

CREATION STORY IN GENESIS CHAPTER ONE IN RELATION TO THE AFRICAN UNDERSTANDING OF CREATION: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract

The world did not just come to be without any cause. This cause is which is summarized as creation stories. Hence, different cultures have their own story of how the universe from their perspective came to be. Biblically we have two stories of how things originated. However, in African Traditional World there are also stories of how things originated or came into be. The account is according to tribes, countries etc. This work looks at the Genesis chapter one story of creations, it also looks at African Traditional Religion stories of creation as we have in Igbo culture, Ghana, and Yoruba land. In looking at it, it tries to expose the creation stories in the Book of Genesis chapter one, also exposed the stories of how things came to be in some African countries and tribes. It was discovered that in both creation stories; that things never came to be like that. It was also discovered that there was a cause that caused things to exist. Also, it was discovered that this cause behind the existence of all this is called God for Christians, Chineke for the Igbo people and related names for Yoruba and Ghana (Ashanti) people. It concludes by saying that the different names are really the same, that the only problem is battling with nomenclature. It recommends that both stories are important and should be taken seriously that the whole universe came into being by a cause that caused all. It made use of historical method in its research.

Keywords: Creation story, Genesis, African understanding, creation

Introduction

The human person is always in search for knowledge, right from the beginning of the world before the advents of science, human beings all over the world try their possible best to see how best they can explain what happens around them. In the case of how the world came into existence, they tried in their best way, to see how best they can explain it.

We hear about different stories, about the creation of the world in different cultures across the globe. In the Genesis story of the Bible, there are two stories of creation. These stories are said to have been influenced by some similar stories around the Ancient Near East like the Gilgamesh Epic, the Enuma Elish, and Atrahasis. The Africans also have stories about creation that are similar to that of the Genesis 1 narrative. This presentation therefore, will look at some of them with special reference to the Igbo, Yoruba and Akan cultures evaluating their points of divergence and convergence.

Clarification of Terms

In the course of this work, there are certain terms which feature prominently. Hence, for better understanding of the work it is important that we briefly explain what those prominent terms are.

Creation

The term creation could be understood as the beginning of things, whether by the will and act of a transcendent being, by emanation from some ultimate source, or in any other way (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2013). In other words, it refers to the act of bringing something new into existence. Suffice it to say that some of the creation narratives were developed as myths. Thus, creation myth could be seen as a philosophical and theological elaboration of the primal myth of creation within a religious community.

Myth

According to Marshall (1988), the word myth is used to refer to stories that are fictional, and hence has come to a pejorative sense. Traditionally, it refers to invented stories about the gods in which they behave like human beings with superhuman powers. Closely associated with this sense of the word is its usage to refer specifically to the stories which may accompany and allegedly form the basis of religious rituals. In other words, the term myth refers to the imaginative expression in narrative form of what is experienced or apprehended as basic reality (p.449). Myths, therefore, are stories of past events which have been believed through the years to be true. They form the basis for religious beliefs and practices and there is hardly any religion without a set of myths. They are not subject to verification or proof, and they do not depend on their empirical authenticity for their strength and validity. Myths actually form a vital part of religious history (Ugweye, 2012).

Africa

This is the second largest continent in the world covering about one-fifth of the total land surface of the Earth. It is bounded on the west by the Atlantic Ocean, on the north by the Mediterranean Sea, on the east by the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, and on the south by

the mingling waters of the Atlantic and Indian oceans. Its total land area is approximately 11,724,000 square miles (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2013). The continent is divided into five parts with West Africa as the largest part of the continent.

