



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1983 Volume II: Greek and Roman Mythology

Myth Connections

Curriculum Unit 83.02.08
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This unit is designed for ninth grade students who are reading four or five years below grade level. This is my first year teaching English to the low level, beige cluster freshmen students at Hillhouse High School, Working with these students, I have observed that they enjoy reading aloud and have vivid imaginations. They often keep each other enthralled with their much embellished stories of out-of-school events. These stories deal with their own or their friends' heroic misadventures. The reading, telling, retelling and writing of myths and folktales will help these students use talents they already have and help them improve writing skills and group participation skills.

Other objectives of this unit are to enable students to appreciate African and Greek myths; develop their perceptions and imaginations; enhance their cultural and literary background; improve their creative writing and oral presentation skills. The objective of expanding upon the students' cultural and literary backgrounds is particularly significant because the students whom I have describe appear to be fixed in their 'here and now' experiences, They have little or no knowledge about ages or cultures past. And, as many of these students are Afro-Americans, the study of African myths will help them to understand their unique culture better.

This unit is designed as an eight week unit of study. The first and second weeks Greek and Roman myths would be read aloud in class and discussed, The students would write summaries of the plots and information about the various gods, goddesses, and heroes in their notebooks. This information will be useful when they compare African and Greek stories, The third and fourth weeks would contain readings and discussions of African myths and a historical perspective of the oral tradition as it applies to both cultures. In the fifth week of study, the teacher and students would engage in telling Greek and African myths and legends. During the final weeks of the unit, the students would be working first in groups and then individually creating, writing and presenting their own myths or folktales. The majority of the recommended readings will be African folktales because experience has shown that the students have been introduced to Greek and Roman myths and are already familiar with some of the more popular stories, but they have not read many African tales.

The teacher who uses this curriculum should have some information and background on African myths. The teacher, being informed about how the myths and tales operated within the tribal societies of Africa, will be better able to guide the learning of the students. For that reason, this unit will provide information about the content of various myths and a brief history of the development of the oral tradition in Africa.

There is always a large stock of books on Greek myths in school bookrooms and libraries. For the purposes of

this unit, any of the Greek or Roman myths could be read and discussed. The myths recommended are Greek tales which contain obvious points of comparison with the suggested readings from African tales. The suggested readings include: "Pandora," 'The Odyssey II Daedalus and Icarus,') "Cupid and Psyche," "Atalanta," "Phaethon," and "Hercules." For students reading below grade level, two good sources for the Odyssey are Henry.I. Christ's The Odyssey of Homer and Scholastic Scope s dramatization of the Odyssey entitled The Homecoming of Ulysses' which appeared in their February 4, 1983 edition.

It will be more of a challenge for the teacher to provide African myths and tales for class reading because so few African myth anthologies are available. There are two ways to present African tales. First, the teacher might read and familiarize himself with African stories and, in the true oral tradition, tell these stories to the students, who will write the stories as they heard them in their notebooks. This method of presentation gives the students the opportunity to make their own books on African tales and they would observe how a story changes from the oral presentation to the written version. Another method of presentation would be to have available in the classroom a collection of African myths, legends and folktales garnered from public and school libraries and other sources. Each student would be responsible for reading and presenting a myth to the class and each student would write in his or her notebook the myths and stories as he or she heard them. Whichever method the teacher selects, the object is to have the students become familiar with a variety of African myths folktales which they can compare with the Greek; and Roman myths and folktales.

It has been estimated that there are over seven thousand African myths, legends and folktales. In order to understand why there are so many African tales, it is important for students to realize that Africa is the second largest continent in the world and is inhabited by over forty-six clans or tribes. There are an estimated 800 to 1,000 different languages spoken in Africa. In spite of the largeness of the continent, the many clans and languages, African myths and folktales have much in common. All African myths and folktales were developed in the oral tradition. Right up to the present time, African myths and legends were verbally handed down from one generation to the next. The oral tradition has existed on the African continent longer than on any other. Long before Homer and the earlier Greek poets, long before the coming of Europeans to Africa, and long before the development of writing, Africans expressed their feelings, beliefs and thoughts orally.

