

Chapter 3. Tales of death and regeneration in West Africa

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Abstract: Myths in African traditional religions (plural intended!) often have an ambivalent relation both to the rituals in those religions and to the conceptions of the 'other world.' For one part the principal rituals seem to bear little relation to the main body of myth, on the other hand some or many of the main supernatural agents do not feature in the myths at all. This relative cultural autonomy of myths is reflected in the issues the myths address among which etiology seems to be of a lesser concern. This dynamic will be viewed in the myths on death and dying in some West African societies. Here, questions of ultimate origin do not feature, neither of creation nor of death, but the mythical attention is more of an intermediate nature, more protohistorical than purely mythical. Thus, one of the glaring absences, in some cases, is any explanation of death's origin, while the focus is either on avoiding the discourse on death and dying, or on the battle against death: how to avoid dying, and why man's ultimate inability to do so. The comparative data stem from the author's research (Kapsiki, North Cameroon, and Dogon, Mali) as the core of a wider West African comparison.

Introduction: An unromantic Africa

Books with large collections of myths, especially those of the universalistic kind such as Campbell's,² usually have only a short section on African myths. For some reason or other, Africa seems to fall beyond the scope of cherished mythical tales. Is this selective neglect or is Africa indeed not home to that many myths? I think two processes are at play here, romanticism and the relationship of myth with folk stories. First, mythological studies have long been colored by a romantic vision, with myths as the 'hallowed remnants of a far greater knowledge born in a bygone golden age, and handed down through the years as a dwindling heritage of that past.'³ In the last few decades this view has been severely discredited⁴ – and rightly so – and is definitely not shared in this article. But the romantic view has had a big impact and one

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² Campbell 1959-1968.

³ Belcher 2005: xvii.

⁴ See, for example, Segal 1984, 2004, Belcher 2005: xvii-xx.

effect has been in the selection of cultures which would fit into the romantic mould and for which 'tribal wisdom' would seem an appropriate notion. I have the distinct impression that African local cultures do not evoke the same kind of romantic appeal that indigenous cultures in other parts of the world generate. The myth of 'tribal wisdom' seems to be less powerful in Africa than it is in, for instance, Aboriginal Australia, on the slopes of the Andes or in Tibet.⁵

Somehow the notion of the 'noble savage' resonates more with traditional cultures 'out of Africa' than with the many on the continent, despite the fact that age-old wisdom should be found more easily on our continent of origin. The situation is similar in the present vogue of romantic 'noble savage tourism', where young westerners are looking for the impassioned age-old wisdom of the *shamans* to be cured or to become *shamans* themselves. In this vein too, Africa is not deemed to possess ancient wisdom for general humanity, as few tourists set out for the African 'wilds' to be initiated into the tribal wisdom which is the outcome of millennia of survival on a harsh continent.⁶ One reason for this might be that African cultures are not threatened, and that on a continent full of African cultures it is difficult to use the term 'indigenous', with its connotations of a threatened minority clinging to their ancient wisdom in the face of overwhelming odds. Africa is, in this sense, unromantic. At least, human Africa seems to be rather unromantic, as the Africa-of-the-animals is of course highly romantic.

Africa is one of these destinations where the 'West' goes to find its adventures in the splendor of the African game parks: the vast herds of wildebeest thundering through the immense plains of untouched wilderness, the elusive 'big five' every traveler must have spotted and photographed.⁷

And if Africa is also mentioned in the tourist brochures as the continent of colorful, strange cultures, of picturesque people in thatched huts that blend in with the surrounding savannah, these are photo ops, not a source of wonder about ourselves.

For Africanists this is slightly galling, even if such blatant romanticism is not one they deign to subscribe to. But there might be another reason for the relative neglect of Africa in the 'world of myths', one which has everything to do with our own perception. Habitually, three types of 'prose narrative' are discerned: myths, legends and folk tales.⁸ Myths are stories set in a remote past, in an earlier world, with non-human characters (preferably gods) who are sacred and generate belief. In legends, the setting is the recent past, with human characters and the story is considered factual. Folk tales – 'just-so stories' – operate in a familiar world with human or non-human characters, often animals, and do not have to be believed. Such a division has

⁵ Yet some publications try to redress this romantic balance, for example, Ford 1999, Mbitu & Prime 1997.

⁶ Some examples of mainly South Africans (and an occasional anthropologist) who are initiated as a *sangoma*, a native healer, notwithstanding.

⁷ Van Beek 2007c: 150.

⁸ For a classic definition, see Bascom 1975, reprinted in Dundes 1984: 5-40.

been found in many case studies as well,⁹ as in most African cultures people seem to separate their folk tales from their myths and legends. Thus, this separation between fictional accounts, folk tales, and the myths and legends that are considered history is indeed present throughout Africa.¹⁰

In this contribution I argue two points. First, a distinction is made between ‘myth’ and ‘legend’ which is ‘emic history’ on the one hand, and the amusement of folk tales on the other hand, but this does not preclude both types from heavily influencing each other, *i.e.* using the same themes, characters and plots. Prose narratives are not that divergent.¹¹ Second, in many African myths the setting is not that different from our present world: African myths have a kind of familiarity, a sense of immediacy that closely links them to the world we know. As I will illustrate, most of the myths in Africa are not overly etiological or very supernatural as more people than gods figure in them, the world is present from the start, and only small environmental details are ever explained.