The Creation Story in Genesis 1

It is important to note abinitio that two creation accounts have been identified in Genesis, the development of which have been put by most authors at the exilic and post exilic periods of ancient Israel (cf. Kizhakkeyil 2009, Obiorah 2010). The first account is found in Genesis 1:1-2:4a while the second is found in Genesis 2:4b-25 (Kizhakkeyil, 2009) or 2:4b-3:24 (Ska, 1998). The first account is commonly credited to the Priestly tradition or Priestly authors of the documentary hypothesis. The first account is characterized by creation by divine command. Here, the picture is given of God (*Elohim*) who creates the world. In contrast, the second account, credited to the Yahwistic tradition or Yahwist authors of the documentary hypothesis, presents an anthropomorphic posture of God. Here God is personified and pictured as possessing human attributes, forming the objects by use of hands (Ugweye, 2012). Apart from the difference in divine names used in the two accounts as well as the impression created of the divine nature, as noted above, one other major difference in the two accounts lies in the order of creation. The items dealt with in the two accounts, essentially the heavens and its constituents, and the earth and its constituents. However, the order in which they appeared in the creation schedule differs substantially. The first account specifically states that the creation was brought to accomplishment in six days, and that on the seventh day God rested. While the second account does not specifically declare this, it would appear from the ordering of its creation account that an attempt was being made to arrange it in sequence in time (Ugweye, 2012).

One marked point of departure of the second account from the first is that while in the first account, mankind was specifically created on the six day, after the elements vital to his sustenance had been put in place, mankind was created first in the second account and then the elements vital for his upkeep were gradually put in place. In fact, the second account tries to create a phenomenal difference in the significance of the word (*Adam*) used to represent-the man by giving that name a gender connotation, implying that the woman was created later, perhaps as an afterthought. It is important to point out at this stage, that while the name appears in both creation accounts, implying the man, the first account gives a more cogent interpretation of its significance, particularly in verse 27 of chapter one, where it says, So God created in his own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them (Ugweye, 2012).

The impression here is that the word was originally used in a genderless sense to imply humanity or humankind, male and female as the text says. That word was later to acquire the connotation of a proper noun, name of a person in the later part of the Yahwist account, and to be used in contrast to the female counterpart. In the first account, it was to the entire humanity, male and female, that the charges was given to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, subdue it, and have dominion over it (Gen. 1:28). The fact of the woman being created as an afterthought to satisfy the man could at best be an unfortunate interjection of the male chauvinistic tendencies of the Jewish society (Ugwueye, 2012). However, our focus here is on the first creation story which is accredited to the Priestly tradition. The first creation narrative (Gen: 1:1ff) opens up with the expression; (In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth). The verb is used to imply creation *ex nihilo* (making out of nothing). This is in contradistinction to 3 meaning 'to form with starting materials.' According to Ugwueye (2012), the Genesis story differs from the thought in the myths of the Ancient Near Eastern background which can only picture creation as something that can be made using starting materials. "Those thoughts properly examined do not really qualify for creation myths since they do not have such a notion as implied by the verb creation in Hebrew meaning to bring into being out of non-existent materials" (Pp. 186-867).

In the first creation account in Genesis, the creator is called (Elohim). A proper look at the term makes it a kind of plural term (Ugwueye, 2012). This is because it has a common Hebrew masculine plural absolute noun termination, *o* (gods). In this way, a polytheistic impression of the deity seems to be created. According to Ugwueye (2012), this point is further intensified when we look at the expression in verse 26 of the chapter one.

And God said; let us make man in our own image and after our likeness. This would appear to fall in line with the polytheistic framework of the Ancient Near Eastern myths. However, even this argument is dislodged by the language of the text. For instance although the noun has a plural termination but the verb that goes with it *x2* is third person singular masculine *qal* perfect tense; implying that the subject in singular.

