

As Flies to Boys Are We to the Gods: Human Identity in Kenyan Myths
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There exists a corpus of tribal myths in Kenya that scholars have recorded in writing in numerous languages (Akivaga and Odaga; Chesaina; Kipury). The recording shows that societies that gave rise to the myths are vanishing, hence the endeavours to preserve the myths, as well as oral literature as a whole, before they become extinct. In this connection, Kipury says of her *Oral Literature of the Maasai*, "This book is an attempt to record, and hence preserve, part of the rich heritage of Maasai oral literature before it is completely forgotten" (vii). In this way, scholars have preserved a precious literary heritage that would inevitably vanish as a result of the advances of literacy in the country and of the death of people to whom the heritage was handed down.

The preservation of the myths in a multiplicity of ethnic languages indicates their multifarious tribal roots, as well as their existence in a number of tribal shades in Kenya. As a result of the preservation, several myths are accessible, in languages of their creation, to their creators' descendants who can read these languages. Some myths have been translated, into English, however. The translation has made them accessible to Kenyans to whom they are inaccessible in their primary languages, as well as to a world audience, literate in English.

These myths are a subgenre of the folktale or of the oral narrative. In this sense, they are oral stories of fictitious human beings created in language for human audiences. As a result of their oral mode of transmission, they are brief stories handed down and retold down the ages by countless narrators who, establishing interactive relationships with their audiences, have provided experiential learning and entertainment to the audiences. As stories, the myths are complete and autonomous entities whose lifeblood are sequences of imaginative events that create interest and sustain suspense in, and explain causal links between the sequences of the narrated events to, audiences.

The characters, through whom the sequences of events are narrated and explained, are a mixture of the animal, the divine, and the human. Without exception, divine characters have power over animal and human characters; indeed, while divine characters play active, creative roles, animal and human characters are passive creatures. I will illustrate the inordinate power that divine characters wield over animal and human characters in Kenyan myths, using three myths in Akivaga and Odaga, "Creation," "Origin of Death," and "Origin of the Gikuyu," as the three myths are representative of the numerous myths found in the country.

"Mogai (the Divider of the Universe)" is the divine character in "Origin of the Gikuyu"; he is a benefactor, a dispenser, who, giving land to Gikuyu, tells the latter that he would assist him "whenever he was in need" if Gikuyu offers sacrifices to him (20). In "Origin of Death," God creates human characters; through repetition, the myth emphasises his role in creating the human race: "It is God who created men," "he created men and

placed them in another region," and he told the chameleon, "[G]o into that region where I have placed the men I created" (26). In his compassion to the people he creates, he sends the chameleon to inform them that they would be immortal; here, an animal character is a submissive messenger conveying divine messages, while human characters, playing a cameo role in the myth, act as passive recipients of divine communication. Were Wakaba in "Creation" is a beneficent creator, "the granter or giver of all things" (22). Repetition underlines his role—like God's role in "Origin of Death"—as a creator: the "world was created by Were Wakaba," and "he created the whole world with everything in it" (22) and "created heaven alone without the assistance of anyone else" (23). In the course of making the world, he creates passive human characters: he creates a man so that the sun can shine on the man, creates a woman so that the man can have a companion to talk to and releases rain to quench the human couple's thirst for water. The following progression of imperative verbs indicates his power as he lays down the law for the human characters:

Were told...[them] to eat the flesh of certain animals...He instructed them to eat only the flesh of beasts with two hoofs...He ordered them to refrain from eating animals that crawl...He also forbade them to eat scavenger birds. (24)

