PROJECT MUSE®

Myth in the Context of African Traditional Histories: Can It
Be Called "Applied History"?

S. A. Shokpeka

History in Africa, Volume 32, 2005, pp. 485-491 (Article)

Published by Cambridge University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/hia.2005.0023>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/187894>

MYTH IN THE CONTEXT OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL HISTORIES: CAN IT BE CALLED “APPLIED HISTORY”?

S.A. SHOKPEKA
UNIVERSITY OF BENIN

I

For the reconstruction of history from oral sources, four broad types are usually distinguishable. These are myth, legend, songs, and what Phillips Stevens calls “popular history.”¹ All of them fall under the generic heading of “folklore”—a term which is so broad in its application that it could include nearly all expressive aspects of culture. The only type that we will concern ourselves with in this study is myth. A comprehensive examination of the issue in question in the study requires a definition of the word myth; an examination of the characteristics of “applied history;” and the application of these characteristics to myth with a view to finding out any point of agreement between them, before a final answer will be given to the question whether “myth in the context of African traditional histories,” can be called applied history.

II

The *Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English* defines myth as a “story handed down from olden time, containing the early beliefs of a race.” Vansina identifies myths by their subject matter and talks about them as those stories which “deal with and interpret the relations between the natural and the supernatural and are concerned with all that part of religious life that lies beyond the moral order.” He says that they “attempt to explain the world, the culture, the society . . . in terms of

¹Phillips Stevens, “The Uses of Oral Traditions in the Writing of African History,” *Tarikh* 6/1(1978), 2.

religious causes.”² McCall, for his part, refers to myths as “stories concerning the supernatural, the activities of deities, spirits and semi-divine heroes on the origin of the world, mankind and cultural artifacts and institutions which usually are said to have been achieved through the instrumentality of these sacred beings.”³ Afigbo, in turn, considers myths as having the “tendency to explain historical institutions and development by appeal to non-historic factors and forces”—as stories that see “the supernatural acting at times through the agency of man, at times through the agency of the lower animals and other times even through the agency of inanimate object, as the original and continuing causes of motion in a society.”⁴

The religious or supernatural character of myths is also emphasized by Bascom, who considers that they are accepted as faith and that “they can be cited as authority in answer to ignorance, doubt, or disbelief.” He says that “[m]yths are the embodiments of dogma; they are usually sacred; and they are often associated with theology and rituals.”⁵ Pender-Cudlip, however, in reply to such definitions of myths that tend to emphasize such terms as “supernatural,” “religious,” “sacred,” and “theology,” reminds users that such terms are differently defined in different cultures. Therefore, the “native and alien ideas of what is and is not supernatural and therefore of “myth” are likely to be rather different.”⁶

While one can agree that some myths have an element of the supernatural in them, it is reasonable in the African historical context to define myth as those stories about the very earliest past that explain the origin of the societies, their institutions and culture, the activities of some noteworthy men in those societies, and their relationship with one another, in the absence of any written evidence. Like any other raw materials, myths are either historical or otherwise, and are often described as crude until they are refined to produce a fine and clean product.

So far I have attempted a definition of the word “myth.” I now turn to the term “applied history” and see what it entails. The initial step here is to find out what it is and for this I refer once again to the dictionary and then attempt a working definition of “applied history” by analyzing the word “applied” and the word “history.”

²Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition* (Chicago, 1965), 157.

³Daniel F. McCall, *Africa in Time-Perspective* (New York, 1969), 41.

⁴A.E. Afigbo, “Facts and Myths in Nigerian Historiography,” *Nigeria Magazine* 122/23(1977), 83-84.

⁵Patrick Pender-Cudlip, “Oral Tradition and Anthropological Analysis,” *Azania* 7(1972), 6.

⁶*Ibid.*

The first dictionary meaning of the word "apply" is to "put (something) into use; into position to serve its purpose." Coining the word "applied" from it and applying to it "arts," thus becoming "applied arts," it gives its meaning to be "as used in textile designs; for pottery etc." In the same manner, if it is applied to history (thus "applied history") it will be logically defined as "serving the same purpose as history."

What then, is the purpose of history? History, we all know, has the purpose of making the past as intelligible as possible in order to make the present meaningful. Although from this working definition of "applied history" it can be agreed that it serves the same purpose as history, although it is not pure history. What then are the characteristics of "applied history" as distinct from pure history? I shall answer this question by first identifying the resemblances between history and applied history. Applied history, like history generally, entails a narration of events. The events narrated are always, like history, events of the past. It aims at explaining the present through stories about the past. It differs from history, however, in the sense that history not only seeks to explain the present through the past, but also places much value on the use the historian makes of the scientific method of checking and selecting his materials from primary and secondary sources, analyzing and interpreting his findings as objectively as possible.