One reason for this could be that the numbers of folk tales, riddles, dilemma tales and other forms of oral literature in Africa are overwhelming, swamping the number of myths and legends in which the function of amusement is less important. It is questionable whether dividing them into three categories does justice to African prose narratives and it might be that these categories are part of the relative paucity of African material in global myth collections.

To highlight some characteristics of the African world of myths and glean some insight into the specificity of African myths, I will look at two examples that I consider are functioning myths. The theme is the ‘struggle with life and death’, the way Africans explain life and mortality. In both cases, these tales are set in hero tales which is a genre in where Africa is also under-represented,¹² but then hero tales of a different and less classic kind. The cases are both West African: one from the widely known Dogon¹³ of Mali; and the second, the Kapsiki of Cameroon and the Higi of northeastern Nigeria from the periphery of West Africa.¹⁴ The two accounts stem from first-hand research over many years and the cases can be seen as a controlled comparison with similar surroundings, similar historical trajectories and a generally

⁹ Bascom 1984: 15.

¹⁰ Typically, African scholars tend to consider these tales as pathways into local histories (Shokpeka 2005, Mbitu & Prime 1997), while European researchers often inverse the relationship: myths are present politics (MacGaffey 2004, Nugent 1997). For the Mandara Mountains, balanced treatments on this issue are given by Sterner 2003 and Müller-Kosack 2003, and for popular Islam in Africa see van Binsbergen 1985.

¹¹ See also Belcher 2005, Lynch 2004.

¹² Ford 1999 uses a very wide definition for his hero tales.

¹³ My fieldwork among the Dogon started in 1979-1980 with regular return visits every two years, the last being in May 2008.

¹⁴ The Kapsiki of Cameroon and the Higi of northeastern Nigeria form one ethnic conglomerate, which I call Kapsiki in this article. My research among these people started in 1972-1973, with regular return visits every three to five years, the last being in January 2009.

similar socio-cultural organization. However, a comparison is about both similarities and differences, and the two cultures will be shown to have important variations on the themes chosen.

Two cultures: Similarities and differences

The Kapsiki in northern Cameroon as well as the Dogon in Mali live in a dry Sahelian-savannah environment where the sedentary cultivation of millet, sorghum and maize is supplemented with animal husbandry (sheep, goats and cattle). Both habitats are mountainous, relatively densely populated and quite intensively cultivated. Cultivation technology is of the classical African iron-type and working units are small. Subsistence cultivation relies on a broad spectrum of food crops, with some cash crops to supplement the family budget. Both groups have lived in these areas for a long time and their dwellings still echo the continuous threat of enslavement in past centuries.

For safety reasons, people built their villages only in defensible spots and cleared fields in the immediate vicinity. The fields of the Kapsiki / Higi were situated around the outcroppings or on the slopes themselves, whereas the Dogon cultivated primarily those fields visible from the plateau rim. In both cases the picture changed dramatically with the coming of colonization. The *pax colonialis* of the Germans and British for the Kapsiki, and the French in the case of the Dogon, opened up the plains and plateau as areas of cultivation. Pacification resulted in the populations rapid dispersal over the formerly dangerous surrounding areas.

The main, if not the only, socio-political unit consists of the village. Although the appearance of the villages is strikingly different, both the Kapsiki and the Dogon villages form the dominant context of village social life. Village communities have always had a high degree of political autonomy with their own clearly defined territory, structures of authority and local histories, in which migration traditions dominate. Politics are not centralized. Village heads have only a few ritual obligations, as have the clan and lineage elders, even though they have more influence in daily life. Conflict resolution, for instance, is highly informal and does not depend on specific functionaries. A separate group of specialists exists in both cases: the blacksmith group amongst the Kapsiki and the blacksmiths and leather workers / tanners among the Dogon.

For both groups, religion is complex and echoes their history and setting. A system of major cyclical rituals, more or less tied in to the *rites de passage* joins a clearly defined set of sacrificial cults which follow the social echelons of the village: individual, household, ward, lineage, clan, village, neighborhood, and the whole village. Sacrifice forms the core ritual in both cases, with divination being the steering mechanism. The pantheon, however, is quite different, even though in both cases the role of the ancestors is limited. Their differences become apparent at the level of ideology and what one might call 'lifestyle', the specific ways of interaction between

members of the same society.

Internal fighting between the villages was much more intense in the case of the Kapsiki. Skirmishes between Kapsiki villages used to form a continuous threat, but they were a much-loved male activity. Villages fought each other with some regularity and for a variety of reasons, always following a strict fighting code. While there were some internal skirmishes among the Dogon, these were far less important. Their raids were limited to occasional groups of youngsters avenging the affronts by peers from a neighboring village who had infringed on their territory, *i.e.* were after 'their girls'. No slaves were caught and no cases of manslaughter were ever reported. The Kapsiki had many more domestic slaves than the Dogon who rarely bought or sold slaves. The Dogon were only likely to be involved in a slave transaction if they were paying the ransom for a kinsman caught by a Muslim, though they occasionally did use other kinsmen in the exchange. Slavery was thus a normal occurrence in Kapsiki villages, but an exception on the Dogon cliff.

