The Dogon Creation Story

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Here, Chukwumu Azuonye outlines and analyzes the creation story of the Dogon people and explains its relationship to the star Sirius.

The Seed of the World

The creation story of the Dogon people of the Bandiagara cliffs in southern Mali and the plains of northern Burkina Faso in the area of the Niger bend in West Africa is one of the most elaborate and fascinating traditional explanations of the origins of the world and of human culture. Unlike biblical and similar stories of creation in other African oral traditions, in the Dogon creation story the idea of an all-powerful and all-knowing divine creator is subordinated to an evolutionary process in which God (Amma) emerges as a supernatural but imperfect progenitor. In place of the traditional idea of creation out of nothing, the Dogon creation story offers through the magic of the divine logos a more scientific explanation that anticipates the modern big bang theory. In the Dogon creation story, we can see a projection into the cosmos of ideas that essentially belong to reproductive biology. Underlying these ideas is what appears to be some knowledge of the role of chromosomes and of DNA in the formation of every new life, as formulated in modern genetics.

The story begins with the idea of the seed of the world. Described by the Dogon as kize uze (the smallest of things), this tiny seed floated quietly through the dark emptiness of space before the birth of our galaxy, the Milky Way. Although it is as small as the smallest cultivated seed in Dogon culture, namely fonio or digiteria exelis, it contains the potential for the existence of all reality. In the course of its flotation, it suddenly begins to expand under the pressure of internal vibrations. This happens at the point in space where the Dogstar, Sirius A (Digiteria) and its dwarf companion, Sirius B, are now located. Today, these twin stars occupy an important place on the Dogon ritual calendar. The all-important Dogon ritual of renewal, Sigui, which takes place every 60 years, follows the time it takes Sirius B to complete one orbit around Sirius A, a fact which has since been confirmed, with only a few minor differences, by modern science.

With the intensification of the internal vibrations within it, the seed of the world expands and expands until it reaches the utmost limits of the universe, forming an oval mass that the Dogon describe as the egg of the world (aduno tal) or the womb of the world, using the term me (which can be glossed as placenta or amnion) to describe its contents. The transformation of the seed of the world into the egg or womb of the world takes place in seven stages. Unwinding like a spiral from its point of origin, each of the seven stages of its expansion is longer than the preceding one. In Dogon iconography, this unwinding process is represented by a zigzag line called ozu tonolo. Other ritual drawings depict the seven-stage unwinding process as culminating in the prefiguration of the human shape. We can see from these drawings (Fig. 1) that the first and sixth vibrations represent the human legs, the second and the fifth the hands, the third and the fourth the head, while the seventh represents the genitals (the male penis or the female clitoris):
At the seventh vibration, the enveloping sheath breaks releasing all creation into space, just as young lives are released into the world from an egg.

An interesting and significant aspect (from the perspective of modern science) of the Dogon view of the processes within the egg of the world before creation is the notion that the egg of the world contained a master plan for creation. This master plan is composed of images or signs called *yala*. Each *yala* contains a model or code of all the instructions needed for the creation of each and every thing now known to exist in the universe, and all these, according to the Dogon, are grouped into 22 basic categories.

Amma, the supreme being, is among the first of the 22 categories of beings (deities) who emerged to become fully differentiated self-conscious beings. As god of creation, he set out to complete the work of creation. But he does so, not as an omniscient and all-powerful God, but, through procreation, as a great father figure with all the imperfections of humankind.

Lacking foreknowledge of things, he must also proceed by trial and error. His first task was to procreate a divine model for humankind, Nommo. Nommo would be a pair of androgynous twins. Each pair would comprise two persons, one basically female but with balancing male attributes, the other basically male but with balancing female attributes. Through further procreation between the twin Nommo, the ancestors of humankind would come into being. Their offspring, like themselves, would preferably come as twins or as individual male and female beings with complementary female and male attributes like themselves. But, unfortunately, Amma's first attempt at procreating the Nommo proved to be a failure.