Verse 26 of Genesis 1 begins with a dialogue; Let us make man in our own image and after our likeness. This is the highpoint of the Priestly creation account, and this high point presents to us the esteem to which man is elevated in the scheme of things. Man is not just one of the creatures, but specially and distinctly created in the image of God. "To the Hebrews, this high point of indication of the dignity of man is responsible both for the reverence of life and for the laws made to safeguard life and protect it against its derogation" (Ugwueye, 2012, p. 187). For instance, two of the laws in the Decalogue, namely, the fifth, ""thou shall not kill and the seventh, "thou shall not steal" are aimed at

the preservation of life and its value (Exo.20:3). The expression in the eight laws actually refers to the abduction. Joseph in Genesis 40:15 used the verb in describing the ordeal of abduction which he faced at the hands of his brothers. To say that man was created in the image of God speaks volumes of the height to which man is placed in the hierarchy of creation. Knudsen (1988) says concerning the use of the word image in that text: An image represents and symbolizes, but it is more; it is the similitude of something reflecting or mirroring it. "Man is created in the image of God; he was made to reflect or mirror the divine nature, but in a creaturely way" (p. 329).

Obiorah (2010) further explores the significance of the making of man in the image of God; In Israel's surrounding cultures in the Ancient Near East, the person who bears the image (ay) of a deity is the king; the king shares in God's authority. "When God made humans in his image, he makes them participate in his dominion" (p. 52).

The implication of this creation of man in the image of God is that, man is given the highest position of honor among all the creatures. In fact, man has been elevated to share in the attributes and the prerogatives of the Creator himself. Dominion or ruling which is an exclusive attribute of God is thus passed on to human beings, being made in the image of God. This would seem to translate human beings out of the realms of creatures, into the realm of the Creator himself. It is for this reason that life is viewed as such a great treasure among the Israelites, and the willful destruction of, or harm to life especially of a member of the covenant family is viewed with such high level of serious and great sin not just against God but against man.

The African understanding of creation

The Igbo Story of Creation

The Igbo people of Nigeria southeast just like other tribes in Africa do not have a single story about creation. According to Afigbo (2006), *Chukwu* (the Igbo name for God) combines the concept of creator of deities for all we know and are aware of, including the concept of the solar deity. According to the Igbo people from the Eastern region of Nigeria, *Chineke* is the Creator of the world and everything good in it. This God is also responsible for rain, trees, and other plants. Chukwu is a supreme God represented by the sun.... The Igbo creative God, *Chineke* has its source in Chukwu. Linguistically, *Chineke* is formed from the Igbo words, Chi and eke (Spirit which creates) (p. 32).

Benjamin and Benjamin (1920) seem to have given a more vivid elucidation on the Igbo myth of creation. According to them: The Igbo believe that *Chineke*, the Greatest of the Great Beings, created the universe and all therein, using parts of Him-her-self. This means that everything a person can see, touch, taste, smell and hear is *Chineke*. The Igbo believe

that the God, *Igwe*, and Goddess, *Ala*, created mankind and the organization of Igbo society. For a long time, things worked very well in heaven, however all the Gods and Goddesses lived in one place? However, each was individualistic and therefore very independent. This was the cause of a big problem. Jealousy and greed came into the picture.

For them, it seems that each god began to want all of the powers of the other gods. The question was who had more authority? Finally, it got so bad, the affairs of the universe began to suffer and became a threat to *Chineke's* existence, who was about to be destroyed by parts of His-Her own mind. *Chineke* began thinking of how to solve the problem and came up with a master plan in the form of "Laws of Social Equality and Personal Freedom, based on equal value of each of the Gods and Goddesses" (p. 34). Therefore, to establish a family, a God and Goddess were to pair up and build their own place in heaven surrounding a market place and the families' relationship was one of contract and trade; with the God, *Ekwensu*, the Trickster, acting as an enforcer in the market place. In other words, heaven was divided into equal parts and each God and Goddess had a domain of their own.