The two value systems vary accordingly. The Kapsiki strive for an individual autonomy: a person should be free from all restraining ties. S/he may call upon clan members for help but should be wary of these kinsmen taking too much of an interest in one's property, time and/or labor. A definite work ethic pervades the value system, albeit an individual one: individuals should work hard and be as autarchic as possible, economically as well as politically. In social interaction this implies an assertive attitude, protecting one's privacy, and shielding the private sphere from any unwarranted intrusion by outsiders. Cunning, in the sense of being smarter than the other, is therefore a valued faculty.

The Dogon, on the contrary, are strongly oriented towards harmony and continuous communion with members of their clan and village. Conflicts should be avoided even if differences of opinion are raised. Not only are the Dogon very much aware of their mutual interdependency, they cherish and accentuate it wherever they can. Communal labor, collective action and group responsibility are characteristics of village life. Hospitality and openness are essential values: each Dogon should be accessible for anyone at all times. The Dogon language has dozens of ways of welcoming a stranger, whereas the Kapsiki have only one expression for 'welcome'. For them, strangers are the enemy without any rights, while the Dogon consider them as guests from whom 'new words' can be learned and information from the outside world can be gleaned.

A correlated difference is the general view on age. For the Kapsiki, age as such is not a quality to be respected; their focus is on the hard-working, strong, independent adult who needs nobody, works hard and feeds himself and many others. Old age brings dependency and poverty, in general a loss of status. Old men gradually lose their wives, while old women become wholly dependent on their sons. Without a living son, old age can be hard for the Kapsiki. While age for the Dogon, is crucially important. Social hierarchy is based on seniority. Everything – the whole village, its fields, crops, houses, lineages and people – is 'owned' by the oldest man in the village (the 'Hogon'). Old age is considered an achievement and forms an important power

base, even if old men are dependent on their younger kinfolk for any real labor and daily care. In Dogon society, dependency on others is not viewed as a problem, but as a meaningful source for crucial relations.

The tales

The Kapsiki distinguish between folk tales and ‘history of the village’ stories that I will call myths. The corpus of the first, called *rhena heca* (old words), run into the hundreds,¹⁵ but there are few riddles, dilemma tales and proverbs in Kapsiki oral tales. Mythical tales are often given no specific name or are named after the main protagonist. This genre consists of the ‘history of the village’, but it is dominated by the story of the village hero, Hwempetla. His exploits form the main point of reference for several rituals as well as for village identity. The myth I have selected forms a crucial part of the Hwempetla cycle. The main myths of origin are the tales of migration: how people came to the area for the first time. For the Kapsiki, they came from just beyond the confines of the Mandara Mountains, in fact from several points of origin, none very far away.

The Dogon culture also is a host of folk tales, as well as proverbs, balanced at the same time with a considerable corpus of tales that function as myths, plus a wealth of elaborate song texts with varying characteristics, some mythical, some heroic, some very mundane.¹⁶ As far as tales of origin are concerned, the same holds for the Dogon as for the Kapsiki though on a larger scale. The Dogon have many tales about their arrival at the cliff. Their ancestors come from far away Mandé, thereby linking the cliff area to the major expanse of Mandé culture, even if they are culturally at the far eastern end of it. So the major myths of origin are, in fact, village proto-histories, combined with etiological tales about specific features of the environment: a special waterhole, a hole in a mountain, as well as a few tales about the provenance of their ‘castes’, the blacksmiths and the leatherworkers.

In neither case does the mythical corpus contain myths of creation as usually understood: there are no mythical cycles about a creation *ab nihilo* and no system of etiological explanations. The latter might be a surprise for those who have read the elaborate Dogon mythology by Griaule and Dieterlen,¹⁷ but these accounts have been shown to be fabrications by research teams. The new wave of Dogon research has clearly shown these myths to be recent constructs, the result of an uncontrolled interaction between ethnographers and full-time, creative (!) informants.¹⁸ This evidently

¹⁵ I collected 120 folk tales that are in the process of being edited.

¹⁶ See van Beek 2008 for an analysis of one major song text.

¹⁷ See Griaule 1948, Dieterlen 1952, 1982, Griaule and Dieterlen 1965.

¹⁸ See van Beek 1991, 2007 but also the work of Anne Doquet 1997, Jacky Bouju 1984, Eric Jolly 2004 and Polly Richards 2001, 2010. The work of Belcher, cited above, still includes some of the Griaulian myths (Belcher 2005: 342-45) but recognizes that ‘there is some question’ about them (*Ibid.*:

makes a dent in the many myth collections that include Dogon ‘creation myths’, and in some cases will all but eliminate the category of cosmogonic myths from Africa because Griaule’s Dogon tales have been a lynch pin in many mythical analyses.

For both cultures, the general setting of the world, the overall patterns of social life and the facts of ecology are given. They do not speculate over these things, or at least they have not developed etiological ‘explanations’. If a ‘why’ question is answered by a myth at all, it is of a more restricted kind. For instance, ‘why blacksmiths’ is answered by the Kapsiki with a tale of how someone acted oddly, ate prohibited meat and thus was relegated to the category of ‘blacksmith’, but that category already existed and no tale explains its origins. Moreover, there are no ‘flood tales’ in either of the cultures, a genre that is receiving increasing attention in African comparative analysis. However, the main rituals are accompanied by a larger number of myths. Dogon tales on the origins of masks are standard fare for the *orubaru* performance, and our example is part of this group of the corpus. The Kapsiki burial is closely linked to the tale used here, though its relationship with the ritual is more ambivalent as will be seen. Finally, some tales illustrate encounters with death, epidemics, periodic drought and rain, as we will see in the hero tales of the Kapsiki and the Dogon. But here too, the corpus is restricted, as is the scope of the questions posed and answered by the tales.