At first Amma was thwarted by the aggressive masculinity of the model earth (then still suspended in the heavens). As he approached the primordial female Earth in sexual foreplay, a termite hill, Earth's clitoris, rose aggressively like a gigantic penis. Amma was forced into a struggle to subdue this aggressiveness. In cutting down the earth's clitoris, he set down the rule that subsequent generations have followed through clitoridectomy (female circumcision) to subdue the potential of the female clitoris to compete with the male penis. After this, Amma succeeded in copulating with the earth; but unfortunately, the struggle with the earth's maleness had already marred this first sexual union. The offspring was the jackal, Dyougou Serou, rather than the perfect model of creation, the twin Nommo, that was intended.

Dyougou Serou was a male being without any complementary female elements. In time, this all-male being raped his own mother, Earth. The result was a breed of incomplete beings that have survived in the universal order as evil beings of various kinds. Seized with shame over his misdeeds, Dyougou Serou spent the rest of his life in restless disgrace. Dogon sculpture represents him in several cringing poses with his hands covering his face (Laude, 1973; Imperato, 1978; Goldwater, 1959; and Ezra, *Art of the Dogon*, 1988). In time he suffered an antibirth by dissolving back into his mother, the earth's, vagina. But his evil offspring have survived to trouble the world.

The Dyougou Serou episode is only one of several versions of the explanation of the origins of evil in the Dogon creation story. In other versions, the origin of evil is attributed to a being known as Ogo, who, paradoxically, is an offspring of one of the pair of perfect Nommo born of Amma's second mating with the now circumcised earth. While still in the womb, the male person (Ogo) in one of the androgynous pair of twin Nommo tore his way out into space before the appointed time of his birth, leaving his female counterpart behind. He emerged carrying with him a piece of his own placenta. Outside the world-womb, this piece of placenta became his own earth. In addition to stealing a piece of his own placenta, he also stole some of the fonio, which Amma had intended to give to perfect humanity to plant for their sustenance on the pure earth. Ogo is thus also known in Dogon mythology as Yo Ogo (the thief Ogo) or Yurugu.

But Ogo's rebellion was in vain. The earth he created in such haste before his birth at full term
was an impure earth in which nothing good or complete could thrive because of its denial of the female essence. In frustration, Ogo returned to heaven to search for his soul sister but discovered that Amma had retrieved her and placed her in the world-womb under the charge of the remaining twin Nommo. Ogo then returned to the dark and desolate world he had created with such reckless haste. There, Amma turned him into the pale fox as a punishment for his misdeeds. The single, all-male incomplete beings born of his incest with his mother's placenta who now populated the earth have survived as the breed of evil beings that still trouble humankind. At this point the Dyougou Serou and the Yurugu versions of the Dogon creation story can be seen to merge.

Now, the impure earth of Yurugu or Dyougou Serou must be cleansed or created anew. To do this, Amma sacrificed the complete twin (male and female) Nommo of the other half of the placenta. These heavenly Nommo had been born at full term. Their bodies and blood were scattered over the cardinal points of the earth. Then the pieces were gathered together, resurrected in heaven, and sent back to the earth to remove all impurities. Earlier, Amma had created the sky and the stars to perfection through these sacrificed and resurrected perfect twin Nommos. They would now create a new earth, a world which, like the sky and the stars, would be perfect. They came down from the sky in a gigantic boat or ark which the Dogon describe as the "Boat of the World," or "the Ark of the World."

The "Boat of the World" is also described by the Dogon as the "Granary of the Master of Pure Earth." It contained everything needed to create a gana duge (a world in harmony). Piloted by the two heavenly Nommos, who now took the guise of blacksmiths, the Boat of the World finally came to rest in the present location of the earth, where it instantly became a new earth. This new earth was complete, formed according to Amma's order. Up until then the universe was in total darkness. Now light appeared for the first time. Water also appeared in the form of rain to clean and purify the earth, making it ready for the first ancestors of human beings.