How far do myths warrant the name "applied history?" Using the Yoruba creation myths as examples, let us try an answer to this question. The first of the myths tells of Olorun (god of heaven) letting a chain down to earth, then covered with water. Down this chain came Oduduwa, holding some earth, a cock, and a palm nut. With the aid of the cock, Oduduwa spread out the earth to produce solid land and planted the palm nut which produced a tree with sixteen branches which represent the sixteen Yoruba crowned *obas*. The point at which this took place was Ile-Ife. Another myth tells of Oduduwa, originating from the east and moving to Ile-Ife and later sending one of his sons Oranmiyan to found Oyo. In this version the seven children of Oduduwa became the first Yoruba *obas*.⁷

A sympathetic and cautious historian presented with these stories will see that an attempt is being made to explain the Yoruba past or history of origins. As P.C. Lloyd sees them in all their present variations, "[t]hey create a genealogy whereby the Yoruba are descended from one man," to

⁷P.C. Lloyd, "Yoruba Myths: a Sociologist's Interpretation," *Odù* 2(1955), 22. See also Noel Q. King, *African Cosmos: An Introduction to Religion in Africa* (Belmont, CA, 1986), 8-9, for other versions of this myth of creation.

wit, Oduduwa. They also stress the fact that "the children of the man became the founders of the sub-groups and their rulers."⁸ These myths tell us that the Yoruba are one people, and their original point of dispersal was Ile-Ife. "Perhaps" says Lloyd, "they relate [also] to an earlier time during which the Yoruba kingdoms did in fact acknowledge one ruler."⁹

Taking another example, this time from Asante, we find that the myth of the Golden Stool, which was said to have been conjured by Okomfo Anokye from a cloud onto the lap of the Asantehene, and which the Asante believe their *sunsum* (soul) is associated with, merely symbolizes the unification of the erstwhile scattered and disunited city-states of the Kwaman forest by Osei Tutu, during whose reign this myth was probably formulated.¹⁰ It could also be telling of the beginning of the use of the golden stool by the Asantehenes and sub-rulers of the Asante Union and the establishment of the divine and centralized kingship in Asante.

Many other African traditional myths help the people of a kingdom to establish their relationship with neighboring kingdoms. This is exactly what the Oranmiyan myth among the Yoruba and the Bini has done for these people. This myth, of course, has also helped to establish the fact that an earlier dynasty, purely Bini, existed in Benin before the relationship which that myth is positing.¹¹ Among the Hausa-speaking peoples of northern Nigeria, there is a popular myth that has helped establish some facts about their origin. The myth states that in the remote times a certain Bayajidda fled from the east to Kanem-Borno, which was already an important state in the Chad basin. There the *mai* of Bornu gave him his daughter in marriage, but deprived him of his followers. This and subsequent events caused Bayajidda to flee the country. Traveling westward, Bayajidda left his wife at Biramta-Gabas to bear him a son. At Gaya he met some blacksmiths, who made him a knife according to specifications. As he continued his journey, he came to a town whose inhabitants were deprived of water from a well by a sacred snake called *sarki* or king. Bayajidda killed the snake and in gratitude Daura, the queen of the town, married him and also gave him a Gwari concubine. By Daura Bayajidda had a son, Bawo. Various accounts exist as to what happened after this, but one of them states that Bawo had seven children, who became

⁸Lloyd, "Yoruba Myths," 22.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰King, *African Cosmos*, 27-28.

¹¹G.T. Strides and C. Ifeka, *Peoples and Empires of West Africa: West Africa in History, 1000-1800* (New York, 1971), 311; J.U. Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin* (Ibadan, 1968), 6.

founders of the seven Hausa states referred to as Hausa Bakwai or legitimate Hausa states.¹²

From this legend three basic inferences can be made: that the Hausa-speaking people had existed long before the formation of states like the celebrated Hausa Bakwai; that successive infiltration of newcomers into Hausaland took place; or that there was an invasion of the area from Kanem-Borno. It is also possible to infer a change in the people's religious beliefs and practices from the killing of the snake, while the marriage of Daura—after which the people of Daura spoke no more of queen Daura, but *Mai Kashim Sarki*—seems to suggest a change from a matrilineal to a patrilineal system of inheritance.