Both African and Greek myths and legends developed from an oral tradition but there are differences in the ways they evolved. The oral tradition in Africa preceded the oral tradition in Greece and it was developed for different purposes. During the time of Homer, the Greeks had a social structure which allowed them much leisure time; so storytelling was a popular entertainment, The people who could spellbind their audiences by telling a story were much in demand and much honored, The art of telling a tale and the stories themselves were developed for art s sake, The storyteller, or bard, in Greece could live well on the gifts bestowed upon him because of his talent. Africans living during the same period did not have a social structure which allowed much time for leisure. The clans were not very large, and everyone had to become involved in the day-to-day tasks which made survival possible. Each tribesman or woman was busy, either tending the crops, hunting, protecting the village, or cooking. Storytelling was developed for very pragmatic reasons. For example, in the Yoruba clan of Nigeria, ijala is the speech-like song which is part of their oral literature. It is chanted by talented men and women at religious ceremonies, "Other occasions of ijala chanting are during periods of hard work by farmers on their farms, Ijala then serves the purpose of 'music-while-you-work', cheering the farmer, making him work faster and longer and helping to make his work not a burden, but a delight for him: be it removal of weeds, the clearing of a fresh plot in the forest, the making of soil mounds with the hoe, the harvesting, of crops, or the tapping of the' palm trees for wine. ¹ Storytelling was believed to ward off evil spirits, help crops grow better and keep clan members healthy. Tales about tribal ancestors were told to elicit help from their spirits. These are but a few of the practical reasons for storytelling in Africa. At this point in

their history, the art of storytelling had not become art for art's sake.

Greeks and Africans living during the time of Homer had different ways of presenting their oral literatures. In African storytelling, the "audience" often told the story. For instance, one person working in the field would start the tale and because everyone was familiar with the story, each person in turn would add a part to the story until it was completed. When Homer or any other Greek or Roman storyteller recited his tale, he would sometimes be accompanied by a lute, but music was not a major part of the Greek or Roman oral tradition. Rattles, drums, bells, dancing, handclapping, and singing were an integral part of the African oral tradition. The following is a description of the 'performance' of an African epic:

. . . Episode by episode, the epic is first sung, then narrated. While singing and narrating, the bard dances, mimes, dramatically represents the main peripeties of the story. In this dramatic representation, the bard takes the role of the hero. The normal musical accompaniment consists of a percussion stick (nkwangatiro) which, resting on a few little sticks so as to have better resonance, is beaten by three young men." .They know large fragments of the epic, and, whenever necessary, help the bard to remember and to find the thread of his story. The narrator himself shakes the calabash rattle and carries anklet bells, . Members of the audience sing the refrains of the song and repeat a whole sentence during each short pause made by the bard. . . Members of the audience also encourage the reciter with short exclamations and handclapping or whooping. ²

Audience participation and musical and rhythmical accompaniment are the essential elements of African oral literature which distinguishes the African oral tradition from the Greek and Roman oral traditions.

Clans relied upon the memories of the older members of their groups to recite and perform the clan's folklore. This person became the clan historian and he or she would recite the history of the clan and sing the praise names of the chief. Each clan had a different title for its historian. Missionaries and other Europeans wishing to compile African myths, legends and folktales spoke to the historians of the clans. The performance of folklore was an avocation rather than a profession. Individuals who tried to make a living by reciting and chanting histories or folklores were regarded as no better than beggars.

Anthropologists and historians have been trying to explain the differences and similarities between the myths and legends of different cultures. It is generally thought that peoples living in the same age and faced with similar social problems expressed themselves in similar ways in their stories. The differences occur because of differing geographic conditions. Geography can account for the fact that there are numerous Greek and Roman myths and only a few African myths. It is believed that the Africans had as many myths in the beginning of their oral tradition as the Greeks and Romans. Greeks, Romans and other western European cultures wrote down the myths in 45 B.C. and therefore preserved them in their original form. Africa did not have a written record of their earliest myths and the myths which did exist at that early period have evolved into fables or animal-novelettes. The art of writing was unknown in Africa. 'This was due, not to any African inability, but simply to geographical isolation. Desert, forest and sea were effective barriers to the spread of written culture until modern times.'