With the descent of the boat of the heavenly Nommo came not only the separation of earth from other worlds, but also the separation of night from day and the appearance of the cycle of the moon (months), seasons, years, and generations. Social life was organized and the artistic and technological foundations of civilization were laid by the Nommo turned blacksmiths. Though he was an evil being, one of Ogo's actions for which he is still remembered in Dogon rituals today was the theft of a piece of the sun. Through this act, he brought fire to the world. With fire already present on earth, the Master Blacksmith introduced the major forms of art and technology for which the Dogon have been known for centuries. First, he taught humans how to weave. Then he instructed them in music and the making of the harp-lute and other musical instruments. After that, he taught them how to make various agricultural and household implements. The first ancestors of human beings appeared soon after the descent of the Boat of the World and its transformation into pure earth. The Dogon creation story says that there were four male ancestors: Amma Seru, Lébé Seru, Binu Seru, and Dyougou Serou (each with a female companion, his sister and wife). These four twins were born of four other pairs of Nommo which came from the four cardinal points—east, west, north and south—at the time of the descent of the Boat of the World. As they came from the four ends of the world, the four pairs or eight ancestors brought with them eight seeds. These seeds were sown in the new, pure, and fertilized earth. Out of each seed, a new seed grew.

The arrival of the eight ancestors signalled the blossoming of civilization on the new earth. This was not a civilization in which human life would be measured in terms of material success or the erection of tall architectural buildings and machines of destruction. It was rather a civilization governed by ideas about the completeness and meaningfulness of human life that run throughout the Dogon creation story.

The Dogon creation story as recounted above is only one of several versions of the myth found in Dogon culture. There are a wide variety of other versions, some far more evolutionary than the foregoing. Others are more creationist and represent Amma creating through the divine logos. Some of these versions may have been influenced by creation myths from other cultures. Nor are myths of this kind peculiar to Dogon culture. Similar myths seem to be widespread among the 44 or so ethnic groups that make up the Mande cluster in the area of West Africa that stretches from the Fouta Djallon to the Niger Bend and from the Atlantic Ocean to the Sahel. Possible links with ancient Egyptian mythology
have been explored (Temple, 1976). But, in the end, the Dogon creation story is best understood as a reflection of the advanced scientific knowledge of the people and as the fundamental basis of their philosophy, worldview, and religion.

On the advances in scientific knowledge of the Dogon in their creation story, Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen (1954), two pioneering students of Dogon thought and religion, have written as follows: “All these images seem to relate to an effort of discovery, an attempt to apprehend the infinitely small at its point of departure towards the immeasurably vast. In fact, the order of the heavens, as it is observed and understood by the Dogon, is no more than a projection, infinitely expanded, of events and phenomena which occur in the infinitely small.”

We shall see that the Dogon creation story explains the creation of the universe in the light of their knowledge of how life is procreated, that is, the reproduction of life in the womb. Thus we have images of the egg of the world, the womb of the world, the placenta, the amnion, the sperm, etc. If this is so, then the 22 basic categories cannot be understood outside the biology of human reproduction. The *yala* may refer to a supergenetic code, and the 22 *yala* signs may refer to 22 of the 23 pairs of chromosomes that carry the genes of the codes of life. Indeed, the Dogon speak of 22 pairs of basic categories, each comprising a male and a female. Twenty-two of the 23 chromosomes in the human body comprise male and female elements. It is also known that the 22 are grouped into four sections. The DNA is controlled by four bases: adenine, thymine, guanine, and cytosine. These correspondences are far too close to be ignored. Myth is not all fantasy; it is also a symbolic expression of the facts of life. This reality is clearly embedded in the Dogon creation story.