Who tells the stories? Any Kapsiki can tell a story, but it is usually a more experienced older man who is a good storyteller. He might well be a blacksmith, since this is part of their repertoire though it does not exclusively belong to them. The context of the storytelling is neither fixed nor ritually circumscribed. The story used here is well known, and quickly told by anyone, even by young boys to any inquiring outsider, although they acknowledge that others know it better. The story is remarkably stable, as my research has shown: the versions collected in 1972, 1994 and 2009 bear almost no differences. The occasion chosen is a gathering of men, in which one elder, possibly a ward chief or the village chief himself, deems it wise to use the story for a particular didactic purpose. While telling the story needs no specific performative setting, if the story is told well, then it can be quite a performance. Due to the extraordinary wealth of idiophones in Kapsiki (a Chadic language), a good raconteur makes the story come alive for his audience by accompanying any relevant action to its idiophone; thus his enraptured audience hears arrows whistle, people running, snakes biting and enemies dying.

Dogon mythical tales, by contrast, are set in a ritual setting. Only a few people have the right and duty to tell the stories, and can do this very well. In Mandé culture, the storytellers are the initiates (*orubaru*) of the *sigi* ritual¹⁹ or their teachers, the

341). He does indeed err on the side of caution, as evidence that these tales were never part of Dogon culture before the arrival of Griaule is becoming overwhelming. It is better to consider them as fiction and no longer include them in myth collections.

¹⁹ The *sigi* ritual is explained in the next paragraph.

‘masters of the word’. The audience is part of the ritual audience, usually linked with death. The complex rites of Dogon burial, the first funeral and the final farewell during the mask performance habitually offer a niche for telling the main stories that make up the mythical corpus. The *orubaru* as a specialist has to tell the story since it must be told in another language. This is the so-called mask language, *sigi so*, a derivative language of the regular Dogon language, with only a 20% overlap in vocabulary. In the literature it has been dubbed a ‘secret language’ but all the men speak it and most of the women can understand it reasonably well, at least in the villages on the Dogon cliff. The *orubaru* has to give an impeccable performance for a ritual occasion. He has to recite the text in fluent *sigi so*, without faltering, without mistakes, in one continuous flow of oratory. The ritual language is precisely for such an occasion and is one-way communication: nobody answers, there is no conversation in *sigi so*, and it is not really spoken, as much as shouted. The text is recited loud enough for everyone to hear, but no one answers. The language is used to shout exhortations at the mask dancers and to thank them for their performances. The masks do not speak, instead they just make animal sounds in return.

The struggle with death in Kapsiki

The following *rhenata Hwempetla* is the Mogode version of the story where the tale of village history forms the central part of the story, the one about their village hero Hwempetla, or NayekwakeḂḱ. I expected every village to have such a cultural hero, but that is not the case. Hwempetla is the hero of most Kapsiki villages, but is almost always defined as belonging to the village of Mogode. He is more in the sphere of a legend than a myth maybe but that issue is discussed later. Only one village, Kortchi, had a similar tale on Nikukud, a dialect variant of NayekwakeḂḱ.

The first part of the foundation myth, *rhenata NgweḂu*, is about the origin of the village and the first arrivals from Gudur, and recounts Mogode’s dependency on neighboring Guria. This ends with the genealogy of the Mogode clans through Hwempetla. Hwempetla was not the first arrival, but the ancestor of all truly autochthonous clans. The second part of this myth is the *rhenata Hwempetla* proper and starts with his miraculous birth followed by his exploits. His famous deeds include stealing cattle from the neighboring village of Guria and the subsequent war which Hwempetla won when he was joined by a stranger during the battle. Later on, other newcomers joined him and would become ancestors of other clans. We start the text when he was established as chief.

‘Hwempetla became the village chief. He wanted a woman so he tried to steal Rain’s daughter but every time he came near her, Rain started to groan, and ultimately he got tired of the game. “Why do you want to steal my daughter? Maybe you will succeed but then rain will fall continuously on your little piece of land and drought will reign elsewhere. Your fields will be washed away by the rain. Is that what you want? You have to go down to the earth, and I will stay up here to go from village to village till the end of the world.”’

“So you won’t give me your child?”

“No, I won’t give her to you.”

Then Rain and Hwempetla made a bet. Rain would grant Hwempetla a favor if he could hide for eight days. Hwempetla left and hid in a beer jar between the sorrel which is kept there, in Rain’s very house. Then Rain started his search: he came with enormous winds, tore trees down, and destroyed houses and termite hills. Everywhere he searched, in mouse holes, under stones, everywhere. Exhausted, he returned home after eight days and found Hwempetla there who told him that he was in the sorrel, inside the beer jar.