Like in myths the world over, the setting is outside the normal human or conventional historical time, the "Zamani" that Mbiti refers to as "the period of the myth" during which "people give or find an explanation about the creation of the world, the coming of death, the evolution of their language, the emergence of their wisdom, and so on" (23-24). This setting is evident in "Origin of the Gikuyu" that is set at an unidentified time when "mankind started to populate the earth" (Akivaga and Odaga 20). Not only are the myths set in a period lying outside normal human time but also are they set in both ethereal abodes and earthly regions, the former being the habitat of divine characters and the latter being the habitat of human characters, while animal characters inhabit one or the other of, or transverse, the two habitats. We see the two habitats in the three myths in Akivaga and Odaga: when God creates human beings in "Origin of Death," he places "them in another region" while he stays "at home" (26); in "Origin of the Gikuyu," the deity's ethereal abode is implicit in the statement that a mountain in the myth is his "resting-place when on inspection tour" of the earth (20); Were Wakaba's abode in "Creation" is explicit, for before the divine character "created the whole world with everything in it, he made his own heaven" (22); in the "Origin of Death" the two animal characters, the chameleon and the weaver-bird, journey from the ethereal abode to the earthly dwelling.

On the whole, the origin of phenomena, such as life and death, is the concern of myths not only in Kenya but also throughout the world. The fantasy, through which the search for this origin is conducted, is narrated and transmitted orally, is set in unconventional places and times, contains a

mixture of animal, divine and human characters, and has as its main theme ancestries with a human relevance—all this suggesting that myths reflect imaginative attempts by primitive society to make sense of the roots of its existence and, in the process, articulate its identity. In relation to the identity, Chesaina—having pointed out that “there are attempts in ... oral narratives to bridge the gap between fantasy and the real world in order to facilitate comprehension” (12)—argues that a myth collected in her book “contributes towards the people’s understanding of their origins and hence gives them a sense of identity” (42). The need to come to grips with the past, use the past in an endeavour to appreciate or understand the present, lay the ghost of the past to rest, or go to the past to give a society ‘a sense of identity,’ is an enduring concern in such contemporary work as *The River Between*.

Reflecting imaginative attempts by primitive society to make sense of the roots of its existence, each myth, as a complete and autonomous entity, was a source of aesthetic pleasure and knowledge for its creators who, through an investigation of their origins, achieved tranquillity as the myths satisfied their curiosity over origins of phenomena in their life. In this way, the myths fulfilled a historical necessity—a human need that indicates, paradoxically, weaknesses in face, but conquest, of mysterious forces of nature.

As descendants of the ancestors who created the myths, we find the narratives appealing. The appeal comes from the enjoyment they give us: they are enduring good stories that give us childlike entertainment. The appeal comes from the knowledge they give us: their enduring theme is an investigation of how human beings relate to their history and social environment. As a result of all this, myths are a source of identity for us, for they act as signposts of the chronicle of human progress, as they create empathy for their creators who are our ancestors. What is more, they embody humanism, for they show the determination by our ancestors to free themselves—as the ancestors simultaneously endeavoured to acquire knowledge that would liberate them—from the ignorance of their origins. In this way, the myths incarnate how indomitable the human spirit is in, through literary imagination, exploring and grappling with issues that tax human consciousness. Our ancestors handled these issues by creating a fabulous literature that creates empathy for them and that has been a source of pleasure for their descendants.

Contrary to these postulations, however, some scholars have treated myths as factual statements, as is apparent when Kabira and Mutahi say that myths and legends “are generally associated with historical facts. They are explicitly or implicitly believed by somebody [,] somewhere [,] at one time or another” (6). Along similar lines, Lansford argues that some people view myths “as a dimension of religion” because “myth-making often involves gods, other supernatural beings, and processes beyond human understanding” (1). This perception treats myths as a foundation of religious belief and, by extension, sanctions the dominance of the divine over the human on account of the enormous power divine characters wield

over human, as well as animal, characters; on the basis of this portrayal, divine characters appear as the driving force of the narrated events and, therefore, as possessing unassailable power over the direction of human affairs. The following assertion exemplifies the perception that myths entail religious belief by implying that that they are factual:

Most myths usually tell us about sacred beings and divine heroes. They are closely connected to religious beliefs and practices of a people. They reveal the existence of spirits and supernatural powers. These powers are seen as having been involved or instrumental in making things happen at the very beginning. (Akivaga and Odaga 20)

It is difficult to accept this assertion. This interpretation fails to treat myths as imaginative human creations in language. Cognising the human nature of their creation, however, disabuses us of their literal perception, as we can see in the three myths.