As both the reflection of and main pillar of Dogon philosophy and religion, the full meaning of the Dogon creation story can only be acquired by initiated elders as part of what the Dogon regard as *so dayi* (clear speech, or advanced knowledge of world order arrived at through progressive lifelong revelation and initiation). This initiation begins with *gid so* (front speech, or elementary knowledge) and proceeds like formal schooling through the intermediate stages of *benne so* (side speech) and *bolo so* (back speech) to *so dayi*.

An example of *so dayi* in print is Marcel Griaule’s book, *Conversations with Ogotemmêli* (1965), in which the blind hunter and sage, Ogotemmêli, reveals the framework of the Dogon system of thought and religion in a series of recorded interviews. Similar revelations have come from other sages, among them Tierno Bokar (Bâ and Cardaire, 1957) and Yébène Dolo (Ezra, 1988b). From these and from more recent sources, we now know that the secret knowledge that constitutes Dogon philosophy is based on solid scientific knowledge of the universe and that it is founded on four major pillars. Stated briefly, these are: first, the idea that the universe is a system of forces (dynamism); second, the idea that everything in the existence comes in pairs or twins (dualism); third, the idea that human beings are the centerpiece of all creation and hence that everything in the universe exists in human interest (anthropocentricism); and, finally, the idea that everything in the universe is a miniature of the whole (microcosmism).

For the Dogon, the vital force, *nyama*, which they see as pervading the universe, became personified in Amma, the creator. From Amma, this force has been transmitted to all beings. Humans received it through the Nommo and through the first human ancestors begotten by the Nommo. At death, *nyama* is let loose and must be contained in some way or it may cause harm. The Dogon do this by making *dege* (images) into which the *nyama* of the dead must be channeled. The main rituals of the Dogon are thus concerned with maintaining the continuity of *nyama* in its positive forms and with controlling all its negative manifestations.

Dogon religion reflects the four pillars of the people’s philosophy. It seeks to control the flow of the life force, *nyama*, in the interest of humankind as the center of all creation. In the visible aspects of Dogon religion—in its rituals, altars, and major icons, such as carved images of gods and other powers (*dege*), care is taken to represent the principle of twinniness associated with cosmic harmony, and one is at every stage reminded of the fact that in the smallest of things will be found the image of the universe, which in turn reflects the form and functioning of the human body.

Two main aspects of this religion stand out clearly. One is the directness of the relationship between every Dogon person and the creator, Amma. The second is the existence of a similar direct relationship between individuals and the community with other major bearers of *nyama*, through four fundamental cults: the totemic cult (Binu), the cult of the earth deity (Lébé), the cult of ancestors, and the cult of masks (*imina*).
Rites and other practices associated with all these aspects of Dogon religion involve first, the use of statues (dege) that represent the object of worship; second, the chanting of invocations or hymns (toro) that praise and petition the objects of worship in order of seniority (beginning with Amma) and that place them in the story of creation and of the maintenance of world order; third, the sacrifice of an animal or the making of an offering, usually on an altar (called ama after the creator, or omono). The altar usually comprises or includes a statue that shows the supplicant in one pose or another statue that indicates the need for which the sacrifice or offering is being made. The use of altars of this kind in Dogon religion is of special interest since they separate the Dogon and other Mande religious practices from what finds elsewhere in Africa.

The supreme god of Dogon religion, Amma, the creator, is not the withdrawn high god of the kind found in the religions and myths of many other African cultures. Amma, the source of life and rain, is ever present. The source of all nyama, he must be called upon directly over all key problems of life. Since all sacrifices ultimately go to him, altars are generally called ama after him. In all rituals, including those addressed to other powers, the toro (hymn or invocation to the divinities) that is chanted must begin by invoking the power and seniority of Amma and move from there down to the least important powers, namely human ancestors.

