of the contradictory myths which are told about Orisha Oko, the farm god. The older story says that the Bale of Irawo was infected with leprosy and therefore driven out of the town. His faithful wife followed him into the forest, where they were both expected to die because they were too old to hunt. The woman, however, began to feed her husband on weeds and in the course of time she discovered that she could produce more and better plants by tilling the ground and planting seeds. Eventually the old chief was cured of his disease and they returned to Irawo. They were received gladly by the people and the woman taught people the new art of farming. She was later worshipped as Orisha Oko.

The other story, which is apparently more recent, says that Orisha Oko was a hunter who lived a lonely life in a cave and grew very wise. Eventually people began to consult him when they suspected women of being witches. Orisha Oko would take the suspects into his cave and if he found them innocent he led them out by the hand, but if he found them guilty he handed them to a spirit called Polo, who would kill them with a club. The first of these stories apparently reflects the people's memory of the introduction of farming by women; the second seems to show the re-establishment of male supremacy. As in the Oduduwa story, the sex of the goddess is changed. In addition, the new Orisha Oko is actually used as a weapon against women.

Another vestige of this older form of Yoruba society, which is symbolized by the earth worship, may be found in the traditions of the Ogboni Society. The Ogbonis use as their symbol two bronze figures, one male and one female, connected by a chain (Ẹdan). I understand that these represent Mother Earth

and Father Heaven, and that some of the ritual of the society still reflects earth worship. The antiquity of the Ogboni cult and ritual is suggested by the style of the Èdan bronze figures, which is uniform in all parts of the Yoruba country and totally different from any type of Yoruba woodcarving we know. Whereas the woodcarvings we know radiate calmness, concentration and balance, the Èdan figures are tense and dramatic, with a mysterious grin on the mouth, that is strangely reminiscent of Greek archaic sculpture. This wild dramatic style of the Èdan reflects a culture which is older and more 'primitive' and less tolerant than that which is reflected by the calm, lyrical woodcarvings which are found in the shrines of the Orishas like Shango, Qbatala, Qshun or Eshu.

All this suggests that the Ogbonis were originally all-powerful priests of the earthgoddess and that, when their cult was superseded—and perhaps fought—by the Orisha cults, they closed together in a secret society in order to preserve their ancient privileges.

Obviously this can claim to be no more than an hypothesis. But I hope that I have been able to show in what direction, I feel, research into mythology should move. I think that, when we can find traces of an older Yoruba civilization and retrace the cultural development of the people, we have learnt more about their history than when we try to retrace Oduduwa's steps to Mecca.

It is worth while also to investigate myths from a psychological point of view. It is a well-known fact that much of a nation's collective unconscious is reflected in mythology. Perhaps when investigating the old lore of a people we can find the answer to the question: 'Who are they?' rather than to the question: 'Where do they come from?'

I have already mentioned the universal recurrent themes of folklore. By comparing similar myths from different countries we may learn about the character of a nation, because, although stories told in different countries are often very much alike, they are never completely identical, and it is where the detail of one story differs from the others that we are given a clue to the nature of the people who told it.

Let us examine the Qbatala story we referred to before. As we observed the Hebrews, Greeks and Eskimos all had stories about human beings being created out of clay. But the Yoruba myth about Qbatala contains an important detail which is not found in other countries. One day, it says, Qbatala was drunk on palm wine and then he created hunchbacks, cripples and albinos. Olurun the supreme God gave the breath of life even to these deformed creatures, but he forbade Qbatala worshippers to drink palm wine. Deformed people and albinos have since been given a special position in Yoruba society as priests of Qbatala.

This detail shows the Yorubas as a tribe with an exceptionally strong social feeling. The other nations saw no need to account for the existence of cripples, etc., who are often treated with contempt by them, and were in some

communities even put to death at birth. The Yorubas, however, by attributing their origin to the creator god himself, have safeguarded the social position of these unfortunates, who are given a special position in his shrine.

Just as the existence of some unique trait in mythology can tell us something about the character of a tribe, so also the absence of a widespread idea may be of psychological interest.