“You are right,” Rain says. “I have ransacked the whole earth and did not find you as you were in my own house. I am for everyone, not for someone special. If you and your small mountain are thirsty, then you have to tell me so. You tell me; ‘I am thirsty’ and then I’ll come and pour myself out on your mountain. Do not buy rain from someone else but come and ask me for it,” Rain told him.

Finally, Hwempetla was approaching the end of his days and he told his people: “I liberated you from our enemies and I will try to liberate you from Death as well. If I do my utmost, I should succeed.” So when his time came, he thought: “With my powers I should succeed, I will be too quick for Death.” He took his bull’s skin and flew through the air. Death chased him, faster and faster and threatened to overtake him. Hwempetla tried to throw off Death by flying straight through a mountain, but Death still followed him.²⁰ Then he tried to hide from Death but to no avail. He hid in a thorn bush but Death found him. He hid inside the straw on the roof but Death found him. He hid inside a termite hill but his hairs stuck out and gave him away. He hid inside a hollow baobab tree but Death saw him. He then dug himself into the stem of the sorrel, and made himself very small. For four days and nights Death searched everywhere – in the straw, in the pool, in a well – but there was no sign of Hwempetla. Then at last Death saw a toe sticking out of the sorrel because the stem was too small. So finally Hwempetla had to admit defeat. “If the sorrel had been larger, I could have beaten Death,” he said. “You people, there is no use trying to hide from death but prepare yourself for a dignified end, and do as I will do shortly. Wrap me inside the skin of my bull and during the dance the smith has to carry me on his shoulders and my wife should hold its tail. When you hear a whooshing noise, I will be gone. Then go to a spot in the bush with a lot of fleas, above two holes in the ground. Make my grave there, and my wife’s.” And so it happened. During the dance, Hwempetla flew off the smith’s shoulders, pulling his wife behind him by the tail. People started searching the bush and finally found two holes in the ground, covered with fleas. They made two graves and covered them with leaves.²¹

Regeneration: The Dogon sigi myth

The Dogon text considered here is part of a larger corpus of texts recited by the village speaker in *sigi so* at various rituals. The other deals with the Dogon’s arrival from Mandé and the ‘finding’ of the masks in the village of Yougo in the northeast. This central ritual spot in the Dogon area is the scene of the selected tale, the myth of

²⁰ This particular mountain has caves, proof of Hwempetla’s flight through the air. One of them is used for girls’ initiation ceremonies at the time of their first marriage (*makwa*).

²¹ During the annual rain hunt, these graves are repaired and covered with leaves to ask Hwempetla for rain, a request he will convey to Rain. The discourse on rain, as elsewhere in the Mandara Mountains, is easy to read as a discourse on power (van Beek 1997).

the coming of another ritual, the *sigi*. Once every sixty years, the ritual of the *sigi* is danced in Dogon villages over a five-year period starting in Yougo and then traveling through Dogon country, being performed in different villages further along the cliff. The ritual itself consists mainly of a string of fully adorned men lined up according to descending order of age who dance following a specific route through the village, the *sigi oju*, the way of the *sigi*. The following text is this ritual's accompanying myth.

'Sen Senu, a young boy, lived in the village of Yougo with his father Sanga Yèngulu and his mother Na Yèngulu. One day while herding his father's cattle, Sen Senu grew tired and thirsty and climbed a tamarind tree to suck its fruits. The owner of the tree came along: "What are you doing in my tree? Shall I throw my stick at you?" Sen Senu, showing no respect, answered: "I want to suck them with my mouth, not my anus." Of course the owner grew angry and hit him. When he came limping home, Sen Senu's parents asked why he had been beaten and how he had lost the herd. "I have been hit by the owner of the tamarind tree!" His father promised to go with Sen Senu next day and kill the owner. Early in the morning, the birds awakened Sen Senu and his father, and they walked to the tree. The owner met them. "Why have you beaten my son?" The owner answered: "Because he has insulted me" and told him how Sen Senu, in answer to his question about what he was doing in his tree, had answered that he was sucking fruit with his mouth not his anus. The father asked his son whether this was true, and his son agreed. "Please accept my apologies for my son," the father said. The owner, accepting the apologies, told the father to climb the tamarind tree and take whatever fruit he wanted, or to suck as many as he wanted to. The father, with his gun at the foot of the tree, climbed and picked a number of fruits. From beneath, Sen Senu called to him "Why are you climbing the tree, father?" "The owner has given me fruit for the porridge." Sen Senu retorted: "That is not the way, father. First you come to kill him, now you accept his fruits as a gift. If you are like that I am no longer your herdsman." "That is entirely up to you, son." "My way," Sen Senu said "is the way of the *sigi*, I will follow the *sigi*." "All right, my son, that is entirely up to you!" So Sen Senu set out alone into the bush, and met someone herding chickens. After exchanging greetings, the stranger asked where Sen Senu was heading. "I am following the road of the *sigi*." "That is a hard road, the road of the *sigi*." "Still I want to try it," said Sen Senu. Somewhat further in the bush, in encounters with people herding goats, sheep, horses, donkeys and cattle, the same exchange was held: "Where are you going?" "I am following the *sigi oju*." "The *sigi oju* is a hard road." "I will try it anyway." At last Sen Senu encountered an elephant [in some versions it is a lion]. "Where are you going?" Sen Senu: "I am following the road of the *sigi*." The elephant trumpeted: "I have the *sigi*." Sen Senu: "If you have the *sigi*, then do as you like." The elephant ate Sen Senu, and for three whole years Sen Senu remained inside the elephant's belly. At length the elephant grew thirsty and went to drink from a water-hole just outside the village. The animal then defecated and out came Sen Senu, carrying with him the *dalewa* (the forked *sigi* stool), the oblong calabash (*koju pom*) and the horse's tail (*sô duro*). Then his sister came along to fetch water. Seeing Sen Senu, she tried to speak to him but he could not speak. She ran back into the village and cried out "Sen Senu is at the pool". Her father thought she was crazy as Sen Senu had been gone for three years, eaten by an elephant, and the period of mourning had long come to an end. "Look for yourself," she said, and so he did. At the water-hole, his father asked Sen Senu to come home. Sen Senu started to speak in the language of *sigi* (*sigi so*): "Go and brew beer, let everyone adorn himself in his finest; if not, I will not be able to return home. So, go and receive me."

