The Lost Land and the Earth Mother: African Mythology and the Issue of Land in Southern Africa

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1 Introduction

The English theologian Andrew Kirk observed a fundamental difference between theology in the North and theology in the South. In the North the validity of theology depends on the answer to the question: Does it comply with the requirements of science? In the South the focus is on “its ability to inspire people to be agents and embodiments of the life of God’s new creation in Jesus Christ.”

The biblical accounts of creation originated in an existential framework somewhat similar to the approach in the South: “It was not the philosopher inquiring about his origins who spoke in the Creation narratives; it was man threatened by his surroundings. The background was an existential, not an intellectual problem . . . myth belonged originally to the context of survival, an expression therefore of one’s understanding of existence, of one’s understanding of the existence of the threatened-self.” “The Creation myths then had the function of preserving the world and of giving security to life.”

Many of the motifs that are found in the biblical accounts of primitive time are also found in Africa: the motifs of the offence, the origin of death, the origin of civilization, fratricide, the building of a tower and the flood. But, says Westermann, in Africa south of the equator “the stories of the creation of man are highly developed, but those of the creation of the world hardly exist and, when they do, they appear only by way of additions.”

The South African Janet Hodgson says the same as Westermann: in African cosmology there is no radical gap between the spiritual world and natural life, so that religion is not a separate category of thought or experience but part of everyday life. The African symbols related to creation play a role in the present

3 Ibid., 71.
context. “In the mythopoeic world-view of the traditional African, the mytho-
logical past is constantly recoverable in ritual because time is eternal.” Hodgson 
also states that most African myths of origin “are primarily concerned with the 
origin of man and the world round him. They are not creation stories.”

There are African intellectuals who dispute this widely held view, namely 
that African myths of origin are not creation stories, but I will not in this 
article compare the African narratives of the origin of the universe with the 
scientific narrative, neither will I focus on the implications of the scientific 
understanding of the universe for the African understanding of God. I will 
reflect on two aspects mentioned by R. Alan Culpepper in his lecture, “Children 
of God”: Evolution, Cosmology, and Johannine Thought, as they relate to the 
African context: the idea that evolution and the theology of John have a direc-
tion and openness towards the future, which has ethical implications, and the 
theological and ethical significance of creation as seen, inter alia, in the book 
of Proverbs and the theology of John.

These aspects will be considered after attention has been given to the way in 
which the mythical relationship to land has functioned in different contexts of 
conflict and survival in Zimbabwe and South Africa, where identity and exis-
tence have come under threat and where people have used mythical concepts 
regarding land to acquire power and wealth. In the political struggle against 
white political domination in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), and against apart-
heid in South Africa the relationship with land played a key role, and it is still 
an issue surrounded by considerable tension in both countries.

2 The Concept of “The Lost Land” in the History of Zimbabwe

One motif that played a central role in the last half century in the history of 
Zimbabwe is the relationship of the people with the land, and the ongoing role 
of the Creator in guarding both the ecology and the people who live from it.

The symbolism of land played a central role in mobilising the rural commu-
nities to support the war for liberation from white domination and occupation 
in the time when Zimbabwe was still Rhodesia, with a white government.

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5 E.g. S. Munyai, “The Tenacity of African Traditional Religion in Venda Christianity: a Missional 
Investigation” (Unpublished, 2015), 11.
6 Culpepper, in this volume.