Although Amma is seen as the source of all nyama, he is by no means all-knowing, all-seeing, or all-good. It must be recalled that Amma himself is said in the Dogon creation story to have made some serious mistakes in the creation of the world. Amma is thus a supreme god who like human beings is subject to forgetfulness, mischief, and other caprices. Because of this belief in the fallibility of the supreme god, the Dogon feel the need to keep their petitions constantly in his view. This is where the statues that represent the petitioner in a pose that represents his or her needs come in. As a Dogon proverb tells us, “One cannot always pray and kneel at the altar, but the statue can.” The dege statues thus help to keep petitions constantly in the view of the imperfect god. In prayers or sacrificial offerings of blood or millet, the petitioner would take off his or her clothes and take the pose of the statue. This also happens in rituals associated with Nommo, the ancestors, and the other fundamental cults.

Other major objects found in and around Dogon altars include a leather string with a duge (a bead or stone) that represents the egg of the world and a bundo (a small clay vessel) for libations.

Daily life in traditional Dogon society is made up of a series of colorful rites that maintain the continuity of the people’s idea of the organization of the world. Other rites are rites of renewal whose purpose is to renew the life force (nyama) that flows with the blood in every human being and is part of the vital energy that controls human society at all levels and the universe at large.

The Dogon rites of continuity are of two types. The first are rites of passage of the kind found in all cultures across the world that mark key moments in the traditional life cycle from birth to death. The most representative of these rites of passage are funeral ceremonies, which are connected with beliefs in the continuity of the life force beyond death. The second type of rites of continuity consists of ceremonies that form part of four primary cults in Dogon culture, namely the cults of Binu, Lébé, Amma, and Dyougou. The most representative of these are the rites connected with the cult of Binu.

The Dogon funeral ceremony is the high point of a series of rites of passage that begin with birth and naming ceremonies and include initiation and marriage ceremonies. The cult of Binu exists to promote growth in the widest sense of the word and so do the rites associated with it.

The most important of the rites of renewal in Dogon culture is the very elaborate Sigui ceremony held every 60 years to mark the passage of one generation and the beginning of another. Another important ceremony of renewal comprises the death anniversaries, called Dama, held every year to mark the doings of one or more persons who died in the previous year.

The timing of the ceremony of Sigui is tied up with Dogon knowledge about the Dog Star, Sirius A, and the movements of its smaller but heavier companion around it. The Dogon believe that the big bang which led to the explosion and expansion of the seed of the world into the egg out of which everything in the world emerged began at the present location of Sirius. It takes Sirius B 60 years to orbit round Sirius A, and the Dogon believe that this period of time represents a significant span which affects the life of the world. People who were born during the last Sigui are on the threshold of old age while those who were old men at the last Sigui are either dead or on their
way to the spirit world. The 60-year period thus represents a major shift in generations and of the life of the world. It is therefore an excellent occasion to make sacrifices and invoke powerful forces for the renewal of the world. In essence, the Sigui ceremony reenacts the story of creation.

The annual death anniversaries are less elaborate but no less colorful or less connected with the Dogon story of the origins of the world order. Today, there are three kinds of Dama. The first is a general Dama, held in honor of several persons who died in the previous year. The second is a special grand Dama, held in honor of one great personality. The third is a special adapted Dama that is performed as theater.

It must be stated in conclusion that controversy surrounds much of the above reconstruction of the Dogon creation story, especially with regard to its scientific and philosophical underpinnings. The Hamitic myth which holds that no black race has ever created any complex structures of the imagination has misled some scholars (such as Temple, 1976) to seek explanations for the Dogon's advanced knowledge first (without success) in European and Arab sources, and ultimately in ancient Egyptian sources. Temple ends up settling for extraterrestrial visits from the region of Sirius A and B. But today, as old-fashioned stereotypes about Africa disappear in the face of more intimate knowledge of the continent and its culture, the Dogon creation story and the worldview, science, and philosophy that inform and are informed by it have come to gain better acceptance as one of the most original and fascinating mythic explanations of the universe, of our world, and of human culture.

Further Reading