[Sen Senu then gave very detailed instructions on how to brew beer, how to fetch water, how to make porridge, how to ferment the beer and how to ration it.]

When everything had been done as instructed, the elders came to Sen Senu and asked: "Who will be at the front?" Sen Senu then sang one of the twelve *sigi* songs, "Please forgive, eld-

ers, you are the oldest but if you do not know the road of the *sigi*, I am the first, and I will turn to the left.” The elders responded: “Yes, you know the way. Three years is not three days; you have been inside the elephant, you know more than we do.” Thus Sen Senu came home and this is the way that the *sigi* came to the villages.’

Death and regeneration: The human way

What are these tales? They are both primarily about human beings who do special deeds which result in rituals. Yet if they are hero tales, these heroes are not the standard ‘Campbellian’ kind: they do not leave the village and they do no deeds elsewhere (it is difficult to see the elephant’s belly as an arena)²² The only relevance of these tales are for the villages of Mogode and Yugo. In fact they are quite irresponsible, more like children than heroes. Hwempetla starts a war with Guria which he would have lost if not for the unplanned arrival of a stranger; while Sen Senu starts his ‘road of the *sigi*’ after severely insulting an old man. In fact he was transgressing all normal rules of behavior, and by acting so extremely impolite he estranged his father in the process. Hwempetla’s bet with his father-in-law is just as odd, and his request is correctly deemed ‘stupid’; his wise in-law transfers it into a sensible proposition: ‘Come and ask me for rain whenever your people need it’. For Sen Senu, wisdom comes from the belly and the rear end of an elephant. This makes sense since animals are considered to be knowledgeable about the bush,²³ and although elephants are not the wildest of animals (foxes are!), they are indeed part of the bush. Hwempetla’s struggle with death is less than successful; though it does underscore his super-human abilities – he can fly! – and also highlights his surrender to Death: even Hwempetla will not escape his fate.

Both myths, though not overly heroic, address ritual to some extent. The Kapsiki burial ritual has been redefined, and the rain ritual has been abolished, at least this village is liberated from the ascendancy of rain makers (including the Guria one). This latter element implies full autonomy for the village as the rain rituals form a special link with the ancestral village of Gudur, the mythical place of origin of many of the Mandara groups and whose ritual power still serves many villages. For the Dogon, Sen Senu gave shape to the *sigi*: he taught them the proper way to make beer and to adorn themselves for the ritual. However, the changes are limited in scope. The Kapsiki funeral already existed and Hwempetla added an element – the simulacrum of the flight of the corpse on the blacksmith’s shoulders from the dancing ground to the grave. In the case of Sen Senu, people were already talking about the *sigi oju* before he showed them ‘the way’. Rather than inventing the ritual as such, he helped to define the proper *sigi*. Neither heroes invent, instead they adjust and adapt existing ritual structures, loading them with their own personal histories, as well as giving new

²² Cf. Campbell 1959-68 with the critique of Segal 1984, 1996 & 2004.

²³ Van Beek 1992.

shape to old ideas.

There is a huge body of literature on the relationship between myth and ritual – in fact a whole myth-and-ritual school²⁴ – but this is not the place to dive into that sea. Both the Kapsiki and Dogon corpus of mythical tales show that the relationship between ritual and myth is complex. Sometimes the relationship is strong, but more often the relationship is quite weak. The two examples given are related: Hwempetla's main message is set in the context of a burial. Some details of the tale including his wife holding on to the cow's tail and his flying can be found in certain aspects of the Kapsiki burial ritual. After all during the burial ceremony, the widow does hold the cow's tail, and the smith tried to run as fast as he can towards the grave with the corpse around his neck so the deceased's gown flaps in the wind. Despite this, the Kapsiki never explain this aspect of their funeral by referring to the tale of Hwempetla. The rain hunt, on the other hand, is explained by the tale, but even then only the absence of a rain maker, as only one detail of the rain hunt comes from the tale, while the rain-hunting party takes care of the graves of Hwempetla and his wife. The Dogon tale has the closest links with ritual of any of the Dogon myths and explains the details of the ritual, such as the brewing process, the forked stool of the initiates and the special calabash. But here too, the ritual already existed in the tale, at least the idea of the ritual, and the hero sets out looking for it, more as an exile, rather than on a quest for knowledge he has to learn. And that knowledge is in the details, not the ritual as such. Viewing the two bodies of myth and their links with ritual, it is safe to say that myth and ritual are not reducible to each other but are parallel worlds, which I have dubbed 'virtual worlds', with a dialectic relationship.²⁵ Myth and ritual usually live in their own worlds, which only incidentally touch, each with its own logic, a narrative logic in the case of myth, and a performance logic in the case of rituals.

