CHAPTER FIVE

STORIES OF THE BEGINNING
ORIGIN MYTHS IN AFRICA SOUTH OF THE SAHARA

Mineke Schipper

All people struggle with the enigmas of human existence. We can assume (though not prove) that all cultures have sought explanations for the secrets and mysteries around them in the form of origin myths, a genre to be found all over the world. All peoples have looked for answers to the eternal questions of how it all began, where we come from, who we are, why we are on earth. Other fundamental questions asked everywhere are: What is the origin of life and why did death have to come to the world? How and why did men and women come into being? Why are there black and white people? Why is God so far away? Everything in existence must have originated somewhere somehow. How did it all start? Peoples living thousands of miles away from each other may answer such questions in very different ways, or in ways that are surprisingly similar. Thus myths could be defined as stories of the beginning, but they are not just ordinary stories. Myths are a powerful genre, and the dogmas and statements they have given birth to are not supposed to be questioned by believers.

Myths confirm and explain how “man” created order out of chaos, and how, by means of culture, he succeeded in imposing his own will on nature. They explain the origin of circumstances or experiences that directly shape human life as we know and experience it daily. They gravely show why important things in life are as they are, inexorably. Creation stories have been inspired by life as it was then, in the times when those stories were thought up. Such stories of the beginning have inspired new variants of the original origin stories, and even completely new stories, and of course endless interpretations of the existing myths, all over the world. The past and the present become interwoven in the stories, and co-exist in the minds of the living. The existing order is not only explained but also justified through the invention of myths. Subsequently, the community involved is pressed into accepting and internalising the provided explanation. People are constantly reminded
of its “truth”. Once they exist, myths tend to have a life of their own, as if they represented self-evident given “facts”.

Here I have to limit myself to a very selective and much too brief overview of the wealth of creation stories found all over Africa south of the Sahara, followed by a few comments on two important issues widely explained and discussed in African creation stories: the origin of the sexes and the origin of black and white people.

*Creation and Origin in African Myths*

African mythology is a vast field of study with numerous gaps in the available material, likely never to be filled. There is no old historical source material, because literacy was almost non-existent throughout Africa—with few exceptions, such as the Vai script in Liberia, ancient Arabic-influenced manuscripts in the south of Ethiopia, or the Bamum script in Cameroon. Generally, written sources did not become available until after Islam had introduced the Arabic alphabet to Africa, and Christianity and the colonial rulers, the Roman script.

Another problem is that the older material was almost entirely recorded and transcribed by outsiders: missionaries, anthropologists, colonial officials, or military officers. Many did their job with great interest and passionate dedication, but some were blinded by prejudices, or they censored the stories they heard for reasons of Victorian modesty. Next to more recent stories, I have also read and collected quite a number of those older versions of African myths, transcribed and translated in the 19th century and often to be found only in obscure missionary monthlies or colonial journals. None of those versions will ever be officially “authorised” or canonised. Who could do this anyway as long as traditions are orally transmitted? Authorised versions of myths originating from other than African cultures are no less questioned and reinterpreted, of course, and Genesis is a case in point.

The first African human beings play a cosmic role in several myths, venturing into areas that are far beyond their human capacities. Notwithstanding their central position, the first humans have to reckon with the powers above them, the supreme beings, the gods or spirits that might also turn against them. In most African myths of creation there is only one divine creator, but there are also myths in which two primeval beings perform the act of creation together, either by mating or by co-operating. The Yoruba, for example, have a myth in which