

African Myths

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No-King-as-God (Hausa of Nigeria):

When an ordinary man comes before the king he salutes him thusly: "May the king live forever!" But once lived a man who refused to say this obligatory phrase, instead substituting: "There is no king like God." After many visits to the king, and many repetitions of this heretical phrase, the king grew angry and plotted to destroy the man. He gave the man two silver rings and told him they were a present to keep, but in reality the king meant to avenge himself through them. The man, whom everybody now called No-King-as-God, took the rings, put them into a dried and empty ram's horn, and gave them to his wife to keep for him. A week later the king called No-King-as-God and sent him to a distant village, to tell the people to come and help build up the city walls. As soon as he had gone the king sent for the man's wife and offered her a thousand cowries (imported small shells used as money or ornaments), and a hundred head-cloths and body-cloths, if she would give him that which her husband had entrusted to her. Tempted by the splendid presents the wife agreed and brought the ram's horn, and when the king looked inside, there were the two rings safely stored. He placed them back in the horn, and gave it to his servants with instructions to throw it far into a lake. They did so, and as the horn fell into the water a great fish swam by and swallowed it. On the day that No-King-as-God was returning home he met some friends who were going fishing. He went with them and caught that great fish. As his son was cleaning it, his knife struck something hard and he called to his father. The father pulled out the horn, and when he opened it and looked inside he saw the rings which the king had given him for safe keeping. "Truly," he said, "there is no king like God." They were still fishing when a royal messenger came and told the man he was wanted by the king at once. He stopped at his house first and asked his wife where was that precious thing he had entrusted to her. She replied that she could not find it and thought a rat had eaten it. Shaking his head at her perfidy the man set off for the royal court. The other counsellors all saluted by saying, "May the king live forever." But the man said only, "There is no king like God." So the king told the counsellors to be quiet, and advancing towards the man he said, "Is it true that there is no king like God?" The man replied firmly, "Yes". Then the king demanded that thing which he had entrusted to the man, and signaled his guards to close round him to kill him. But No-King-as-God put his hand under his robe and pulled out the horn and handed it to the king. The king opened it and took out his two silver rings. "Indeed, there is no king like God", he said, and all his counsellors shouted in approval. Then the king divided his city into two, and gave half of it to No-King-as-God to rule.

The Origins of Procreation (Ashanti):

Long ago a man and a woman came down from heaven, while another man and woman came out of the ground. The Lord of Heaven also sent a python, the non-poisonous snake, 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, 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 in clan rituals). Then the Python told the couples to go home and lie together, and the women conceived and bore children. These children took the spirit of the river where the Python lived as their clan spirit. Members of that clan hold the python as taboo; they must never kill it, and if they find a python that has died or been killed by someone else, they put white clay on it and bury it human fashion.

Thunder and Lightning (Nigeria):

A long time ago, both thunder and lightning lived on this earth, among the people. Thunder was a mother sheep and Lightning was her son, a ram. Neither animal was very popular with the people, for when somebody offended Lightning, he would fly into a furious rage and begin burning whatever he came across. This often included huts and corn bins, and even large trees. Sometimes he damaged crops on the farms with his fire and occasionally he killed people who got in his way. As soon as Thunder knew he was behaving this way, she would raise her voice and shout at him as loudly as she could, and that was very loud indeed. Naturally the neighbors were very upset, first at the damage caused by Lightning and then by the unbearable noise from his mother that always followed his outbursts. The villagers complained to the king on many occasions, until at last he sent the two of them to live at the very edge of the village, and said that they must not come and mix with the people any more. However, this did no good, since Lightning could still see people as they walked about the village streets and so found it only too easy to continue picking quarrels with them. At last the king sent for them again. "I have given you many chances to live a better life," he said, "but I can see that it is useless. From now on, you must go away from our village and live in the wild bush. We do not want to see your faces here again." Thunder and Lightning had to obey the king and agree to abide by his ruling; so they left the village, angry at its inhabitants. But still there was plenty of trouble in store for the villagers, since Lightning was so angry at being banished that he now set fire to the whole bush, and since it was the dry season this was extremely unfortunate. The flames spread to the little farms of the people, and sometimes to their houses as well, so that they were in despair again. They often heard the mother ram's mighty voice calling her son to order, but, since it was always after the fact, it made very little difference in his actions. The king called all his counselors together and asked them to advise him, and after much debate they hit on a plan. Why not banish Thunder and Lightning completely away from the earth, and send them to live in the sky. And so the king proclaimed. Thunder and Lightning were sent away into the sky, where the people hoped they would not be able to do any more damage. Things did not work out quite as well as they had hoped, however, for Lightning still loses his temper from time to time and cannot resist sending fire down to the earth when he is angry. Then you can hear his mother rebuking him in her loud rumbling voice.