While the number of myths from the African and Greek cultures may differ, both cultures had a similar concept of the beginning of history. Both cultures refer to a Golden age. During the Golden age, the earth needed no cultivation, there was no war, and man lived without sorrow, rich in flocks and free from toil. The Greek concept of the Golden age appears in Hesiod's *Works and Days* and in books one and fifteen of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In one African myth entitled 'The Separation of God from Man,' the end of the Golden age is explained. According to this myth, the earth and the sky were connected. Man did not have to grow crops. He

simply reached into the sky and took the foods he needed from the skygod. But man abused this privilege by taking more food than he needed. He wasted much of the food, and this angered the skygod. The skygod was further angered when the women of the village would constantly hit the sky and cause huge chunks of it to fall when they were pounding the 'fufu to make bread, For that reason, the skygod moved his domain away from earth,

Like 'The Separation of God from Man, most of the African myths illustrate the geocentrism of the African people. Africans are earthbound. Their lands and the earth are very real. In most of their myths man does not ascend to the sky, but the skygod descends to earth. The sun and the moon were once on earth.i Another African myth depicts the water and the sun with his wife, the moon, living on earth. They were great friends, The sun was always visiting the water, but the water would never return these visits. When the sun asked the water why he never visited him, the water replied that the sun s house wasn't big enough and if the sun wanted him to visit, the sun would have to build a very large yard, The sun went home and told his wife, the moon, what the water had said, The next day the sun built a huge yard so that his friend, the water, could visit. When the yard was completed, the sun invited the water. The water, accompanied by the fish and other water animals, began to flow in, He soon filled the yard and the water asked the sun if he still wanted him to visit. The sun replied, 'yes." More water and water creatures flowed in. The water was now up to the sun's head. Again the water asked the sun if he wanted the water to visit him, and the sun, not knowing any better, replied, "Yes." The water continued to flow until the sun and the moon had to perch on their roof. The water asked the same question and received the same answer, When the water overflowed the roof, the sun and the moon were forced to go up into the sky. There they have remained ever since. The Bushmen myth entitled 'The Sun and the Children'' depicts the sun living on earth. In this myth the sun is lying on the ground and the children, who are the heroes of the myth, are being admonished"by their mother to lift up the sun's armpit. "Children," she says, you must wait for the sun who is making us so cold, to lie down to sleep. Then approach him gently and, all together, lift him up and throw him into the sky. The three myths summarized in these two paragraphs can be found in the book *African Folktales* , edited by Paul Radin.

After reading several African myths certain similarities in the stories will become evident. The African myths simply and succinctly express joy in life and human activity. These myths, legends, and folktales reinforce the world affirming belief that life on earth is good. Man is depicted as completely and inextricably anchored in this world. There is stark realism in African myths. Man is shown in all his moods. The pleasant and not so pleasant aspects of daily life are told. While there is the tale of Kintu who undergoes many tests to obtain the woman he loves, for the most part there is little romanticism or sentimentality found in African myths.

Unlike the Greeks and Romans who have many myths and legends concerning the numerous virtues of a hero or demigod, African myths rarely depict the heroic deeds of one man. The African culture stresses the importance of the group over the individual. The individual is only important to the extent that he or she benefits the group. In fact, if the individual has a fault, the whole group suffers. For example, in one African myth the foolish king indulged the wishes of his greedy son and brought ruin to himself, his land, and the country was turned into ashes and dust. African societies do not deny the existence of individuals or individual traits, but require that these be subjugated to the best interests of the group. The individuals celebrated in the African folktales and legends are those who have earned recognition because of their relationship with the group. The qualities praised in the hero of a tale are those that are successful in furthering the overall interests of the clan,

There is one African epic about a hero named Mwindo. This epic is told in many parts of Africa. The most complete and poetic version of the Mwindo story is heard in Myanga country which is in the eastern part of