We have seen so far that these myths are narrative, have a sense of the past, and explain the present by their stories of the past, and so can be regarded as “applied history.” Pender-Cudlip tells us that “the narrative form and the location of mythical events in the past are essential because . . . a narrative has a beginning, a moment of time in which a series of events is anchored. . . . One of the important functions of myth is that it anchors the present in the past.”¹³ Quoting an anthropologist, Pender-Cudlip continues that “myth by establishing a narrative locks a set of circumstances in an original set of events. And the effect and perhaps the unconscious motive for this is to provide a point of reference in the past beyond which one needs not go.”¹⁴

Some mythical traditions, it is true, contain accounts that Lewis refers to as “tradition plainly relating events that could not have occurred and including grotesque situation and action that are travesties of approved customary behaviour.”¹⁵ For him such accounts, because of their nature, should be dismissed. Such accounts as the Yoruba myth of creation fall into this category. They have religious and supernatural nature, but that does not remove them from within the context of the history of man. McCall tells us that from at least two considerations the religious myths of a people are pertinent to their history. First, he says, “religion tend to sacredotalize the most important institutions in a society. Authority is sanctified by godhead and priesthood.”¹⁶

This is certainly so in Africa, where “divine kings” are common. Hence in Yorubaland, where the kingdom and kingship were mythically said to have been derived from Olodumare (supreme god), the divine

¹²Pender-Cudlip, “Oral Tradition,” 12.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶McCall, *Africa in Time-Perspective*, 43.

kingship concept is very strong. The Wolof myth about the mysterious man who intervened in a quarrel between two different village states and later became the ancestor of the *buurba* Jolof, also explains the concept of divine kingship held there. Traditions of this nature are ubiquitous in the traditional histories of Africa, and since most of the African past, especially the precolonial period, depends for its history on traditions of this nature, it is not safe to dismiss them on the grounds that they contain the "supernatural" and the impossible, for some vital evidence might be disregarded in such a way. As Pender-Cudlip has warned, "an unhistorical story or myth . . . is not necessarily an untrue story but simply a story which is regarded as untrue." According to him, no story "has an inherent quality which makes it historical; it becomes historical not by being true but by being accepted as true."¹⁷

This is affected by the norms of the societies and the aims of the different historians reconstructing the history. They distinguish between facts and fiction according to criteria that are a product of their cultural environment. A traditional story that—to us—is clearly impossible, and so mythical, may be regarded by others as truly and indubitably historical, and our dismissing it as myth does not help us to understand what it means to the custodians. As Leach puts it, "[t]he distinction that history is true and myth is false is quite arbitrary," and Pender-Cudlip makes an interesting imitation of a popular saying that "one man's myth is another man's history."¹⁸ With particular reference to African traditional histories therefore, myth *is* applied history.

III

Myths are indispensable in the reconstruction of the Africa past. It is through the study of these African traditional myths that the early history of the political and social structures of most of the African kingdoms are explained. For instance, the establishment of the second most important institution of government in Benin kingdom—the Uzama —is explained in the Edionise myth, the five courtiers who were sent by the Ogoiso to negotiate with the Edionwere of Udo. McCall argues that sometimes the deities in those religious myths "may be ancestors or heroes who have been elevated into the supernatural and their exploits may indicate human action of historical significance."¹⁹ Some stories about military expedi-

¹⁷Pender-Cudlip, "Oral Tradition," 12.

¹⁸Ibid., 13.

¹⁹McCall, *Africa in Time-Perspective*, 43.

tions of kingdoms, of overlordship of one over the other, accounts about men of courage and villainy, African warlords or heroes, are cast as mythical traditions. Such people are sometimes represented in those myths as possessing superhuman features and qualities—in most cases they are called magicians. Such is Afigbo's story about the Igala military expedition into Nsukka, which is cast in the Onoju Oboni myth, in which Oboni is depicted as a giant with six fingers and six toes. This myth establishes the conquest of Nsukka by Igala, and talks about the valor of Onoju Oboni as a warlord and leader of the expedition, to whom descent by some of the villages in Nsukka is presently traced.²⁰

In the African context therefore, myth, like history, uses the past to explain the present. There might be inconsistencies in these accounts, but that is not exclusive to myth; inconsistencies are also found aplenty in historical accounts. Therefore, if a mythical tradition is discredited by their inconsistencies, then many "orthodox" historical sources, and some of what has been written and read as finished "history" should also be called myth. In many ways, as seen from the various African mythical tradition cited here, myth and history are similar.

Both consist of supposedly authentic narratives of past events; both express and explain truth about the present through stories about the past and both use the present to reconstruct the past. The only basic difference between them is a technical one. "History," says Pender-Cudlip, "has its own peculiar scientific (in the sense of rational and methodical) procedures, methods and rules—such as rules of evidence, method of proof, standard of objectivity, procedures of historical explanation, the use of absolute chronology and the identification of primary and secondary sources of information."²¹ It is only in the light of these basic differences that myth cannot be regarded as "history," but "applied history." As Barnes puts it, in the light of this difference "history is myth with dates," while for Pender-Cudlip, "myth is technically imperfect history."²²

²⁰Afigbo, "Facts and Myths," 86.

²¹Pender-Cudlip "Oral Tradition," 13.

²²H.E. Barnes and Howard Becker, *Social Thought from Lore to Science*, quoted in Pender-Cudlip, "Oral Tradition," 14.