Both tales are about life, the *sigi* is about regeneration, and for Hwempetla it is about escaping death. Life is seen in both as precarious, fleeting and not self-evident. Life is something one has to work for, to exert oneself for, and for the continuity of which one has to perform the proper rituals. The results come from a transgression of normal rules, rebellion against a superior enemy in the Kapsiki case, gross insults against the vaunted respect for age in the Dogon case. Life has rules that are broken, at least to some extent, and breaking the rules results in new rules: the rules of normal daily life are converted and exchanged into the rules of ritual behavior.

The myths in question are situated geographically and genealogically. Though in principle village-based, both transcend the village as their exploits have become known by and relevant for the villages in the larger region: a host of villages at the center of the Dogon region celebrate the *sigi* (though by no means all) and most Kapsiki villages acknowledge Hwempetla, follow his redefinition of the funeral proceedings, even if his rain exploits are only deemed relevant for Mogode. Sen Senu is of Yougo stock, but his ritual prowess is appreciated. While Hwempetla is proudly

²⁴ For an overview and criticism, see Segal 2004 and Doty 2000: 234 ff.

²⁵ For the notion of 'virtual world', see van Beek 2007a.

claimed as the direct ancestor of about half of the Mogode clans. The other category used in the literature is the legend, and both tales come close to these as well: deemed historic and about humans and believable. However, legends are usually not tied to rituals and do not serve as a charter. While both the stories discussed here are about rituals and function within rituals as well as having a genealogical charter.

The struggle with death, as told below, tells us nothing about how death came into the world, but it does tell us why everyone has to succumb to it. Or in the Dogon case, how everyone can enhance their own survival on earth through progeny. It is not the situation of the world which is the *explanandum*, but the submission of mankind to the conditions already prevalent in the world, as well as the way of making the most out of a difficult situation. The focus is on the human condition and lived reality, and not the virtual reality of history.

In some other cases in the Mandara Mountains, people tell tales about the origin of death, but they do this humanely, mundanely and blandly. The example below is from the Mofu, the Kapsiki's eastern neighbors:

'Formerly people did not die but just lay resting in their grave for two years and then came back. An old man married a young woman, had three children, then died and rested. After eighteen months he came back, wanting to see his wife again. His wife cried out: "Are you there already? Have I not suffered enough? Why leave already?" The man grew angry and told the other dead: "Let's stay in the grave. We will not leave again.'" Since that time people really have died.'²⁶

In this case, the burden of guilt is put on the shoulders of the women. A very common story, told in many groups including the Kapsiki, is the tale of the separation of heaven and earth.

Heaven used to be very close to the earth, and people had to bend over continuously. Any food they took straight from heaven, above them. One day a young girl found sorghum grains on the earth and started to pound them, her pounding stick going straight into the face of heaven. Heaven withdrew, and she kept going till heaven was far away. Now people have to cultivate and eat sorghum.²⁷

As Müller-Kosack has noted concerning their northern neighbors the Mafa, that the 'mythological imagination is more concerned with transformational issues and matters of maintenance and change than cosmological structures.'²⁸ I have also received a definite impression that cosmology is hugely overrated in mythological studies.

In both cases, folk tales surround these hero myths. They use the same story lines, the same themes and to some extent the same characters. Many Dogon folk tales deal with the elephant or the lion and its usual adversary the rabbit. But many of the exploits of both protagonists reflect the themes in Sen Senu's tale: entering the anus,

²⁶ Vincent 1991: 749.

²⁷ Jauoen 1995: 18, Vincent 2008:140, Sundermeier 1998:161. See also Juillerat 1971: 160, Scheub 2000.

²⁸ Müller-Kosack 2003: 66. Good examples are also found in Sterner 2003: 215-18 and Juillerat 1971: 63.

staying inside, eating the other from the inside out, coming out fully decorated and the like. With Hwempetla, the likeness with folk tales is even stronger. The usual hero of the folk tales, *rhena heca*, is the *meke* (the ground squirrel) who is clever, wily and full of tricks. His adversary is usually the leopard or the hyena, who are dumb, strong and easy to trick, but still immortal. This particular story is told and widely distributed with the ground squirrel (*meke*) in the role of Hwempetla; the squirrel being the standard protagonist in traditional Kapsiki stories, *rhena heca*. In the squirrel version, the ending is different: the squirrel marries Rain's daughter and gives an elephant as bride price. To trick his father-in-law, he eats the elephant from the inside, helped by the leopard, and then arranges it so that the angry Rain catches the leopard *in flagrante delicto*. The squirrel also dallies with Death, giving Death a terrible punishment, centering – again – on the anus. So the difference between the myth and the folk tale is not overly clear and the boundaries become vague. Yet for both the Kapsiki and the Dogon, the genres are distinct. For the Kapsiki, the story of Hwempetla is just that, the story of Hwempetla, and is deemed completely historical. Folk tales are called 'tales of old' (*rhena heca*), not seemingly too different, but for them a different category anyway. For the Dogon, one main difference lies in the language. The Sen Senu myth is told in *sigi so* which is a ritual language reserved for ritual occasions. Folk tales are told in everyday Dogon language and called *jwini*, a term without a clear etymology.