Luyia (Kenya):

The first man and woman had no children for a long time. They did not know the secret of procreation and tried to have union in various ways without success. One day the man saw the woman climbing a tree and noticed her private parts, and so that night he sought union with her again. She refused at first, saying that he had only seen an ulcer, but later she gave in. She suffered great pain at this union but, in due course, she bore a son, much to the surprise of both of them. That was the beginning of their family, for they had found the secret of getting children.

Bantu (Sesuto):

Once there was a monster, named Kammapa, that devoured humans. Eventually the only person left in the world was an old woman who had fearfully gone into hiding when she saw what was happening. One day, without the aid of a man, she gave birth to a boy-child who was adorned with amulets. She named her son Lituolone in honor of her god. By nightfall the boy was full-grown. He asked his mother where the other people were, and being told of Kammapa, grabbed a knife and went forward to fight it. The monster swallowed him in one gulp; finding himself unharmed in the beast's stomach, Lituolone used his knife to cut his way out. In tearing apart the beast's entrails he allowed thousands of human beings to escape with him. The world was repopulated again.

Tortoise and the Lizard (Bantu):

Tortoise had used up all his salt, and he found his meals so tasteless without it that he decided to call on his brother and ask him if he had any to spare. His brother had plenty. "How will you get it back to your home?" he asked Tortoise. "If you will wrap the salt in a piece of bark cloth, and tie it up with string, then I can put the string over my shoulder and drag the parcel along the ground behind me," said Tortoise. "A splendid idea!" exclaimed his brother, and between them they made a tidy package of the salt. Then Tortoise set off for his long, slow journey home, with the bundle going bump, bump, bump, along the ground behind him. Suddenly he was pulled up short, and turning round, he saw that a large lizard had jumped on to the parcel of salt and was sitting there, staring at him. "Get off my salt!" exclaimed Tortoise. "How do you expect me to drag it home with you on top of it?" "It's not your salt!" replied the lizard. "I was just walking along the path when I found this bundle lying there, so I took possession of it and now it belongs to me." "What rubbish you talk!" said Tortoise. "You know well it is mine, for I am holding the string that ties it." But the lizard still insisted that he had found the parcel lying in the road, and he refused to get off unless Tortoise went with him to the elders, to have their case tried in court. Poor Tortoise had to agree and together they went before the old men at the court. First Tortoise put his case, explaining that as his arms and legs were so short he always had to carry bundles by dragging them along behind him. Then the lizard put his side of the matter, saying that he had found the bundle lying in the road. "Surely anything that is picked up on the road belongs to the one who picks it up?" cried the lizard. The old men discussed the matter seriously for some time; but many of them were related to the lizard and thought that they might perhaps get a share of the salt, so eventually they decreed that the bundle should be cut into two, each animal taking half.