The God, *Igwe*, and the Goddess, *Ala* had a domain consisting of the earth and the sky. Although they are like husband and wife, they do not live in the same house. *Igwe* lives in the sky and *Ala* lives on the earth; to the Igbo, the earth and the sky merge to form the Holy Homestead in which mankind was created. *Ala* and *Igwe* created 8 people, 4 males and 4 females. In the process of creating mankind, *Igwe* and *Ala* used different kinds of materials: sticks from the *Ofo* tree as bones, and clay and chalk for flesh. After they were formed and dried in the sun, *Ala* wrapped them in *Umune* leaves from *Umune* tree for nurturing the five senses and sexuality. And as creators, they had the responsibility of educating them as well, especially on the seven cycles of life and rituals related to the rites -of-passage that a person must pass through in life, namely, sex act and birth, babyhood, childhood, adulthood, parenthood, grand parenthood, and great grand parenthood which flows unabridged into ancestorhood (p. 34-35).

The Ashanti Story of Creation

The Ashanti is an important tribe of Ghana. Their religion is animistic in that everything in nature is spirit-infused. Their supreme being is *Nyame* (the Sky deity of the Akan people) of Akan land (Southern Ghana), the leader of the Abosom, the Akan spirits and minor gods. His name means "he who knows and sees everything" (David A. 1991). The Ashanti people also have a popular trickster figure, named *Ananse*, the spider, who plays a role in their creation myth. *Nyame*, the high god, created the world including this spider *Ananse* but it was *Ananse* who made the first people, into whom the sky god *Nyame*

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(Nyankopon) then breathed life. *Ananse* enjoyed working behind the high god's back, disguising himself as a bird and even challenging him as a creator, creating the sun, moon and stars as well as night and day (David A. 1991). Tradition has it, as David A. (1991) tried to make us understand about the Akan people in his article, "The origin of life on Earth: An African Creation myth," that long ago a man and a woman came down from heaven, while another man and woman came out of the ground. The Lord of the Heavens also sent an African python, (a non-poisonous snake of Africa), which made its home in a river. In the beginning men and women had no children; they had no desire for one another and did not know the process of procreation and birth. It was the Python who taught them. He asked the men and women if they had any children, and on being told that they had none, the Python said he would make the women conceive.

He told the couples to stand facing each other, and then he went into the river and came out with his mouth full of water. This he sprayed on their bellies, saying "*Kus, kus*" (words that are still used till date in the clan rituals). Then the Python told the couples to go home and lie together, and the women conceived and bore children. The children and the descendants took the Python (spirit of the river), as their Clan Spirit'. Thus, killing or harming a python is a taboo, and if they find a python that has died or has been killed by someone else, they put white clay on it and bury it in human fashion (David A. 1991).

The Yoruba Story of Creation

Ogunbitan (2007) tells us that the Yoruba people have it that initially all life existed in the sky. *Olorun* lived in the sky, and with *Olorun* were many orishas. There were both male and female orishas, but *Olorun* transcended male and female and was the all-powerful Supreme Being.

Olorun and the orishas lived around a young baobab tree. Around the baobab tree the orishas found everything they needed for their lives, and in fact they wore beautiful clothes and gold Jewelry. *olorun* told them that all the vast sky was theirs to explore. All the orishas save one, however, were content to stay near the baobab tree.

Obatala was the curious orisha who wasn't content to live blissfully by the baobab tree. Like all orishas, he had certain powers, and he wanted to put them to use. As he pondered what to do, he looked far down through the mists below the sky. As he looked and looked, he began to realize that there was a vast empty ocean below the mist. Obatala went to *Olorun* and asked *Olorun* to let him make something solid in the waters below. That way there could be beings that Obatala and the orishas could help with their powers (Ogunbitan, 2007).

Touched by *Obatala's* desire to do something constructive, *Olorun* agreed to send *Obatala* to the watery world below. *Obatala* then asked *Orunmila*, the orisha who knows the future, what he should do to prepare for his mission. *Orunmila* brought out a sacred tray and sprinkled the powder of baobab roots on it. He tossed sixteen palm kernels onto the tray and studied the marks and tracks they made on the powder. He did this eight times, each time carefully observing the patterns. Finally, he told *Obatala* to prepare a chain of gold, and to gather sand, palm nuts, and maize. He also told *Obatala* to get the sacred egg carrying the personalities of all the orishas (Ogunbitan, 2007).