On the basis of his beneficence in "Origin of the Gikuyu," Mogai becomes an object of Gikuyu's, as well as his descendants', veneration. The reverence subordinates the descendants, as well as Gikuyu, to the deity. Yet, through imagination, the descendants created a story in which Mogai features as a beneficent divine character to Gikuyu, the fictional human character they created in the myth. Once we perceived them as Mogai's subordinates, however, Gikuyu's descendants' position as mythmakers is inverted, indeed subverted, for they, the creators of the myth, serve and worship Mogai—the character they created and named in the first place. Perceived literally, therefore, the myth sets aside the role of human beings as creators and managers of their past and, by extension, of their present and their destiny.

In "Origin of Death," animal and human characters play small parts, while the divine character performs a significant role as the deity who creates the human characters, endeavours to save the human race from death and sends the chameleon to inform the human characters that they would be immortal. In spite of portraying God's supremacy, however, the myth conceives him, as well as the chameleon and the weaver-bird, in human terms. To this end, the myth further humanises, and thereby concretises, God's ethereal abode as "home" and, despite its larger-than-life portrayal of God, humanises the deity, conceiving of and depicting him in human terms: he "had pity," he "saw the chameleon and the weaver-bird," he "recognised that the weaver-bird was a great maker of words," he "watched the chameleon and recognised that he had great intelligence," and he "spoke to the chameleon" (26). In relation to the animal characters, the weaver-bird is "a great maker of words compounded of lies and truth," while the chameleon has "great intelligence," does "not lie" and his "words" are "true," and, like a human being, the chameleon travels and exclaims, while the weaver-bird talks, saying like a human being, "I wish to step out for a moment" (26). In the end, the widespread use of

anthropomorphism in the myth not only places human characters at the centre of the creation of the deity who creates human beings and who sends a messenger to inform them that they would live forever but also acknowledges the human creators of the myth.

In a similar vein, the extensive use of anthropomorphism in “creation” indicates that myth is a human creation—the picture of Were Wakaba as a powerful creator and benefactor notwithstanding. To this end, to stop the heaven from falling, Were Wakaba supports “it all around by [sic] pillars just as the roof of a round hut is propped up by [sic] pillars” (23). At the same time, he creates the stars “to assist the sun and the moon” and creates the sun and the moon whose relationship the myth presents in human terms:

In the beginning, the moon was larger and more luminous than the sun who is his younger brother. Being envious of the moon and its scintillating power, the sun went to assault the moon.

The two brothers wrestled with one another and the sun was knocked down by the moon and asked for mercy. The moon yielded to his brother’s plea and left him alone. Later the two brothers wrestled again. This time it was the sun who knocked down the moon, throwing him into the mud. Then he splashed the moon all over with mud to stop him from being resplendent...

The moon was deprived of his resplendence because he was so stupid as to grant mercy to his younger brother, the sun. Rather than show pity, he should have beaten the sun. (22-23)

While the comparison between heaven and a hut renders creation human, humanising both the creation of the stars and the relationship between the moon and the sun concretises the abstract in terms human beings can relate to. The anthropomorphic language myth employs in doing all this helps its audiences understand creation in terms familiar, and therefore comprehensible, to them as human beings; in the process, they might see human beings as the creators of both Were Wakaba and the universe he creates. Taken literally, however, the myth—together with the other two, and several similar, myths—could be literally but erroneously interpreted as a basis for religious belief where the power of the human-created creator of the universe overshadows or surpasses that of his creators—the anonymous human beings who created the myth.