Tortoise was disappointed, because he knew it really was his salt, but he sighed with resignation and let them divide the parcel. The lizard immediately seized the half that was covered with the biggest piece of cloth, leaving poor Tortoise with most of his salt escaping from his half of the parcel, and spilling out on to the ground. In vain did Tortoise try to gather his salt together. His hands were too small and there was too little cloth to wrap round it properly. Finally he departed for home, with only a fraction of his share, wrapped up in leaves and what remained of the bark cloth, while the elders scraped up all that had been spilled, dirty though it was, and took it back to their wives. Tortoise's wife was very disappointed when she saw how little salt he had brought with him, and when he told her the whole story she was most indignant at the way he had been treated. The long, slow journey had tired him, and he had to rest for several days. But although Tortoise was so slow, he was very cunning and eventually thought up a plan to get even with the lizard. So, saying good-bye to his wife, he plodded along the road towards the lizard's home with a gleam in his eye, and after some time he caught sight of the lizard, who was enjoying a solitary meal of flying ants. Slowly and silently Tortoise came upon him from behind and put his hands on the middle of the lizard's body. "See what I've found!" called Tortoise loudly. "What are you doing?" asked the perplexed lizard. "I was just walking along the path when I found something lying there," explained Tortoise. "So I picked it up and now it belongs to me, just as you picked up my salt the other day." When the lizard continued to wriggle and demanded that Tortoise set him free, Tortoise insisted that they go to the court and get the elders to judge. The old men listened attentively to both sides of the story, and then one said: "If we are to be perfectly fair, we must give the same judgement that we gave concerning the salt." "Yes," said the others, nodding their white heads, "and we had the bag of salt cut in two. Therefore we must cut the lizard in two, and Tortoise shall have half." "That is fair," replied Tortoise, and before the lizard could escape, he seized a knife from an elder's belt and sliced him in half, and that was the end of the greedy lizard.

Tortoise and the Baboon (Nyanja):

One evening when the tortoise was crawling slowly home, he met the baboon on his path. "Hello, old fellow," said the baboon heartily. "Have you found much to eat today?" "No," replied Tortoise sadly. "Very little indeed." The baboon danced up and down, chortling with laughter at an idea which had just come to him. "Follow me, poor old Tortoise," he exclaimed, "and when you reach my home I will have supper all ready for you." "Thank you. Thank you," said the grateful Tortoise, as the baboon turned round and bounced gaily along the path that led to his home. Tortoise followed as fast as he could, which was very slow indeed, especially when he went uphill. Once or twice he stopped to rest, when the ground became so bumpy that he got disheartened, but holding in his mind the picture of a wonderful feast, he plodded on. At last he reached the place in the bush that the baboon called his home. There he was, leaping about and grinning to himself, and as soon as he caught sight of Tortoise he exclaimed: "Bless my tail! What a long time you have taken to get here. I declare it must be tomorrow already!" "I'm so sorry," said Tortoise, puffing a little after his long journey. "But I'm sure you have had plenty of time to get the supper ready, so do not grumble at me." "Oh, yes, indeed!" replied the baboon, rubbing