Obatala went to his fellow *orishas* to ask for their gold, and they all gave him all the gold they had. He took this to the goldsmith, who melted all the jewelry to make the links of the golden chain. When *Obatala* realized that the goldsmith had made all the gold into links, he had the goldsmith melt a few of them back down to make a hook for the end of the chain.

Meanwhile, as *Orunmila* had told him, *Obatala* gathered all the sand in the sky and put it in an empty snail shell, and in with it he added a little baobab powder. He put that in his pack, along with palm nuts, maize, and other seeds that he found around the baobab tree. He wrapped the egg in his shirt, close to his chest so that it would be warm during his journey.

Obatala hooked the chain into the sky, and he began to climb down the chain. For seven days he went down and down, until finally he reached the end of the chain. He hung at its end, not sure what to do, and he looked and listened for any clue. Finally, he heard *Orunmila*, the seer, calling to him to use the sand. He took the shell from his pack and poured out the sand into the water below the sand hit the water, and to his surprise it spread and solidified to make a vast land. Still unsure what to do, *Obatala* hung from the end of the chain until his heart pounded so much that the egg cracked. From it flew *Sankofa*, the bird bearing the spirits of all the *orishas*. Like a storm, they blew the sand to make dunes and hills and lowlands, giving it character just as the *orishas* themselves have character (Ogunbitan, 2007).

Finally, *Obatala* let go of the chain and dropped to this new land, which he called "Ife", the place that divides the waters. Soon he began to explore this land, and as he did so he scattered the seeds from his pack, and as he walked the seeds began to grow behind him, so that the land turned green in his wake.

After walking a long time, *Obatala* grew thirsty and stopped at a small pond. As he bent over the water, he saw his reflection and was pleased. He took some clay from the edge of the pond and began to mold it into the shape he had seen in the reflection. He finished that

one and began another, and before long he had made many of these bodies from the dark earth at the pond's side. By then he was even thirstier than before, and he took juice from the newly-grown palm trees and it fermented into palm wine (Ogunbitan, 2007). He drank this, and drank some more, and soon he was intoxicated. He returned to his work of making more forms from the edge of the pond, but now he wasn't careful and made some without eyes or some with misshapen limbs. He thought they all were beautiful, although later he realized that he had erred in drinking the wine and vowed to not do so again.

Before long, Olorun dispatched Chameleon down the golden chain to check on Obatala's progress. Chameleon reported Obatala's disappointment at making figures that had form but no life. Gathering gasses from the space beyond the sky, Olorun sparked the gasses into an explosion that he shaped into a fireball. He sent that fireball to Ife, where it dried the lands that were still wet and began to bake the clay figures that Obatala had made. The fireball even set the earth to spinning, as it still does today. Olorun then blew his breath across Ife, and Obatala's figures slowly came to life as the first people of Ife (Ogunbitan, 2007).

Points of Convergence and Divergence

Points of Convergence

Few features stand out prominently in the Igbo, Ashanti (Akan) and Yoruba creation myths in comparison with the creation myths in Genesis account. First of all, in the Igbo, Ashanti and Yoruba myths, God (Chineke, Nyame or Olorun) created all things and secondly, He created them with or as parts of Himself. In other words, the gods and goddesses, as well as all material and spiritual elements in creation are parts or particles of the Supreme Being or the creator-God.

The implication of this is that human beings are essentially a component part of the Creator God. And it agrees directly with the two creation myths in Genesis as the first account of the creation myth in Genesis explicitly states that man was created in the image (Hebrew *ay*) of God, and after His likeness, (Genesis 1: 26-27). The second account of the Genesis creation myth states that God formed man out of the dust of the ground and breathed into him the breath of life (that is, a part of Himself) and man became a living being (Genesis 2: 7).