Zaire, The Mwindo epic has all the characteristics of a Greek or Roman epic. This epic could be compared to Homer's *Odyssey* or the tales of Hercules. The hero, Mwindo, has a miraculous birth, and he is a great hunter. His story depicts supernatural beings and the metamorphoses of human beings. Mwindo's travels take him to the underworld. Mwindo has a celestial journey where he is lifted into the sky and returned to earth by lightning after an adventurous year. The hero also possesses magical powers which enable him to perform Herculean tasks. All of the elements of the Mwindo epic can be discussed and compared to the trials of Odysseus or his son, Telemachus. And the feats of the African hero Mwindo can be compared with those of Hercules.

God is the supreme being in most African myths. Different Clans have different names for their supreme being. There are lesser gods and ancestors who are believed by Africans to play influential parts in their lives and therefore these lesser gods and ancestors' spirits appear in African myths. African peoples see themselves in the center of a triangle with the supreme being at the top of the triangle, the lesser gods in the left part of the triangle and the ancestor spirits and the tribal medicine man occupying the right part of the triangle. African man spends his life trying to maintain a balance of all the influential powers in the triangle and African myths often depict this struggle.

The names given to the supreme being in African myths represent what men think of his character and attributes. He is called Creator, Moulder, Giver of breath and souls, and God of Destiny. The supreme being is given such nature titles as The Bow in the Sky, The One Who Thunders, and The Fire-lighter. The divine greatness of the supreme being is indicated by such names as Ancient of Days, The Limitless, The First, The One Who Bends Even Kings, He Who Gives and Rots, The One Who Exists of Himself, and The One You Meet Everywhere.

God is also called The One Who Besets. If there was great suffering in an African's life, he or she would appeal to the medicine man in the village. If he could not stop the suffering or explain the cause of the suffering, the afflicted man or woman would appeal to the supreme being who is called The Ordainer of Human Lives. The Chaga people of Kenya tell a story about a man whose sons had all died and the father, being angry with God, went to the blacksmith to have the blacksmith make him the finest arrows. This Chaga man was going to shoot God. The man travelled to the farthest edge of the earth to the place where the sun rises. There he stood waiting for sunrise. Presently the Chaga man heard footsteps and people shouting that the gate must be opened for the king. The man saw a throng of shining people and he hid himself in fear. The Shining One was in the midst of the others. Suddenly the procession stopped because the shining people smelled the horrible stink of an earth man. They found the Chaga man and brought him before God. God already knew that the man wanted to shoot him so the God bade the man to shoot him. The man refused to shoot God. God, who already knew that the man wanted his sons, told the Chaga man that if he wanted his sons he could take them as the sons were standing right behind him. The man saw his sons but they were so radiant that he hardly knew them. The man did not take his sons because he felt they belonged to God. God told the man to return home and on his way home he must look carefully and he would find something that would please him very much. On the road home, the Chaga man found a cache of elephant tusks which made him rich for life. He married and had other sons who lived to support him in his old age. Like this tale, other African tales of visits to God usually contained a promise of good fortune if the supreme being's wishes were followed,

The most popular and prevalent of all the African stories are the animal fables. The African has always been in close touch with the animal world so that it is natural for them to create stories about animals. The Africans project human feelings on to the animals in the tales, The personifications of the animals reveal the attitudes and actions of men which are praised or condemned. These animals are characterized as being wise, cunning,

deceitful, greedy, jealous, kind, or treacherous, There are many fables about the leopard, the python, the goat, the tortoise, the hare, the chameleon, and the elephant. But, the most popular of all the animal tales are the stories about the spider called Anansi. He is the cleverest of animals and he appears in many African myths. In some of the stories about Anansi, he proves to be smarter than the gods, The Greeks and Romans also had tales about animals. Many of the animal stories are found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* . There is the story of the crow in Book II, lines 540-655, and the story of Picus who is changed into a woodpecker in Book XIV, lines 320 to 400.