Most countries in the world have a 'lost paradise' story which ascribes the hardships of our lives to divine punishment for a sin committed by our ancestors in the distant past.

The Hebrew story of the garden of Eden and the Greek story of the Golden Age are well-known examples. As an example of an African version of the 'lost paradise' type of story I should like to quote a story from Benin, which I was given by Mr. Bradbury, an anthropologist attached to the West African Institute of Social and Economic Research.

Long ago, the story goes, the sky was very low down. So low, that human beings could cut a piece off the sky whenever they wanted food. But human beings were very careless with the sky. They cut off far more than they could eat and threw the rest on to the rubbish heap. The sky felt annoyed about this and asked God to forbid human beings to cut more off him than they could eat. God made a law accordingly and this was kept for some time. But one day a woman cut a huge piece off the sky. Although the whole village came to help her eat, they could not finish it and in the end had to throw the rest on to the rubbish heap. The sky, deeply offended, moved high up, out of human reach; and from then on human beings have had to work.

This story can be interpreted in exactly the same way as the biblical story of the garden of Eden: long ago human beings were close to God. But they were unaware of the great blessing this meant for them. They offended God by not heeding His commands. Now God has turned away from them and human beings must work hard and show themselves worthy before they came close to him again. In other words, the story betrays a consciousness of original sin. The fact that it is always the woman who is made responsible for the disaster of mankind reflects that a guilt feeling about the complicated relationship between the sexes is at the bottom of the idea of original sin.

Now let us see what the Yorubas have made out of this same story. Once upon a time, they say, the sky was so low down that people could wipe their hands on it after eating. But one day a leper wiped his hands on it and the sky, shrinking from his touch, moved out of the reach of human beings.

In spite of a superficial similarity, this is a very different story, because in the Yoruba story the loss of Paradise is not attributed to 'sin'. In fact, God is not even mentioned in the story, and there is no question that the breaking of a divine command has brought ruin to man. Rather it may be misfortune

or suffering (symbolized by the leper) which is made responsible. The Yoruba has in fact no concept of 'sin' in the European sense of the word.

In connection with this it is most interesting to see what mythology can tell us about the Yoruba conception of good and evil. Missionaries, looking in vain for a Yoruba conception of good and evil. Missionaries, looking in vain for a Yoruba personification of 'Evil', have pounced on Eshu the trickster Orisha and labeled him 'the devil'. But Yoruba myths about Eshu contradict this decidedly. Eshu is described as a dangerous deity, difficult to please, and full of tricks, whose shrine is kept outside the house, because he is so dangerous. But at the same time Eshu is a culture hero, the bringer of the Ifa oracle and—according to Frobenius—the bringer of the sun. In other words, he brings danger and blessing at the same time.

In Yoruba mythology we hear nothing about good and evil being forced opposed to each other in deadly strife, both demanding allegiance from human beings.

All the Orishas are conceived as great forces that can have a good and a bad effect on human beings. All of them may protect or harm. Shango, who can bring so much happiness to his worshippers, as will be testified by anyone who has seen the play of his priests, is described as a tyrant king. Obatala himself, the creator and the god of purity, is described as being drunk in the act of creation.

Good and evil, in other words, are but two sides of one and the same thing, just as the good citizen is not the one who obeys certain abstract ideas of civic virtue, but the one who finds the proper relationship with his fellowmen. In the same way, the realistic Paganism of the Yoruba demands of the religious man that he should achieve the proper relationship with the supernatural forces, and has no place for the theory that man is a fallen creature who should be redeemed by some absolutely good being.

This realistic approach to good and evil has saved Yoruba society from many a complex to which other nations are generally exposed. It is partly responsible for the calmness and serenity which is one of the characteristics of Yoruba art.

There is a great deal of research to be done in this field, and much of it will have to be done by Yorubas. There are a great many symbols which a foreigner must needs find difficult to interpret. I do not venture to say, for example, what the 'wiping of the hands on the sky' mentioned in the story of the leper may signify.

There is also the vast body of folklore, the tortoise stories and all the rest of them, which need to be investigated. I do not think that these should be dismissed as just funny tales. I am convinced that they are just as laden with symbolism as, say, Grimm's fairy tales.