However, in the Igbo creation myth, the God, Igwe, and the Goddess, Ala, (both, components of the creator God, Chineke) met and formed human beings, male and female. The reference to the use of materials, clay, sticks and leaves, in creating mankind in the Igbo myth, strikes a note of similitude with the second creation account in Genesis, which posits the use of dust from the ground .

Likewise in the Yoruba myth, Obatala, one of the Orishas (gods/minor deities/divinities) formed human beings and the earth as we know it. In forming humans as a reflection of himself which was reflected by water, he made use of the dark clay by the side of the river/stream. When Olorun saw Obatala's disappointment at the lifelessness of his work, He (Olorun) breathed life (gave a part of himself) on them and they became living beings. Thus, this act of creation could be so much likened to the second account of creation according to Genesis, where God made man from Clay and breathed life into him.

Notwithstanding, in the Ashanti myth we find the trickster god, Ananse, doing the work of creation and the supreme God, Nyame, breathing the life-giving breath (a part of himself) to the human beings created by the god, Ananse, which is also a part or particle of himself. This corresponds to the other narratives of the Genesis accounts, the Igbo and the Yoruba creation myths as earlier given.

Points of Divergence

Worthy of note are the few points of divergence or little differences between the Igbo, the Akan (Ashanti), the Yoruba and the Genesis accounts (the first and second accounts) of creation myths. In the Genesis account of creation, especially in the first account, everything was created by God's pronouncement (word), without consultation or involvement of any power or spirit, except man whom he made in his own image and likeness. While in the creation myth of the Yoruba and the Igbo people, we find the creation of man and other things not by the Supreme Being but by other deities or divinities that exist with him or were created by him.

More so, in the creation myth of Genesis, especially in the first account, there is a chronological sequence of created things with human beings being the last of all that was created before God finally rested on the seventh day. After humans were created lastly to be the caretaker of all other created things, God gave them dominion to conquer and subdue the Earth. This is not so with the Igbo and Yoruba creation myth as both were not given in a chronological sequence, although humans seem to be the last in the list of creation. The divergent point between them is the numbering of days to mark or situate creation in time as days were used in the Genesis creation myth but not in the Igbo and Yoruba myths.

Conclusion

The religious thoughts of a people, to a very large extent translate to the kind of interpersonal relationship that exists between them, hence to the pattern and level of their development. The Genesis creation myths present mankind as created by God in his image and likeness. This implies that mankind is given the highest place in creation, an

understanding which has led to the sanctity of life among the Israelites and other adherents of the Jewish faith. The creation myths of the various tribes in Africa especially among the Igbos and the Yorubas also present similar notions of mankind being made by God (gods) and containing a part of God (gods).

Quite evidently, as could be drawn from the narratives of the Genesis creation myths as well as the Igbo, Akan (Ashanti) and Yoruba creation myths, the significant points of convergence between them are, firstly, that man was formed by the direct action of God (or through the gods since they are part of the supreme being) and that man contains (or is) a component (a part) of God (or the gods). Secondly, man is not just a physical being that accidentally came into existence but rather that he was formed by God (gods) carrying a part of Himself (or themselves).

Owing to this divine component and sacredness of the composition of man (humankind at large), life is regarded as truly Sacred in Igbo land and in all parts of Africa. Life is treated with the highest form of respect, reverence, honour and dignity and it is highly elevated and celebrated. Consequently, the giving of life at birth or through child bearing is a great celebration among the Igbo people of the South Eastern region of Nigeria as well as among the Yoruba people of the South Western region of Nigeria and other parts of Africa at large. Elders are invited to make positive declarations and incantations in the atmosphere of prayer and worship, to implore the favour of the benevolent spirits to safeguard and beautify the destiny of the new-born baby.

Owing to this esteemed position of Humans in the hierarchical structure or order of created things, human life is highly revered among the various tribes in Africa. This reverence for human life leads to the promotion of the highest good in the society and provides a high-quality atmosphere for the highest level of development.

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