The literal perception that leads to the treatment of myths as a foundation of religious belief appears to ignore the creative process, which makes clear that their creators, their language and their implied audiences are human. Ultimately, those who create and, subsequently, narrate or record myths, as well as other genres of oral literature, educate and entertain human audiences (Akivaga and Odaga 8; Chesaina 42; Kipury 16-17) using a human language creatively. This creative process at least suggests that human beings are, or at most places them, at the centre of creation, because all the characters in myths—animal, divine and human

are their creations. Though, therefore, they show deities creating human beings, regulating human affairs or influencing human destiny, myths, in the end, demonstrate that human beings not only are in charge of their affairs but also determine their own destiny—even if they may not know how they came into being. Further, the creative process affirms human creativity and, from the perspective of the creators of myths, endorses the role of imagination as a bridge between an unknown past and a known present, thereby assisting our ancestors lay the ghost of their unknown past—what Achebe refers to as “the impenetrable darkness of... [human] origin” (97)—to rest, transcend the limitations of their present, and focus attention on their present and, perhaps, their future.

From a perspective of the present, in myths, contemporary Kenyans become witnesses to their ancestors’ ability, through literary imagination, to manage their present by coming to grips with their past. Here, myths pay tribute to the human ability to imaginatively build a bridge between the ancestors’ present and past; in this way, they thus espouse enduring values, as well as eternal lessons, for humankind. Further, lying at the source of a literary heritage, Kenyan myths become the first of a rite of passage - literary been, being and becoming - that reflects literary dynamics in the country, as it represents and affirms the universality of artistic progress. Treated this way, myths help contemporary Kenyans understand their place in history and themselves better. In the course of helping them do this, myths—together with the rest of the nation’s oral literature—help contemporary Kenyans counter alienation resulting from the denigration that Mbiti indicates has been their bane since the encounter with colonialism (216-28). In this way, myths can help them turn to themselves and energise them to acquire self-confidence in fashioning their destiny. This self-confidence, therefore, would be an antithesis to the “colonial education [that] sought to disparage the culture of the people and to turn them away from themselves” (Akivaga and Odaga 3).

Myths also help to define contemporary Kenyans’ national identity. In this connection, looking at the myths their ancestors created, contemporary Kenyans must be aware of how distinctive their myths are in their languages of creation, the kinds of characters they portray and the events they present and, that, in spite of their distinctiveness, they all make an effort to get to the bottom of the mysteries of human origins through the creation of similar stories. In the circumstance, from the perspective of the descendants of their creators in this country, the myths indicate the common roots of contemporary Kenyans’ multiple identities, thereby delineating their unity-in-diversity. Further, if we accept Lansford’s argument that the “universal human practice of myth-making appears to be the earliest means by which people interpreted the natural world and the society in which they lived” (3), we will see in myths the fountain from which springs a common literary heritage in the country—on account and in spite of their distinctiveness in language, story, and characterisation. In the end, the myths, therefore, help to delineate contemporary Kenyans’ collective identity, as they represent part of contemporary Kenyans’

multiple identities, for the settings, stories, characters and languages that are specific to Kenya give us an idea about the country's ethnic plurality while the similarity of settings, stories, characters and themes reveal part of the basis for national concord. This observation is in line with the argument that Akivaga and Odaga put forward as a reason for the study of oral literature in the country when they say that since "Kenya is a nation of different peoples," the "study of the oral literature of our different peoples gives us a sympathetic understanding of each other's culture" (4). In the end, the myths not only create empathy for their creators who are the ancestors of, but also are a source of identity for, contemporary Kenyans.

In the process of demonstrating contemporary Kenyans' particularity, however, myths affirm their universality because the different tribes that constitute Kenya today share in the 'universal human practice of myth-making that appears to be the earliest means by which people interpreted the natural world and the society in which they lived.' The implied audiences in this myth-making in this country, as well as elsewhere in the world, were preliterate, however. As a stage in human development, their pre-literacy, as well as that of the creators of the myths, universalises contemporary Kenyans by showing them that in line with all human societies they once were, though on the whole they no longer are, barbaric and illiterate – if we accept the observation by Thucydides that civilised and democratic ancient Athens, like the states surrounding it, was once primitive: "Many proofs might be given to show that the early Greeks had a manner of life similar to that of barbarians to-day" (Thomson 2005). This observation persuades me to believe that myths cannot only promote international understanding but also indicate a Kenyan identity as a result of the realisation that all societies have at one stage of their development produced myths before producing a written literature reflecting their social consciousness and collective psychology – in the manner we are doing in Kenya today.

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