So this corpus of African myths is ill served by the habitual characterization of oral tales, conflating as they do many of the habitual distinctions within their own lived reality. There is no clear-cut mythical world, no 'virtual reality' of supernatural beings independent of the world of everyday. The world invoked by African myths is very much the one we know, our daily reality and our direct environment. The tales may tell us why there is a specific hole in the mountain, why we brew beer as we do, why we perform the ritual dances we do, why the blacksmith has to run with the corpse on his shoulder, or why there is always water at a certain spot on the cliff. But that is about the scale of it: restricted, immediate and relevant. Speaking about African myths, Sundermeier remarks:

The overwhelming majority of them speak of the origins of the first men and women, not of an actual act of creation by God. They are about people. They are not interested in the origin of the world as such. They hardly mention the stars, or the cosmos, or the distant world.²⁹

And even the origins of man usually mean the origins of the first man and woman in the village or group. The world as a whole is not invoked, nor is the cosmos or the basic facts of life: the existence of death – or of 'Death', often conceived as a person – is self-evident, and social categories such as blacksmiths already existed in the oldest tales, and the rules of politeness have never changed. The myths indicate that we cannot escape our fate, our *condition humaine*, but that we have to live with it. And to live to the full, we have to exert ourselves, to follow the instructions of those that know – even if they are from ancient times – and to work on it in our own lives. It

²⁹ Sundermeier 1998: 106.

is not the etiology of death that is important here, nor the cosmology and certainly not any cosmogony, but instead it is the existential fact of living, either in a direct way as a failure to escape death, or in an indirect way as a rebirth and fertility. The borders between the genres become blurred and they seem to conflate from the extremes of mythical reality and deep history to the everyday world of lived reality.

One can glean from the total corpus of prose narratives, and in particular from its mythical part, what a culture is interested in. What constitutes the focus of their discourse? What are the questions they see as relevant? In our two cases it is clearly not the conditions under which they live or the provenance of their problems, but the solutions their cultures have found to cope with such realities. Their interest is in specific cultural elements, those which they consider central to their identity. The Dogon are fascinated by their own masks and everything that belongs to the mask complex, including the *sigi*: they talk about it, the children make drawings of masks, and they tell tales of performances and failures.³⁰ The Kapsiki see Hwempetla's exploits as a natural precursor for their own existence, their burial, their rain rituals, and their fascination with cleverness and deceit. Myths speak about our being in this world, the success story of our survival and our font of cultural self-confidence. These are the tales that prove that one is rightly and justly here, and is well adapted to the here and now.

This is rather unromantic as myth analysis goes; the cosmic element is missing, and the great battles between good and evil are absent, as are the moral dilemmas and the fundamental tragedy of human life. Intellectually there is no deep reflection on ultimate origins, no creative way of thinking existence out of non-existence, no wondrous speculation on the beginning or on the end of times. It is more mundane, more related to everyday life, and thus less mythic, at least in the way the North Atlantic has usually defined myth. Gods of any kind play a small part on the mythic stage as humans have the major roles, with their (simile) characters in animal tales very close at hand. For African prose narratives, the inclusion in or exclusion from general book collections of myths, tells us more about our own definitions, our way of ordering the world, our preferences in discourses and about the deep romanticism long rampant in this scholarly endeavor, than about the quality of African tales – or of myths from other parts of the world for that matter.

African mythology is, therefore, eminently human and does not in the end try to explain why things are as they are, but poses another question: 'How can we live with life as it is?' It does not explain the world; it instead explains life, human life, our life. It does so by rendering our environment human, recognizable – look, that hole in that mountain over there – and immediate, bringing the scale of the world down to human measurements and standards. Thus we live in a world that is not alien. We belong here, we are not the aliens in this world because our ancestors made their imprint on it. Life does indeed have its risks, but these are human risks and human problems, droughts induced by someone, fertility enhanced by someone else. African

³⁰ See van Beek 2006 for young boys' fascination with masks.

mythology is not a window on the universe or a window on our global earth. It is a window on something much more relevant and at least as interesting: a window on ourselves, on our humanity, our fate, our destiny and on the ways we can make this restricted life into something worthwhile, not everlasting, but worthwhile as each of us walks his own small patch of earth for a short, fleeting moment.

I want to close with some wild speculation:

- if it is correct to say that myths in Africa are more human oriented than in other continents,
- if truly myths in Africa are more animal-oriented than in other continents,
- if indeed myths in Africa question the given environment less than in other continents,
- if myths in Africa are less prone to speculation,

one reason might reside in the deep history of man inside Africa. For the human subspecies Africa is home, and has been so for all of our non-recorded history. In Africa, man has evolved into a familiar surrounding, in an environment made up of animals and equals. In other continents 'we' are newcomers, adapting to an alien environment which evoked fear, wonder and reflection, an environment in which 'we' could not fall back upon the familiarities of the living world with kindred beings. If myth is also an instrument for cultural adaptation, then the radical change in habitat as we ventured 'out of Africa' may well have generated speculation, cosmogony, in short the creative virtual world we usually call myth.

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