his hands together. "Supper's all ready. All you have to do is to climb up and get it. Look!" he said, pointing to the top of a tree. "Three pots of millet-beer, brewed especially for you." The poor tortoise looked up at the pots which the baboon had wedged in the branches high above his head. He knew he could never reach them, and the baboon knew that too. "Bring one down for me, there's a good friend," begged Tortoise, but the baboon climbed the tree in the twinkling of an eye and shouted down to him: "Oh, no! Anybody who wants supper with me must climb up to get it." So poor Tortoise could only begin his long homeward journey with a very empty stomach, cursing at his inability to climb trees. But as he went he worked out a splendid plan for getting his own back on the unkind baboon. A few days later the baboon had an invitation to eat with Tortoise. He was very surprised, but knowing how slow and good-natured the tortoise was, the baboon said to himself: "Oh, well, the fellow evidently saw the joke and bears me no malice. I'll go along and see what I can get out of him." At the appointed time the baboon set out along the track that led to Tortoise's home. Now it was the dry season, when many bush fires occur which leave the ground scorched and black. Just beyond the river the baboon found a wide stretch of burnt and blackened grass, over which he bounded towards Tortoise, who stood waiting beside a cooking pot from which issued the most savory of smells. "Ah, it's my friend the baboon!" said Tortoise. "I'm very pleased to see you. But did your mother never teach you that you must wash your hands before meals? Just look at them! They're as black as soot." The baboon looked at his hands, which were indeed very black from crossing the burnt patch of ground. "Now run back to the river and wash," said Tortoise, "and when you are clean I will give you some supper." The baboon scampered across the black earth and washed himself in the river, but when he came to return to Tortoise he found he had to cross the burnt ground again and so arrived as dirty as before. "That will never do! I told you that you could only eat with me if you were clean. Go back and wash again! And you had better be quick about it because I have started my supper already," said Tortoise, with his mouth full of food. The poor baboon went back to the river time and again, but try as he would he got his hands and feet black each time he returned, and Tortoise refused to give him any of the delicious food that was fast disappearing. As Tortoise swallowed the last morsel, the baboon realized he had been tricked and with a cry of rage he crossed the burnt ground for the last time and ran all the way home. "That will teach you a lesson, my friend," said the Tortoise, smiling, as, well-fed and contented, he withdrew into his shell for a long night's sleep.

Murilé and the Moonchief (Kenya):

Once there was a youth named Murilé, whose mother incessantly nagged at him, criticizing him over every little thing. Nothing he did was ever right; even his best efforts brought snide remarks from her. Growing tired of this, Murilé borrowed his father's stool, which had been in the family for countless generations. He sat on the stool and recited every magic incantation he knew. Suddenly the stool began to fly up off the earth in the direction of the moon. When he landed on the moon, he came to a village and asked for directions to the home of the Moonchief. The villagers asked Murilé to work for them in exchange for the information. They came to like him and they told him how to get to his destination, and he went on his way. When Murilé arrived at the village of the Moonchief, he was appalled at how backward the people there were. They knew nothing

of fire; they ate their meat raw, had no pottery, and shivered at night from the cold. So Murilé took sticks and built a fire, which made him a great hero to the moon people and a favorite of the Moonchief. He was hailed as the greatest magician the people had ever known. In recognition of his services, Murilé was showered with gifts and honors. The Moonchief and his subjects could not give Murilé enough cattle and wives. Every father wanted Murilé to marry his daughters. Soon a very rich man with many cattle and wives, Murilé prepared to return to earth in triumph: Now his mother would see that her son had amounted to something. So he sent his friend, the mockingbird, to announce his imminent return to earth. However, Murilé's family did not even believe their son was alive; they had given him up for dead long ago. When the mockingbird flew back to the moon with his report, Murilé could not believe that the mockingbird had spoken to his family. So the mockingbird went back to Murilé's earthly village and brought back his father's walking stick as proof of the visit. Finally convinced, Murilé prepared to return to earth. He dressed his wives and many children in their finest clothing and covered them with jewels. He had so much wealth to show off that his mother was sure to be impressed. With this great entourage to bring with him, Murilé could hardly travel back on the magic stool, so the entire party left on foot. Murilé became exhausted. One of his finest bulls told Murilé that he, the bull, would carry his master back to earth in exchange for a promise: that Murilé would never kill him and eat him. Murilé gladly consented. The family of Murilé on earth were thrilled to see him and marveled at his wealth and fine new family. Even his mother rejoiced to have him home. Consistent with her character, she went about bragging to everyone of her rich and powerful son. Murilé made his parents swear never to harm the bull that had brought him home, and they agreed. However, as time passed, the parents forgot their promise. After all, Murilé had so many cattle that they probably forgot which bull was which. So his parents killed the bull and Murilé's mother prepared a dish seasoned with its fat and broth. As Murilé sat down to eat, the meat spoke to him, reminding him of the promise. As Murilé took the first taste of the bull's meat, the earth swallowed him up..