There are many points of comparison between the myths, legends and tales of the Greek, Roman, and African cultures. The background information on the African oral literature and oral tradition will help the teacher guide the learning experiences of his or her students. As the students become familiar with the elements of comparison, they will begin to discover more and more similarities and differences between these ancient cultures. In order to provide the students with a geographical perspective, I have included a map of Africa which shows the locations of some of the African clans. Finding the locations of the clans was not an easy task because the names of the African countries are changed frequently. For example, one clan was Located in the Congo Republic which is now called Zaire. The students could draw their own maps of Africa and include them in their mythology notebooks.

Earlier in this unit I named some Greek stories that could be read and compared with African stories. Both cultures have many stories about people who were excessively jealous or curious. The story of "Cupid and Psyche" depicts the jealousies of Aphrodite and Psyche's sisters. The African story called "The quarrel between Oya and Oshun." Which can be found in Courlander's Tales of Yoruba Gods and Heroes, depicts the jealousy between the chief s two wives. Human curiosity can cause all kinds of problems for humans as noted in the Greek story Pandora,' and the African story "Shango and the Medicine of Eshu" which can be found in Courlander's Tales of Yuroba Gods and Heroes. These suggested readings and comparisons should get the teacher and his or her students started on a fascinating experience of learning about myth connections.

Names and Locations of Some African Clans

(figure available in print form)

Lesson Plan #1.

Oral Presentation

Objective: Students will present tales and myths in the oral tradition.

Preparation: Have a selection of books containing Greek, Roman, and African myths, legends, and folktales. The teacher might want to refer to and use some of the techniques for oral presentations and storytelling suggested in Viola Spolin's book, *Improvisation for the Theater* .

Procedure: Review the history of the oral tradition as it developed in the ancient cultures of Greece, Rome, and Africa. The teacher could present a dramatized version of a myth or folktale, Discuss how effective oral presentations are when the presenter uses movement, facial expressions and voice in dramatizing the story.

Norms must be established so that the presenter knows what is expected of him or her and the audience

knows what is of it. The audience should know that it is expected to listen carefully and respectfully to each presenter, and each student is to write a summary of each presenter's tale in his or her notebook.

The presenter should be prepared to tell a myth or tale to the audience. The presenter can retell any of the myths or tales studied in class or find a different story. The presenter should speak in a direct, loud voice so that the audience can hear the story. The presenter should use movement and facial and voice expressions where appropriate to dramatize the story. The presenter will have two to five minutes to recite his or her story.

When students are presenting material to each other for the first time, I have found it to be a less anxious experience for the presenter if the desks or chairs are arranged in a circle and the presenter does not have to stand unless he or she chooses to.

Follow-up Suggestions for Oral Presentations:

Students or classes who enjoy oral speaking may wish to share their oral presentations with other audiences, I would suggest that the teacher arrange for the class to go to an elementary school and present their dramatized stories to primary classes. Other audiences might be senior citizen centers or convalescent homes.

Lesson Plan #2

Group Writing

Objective: Students will work in group a myth or a tale.

Preparation: Discuss the African method of telling a story where each member of the group tells a part of the story. The teacher should then begin telling a story and then, in turn, ask each student to contribute to the story line until the tale is completed. Point out to the students that if this original story is to be preserved and told again, it would have to be written down. Tell the students that they will work in small groups creating and writing a myth or tale.

Procedure: Divide the class into groups of four or five members in each group, Direct each group to select a chairperson, a recorder, and a writer. It should be understood that while all members of the group will be required to do something, certain members of the group will have additional responsibilities. The chairperson is responsible for coordinating the overall efforts of the group and making sure that the group accomplishes its tasks within the allotted times. The recorder is to collect all writings completed by the members of the group and the writer is responsible for the final copy of the group's story or stories. The writer does not do all the rewriting himself or herself, but he or she can delegate rewriting assignments to the other members of the group. The teacher can then assign a particular type of myth or folktale to each group or let the group select the type of story it would like to create. (See *Procedures for Creating a Myth or Folktale*)

PROCEDURES FOR CREATING A MYTH OR FOLKTALE

I. Explanation Myth or Folktale

1. Each member of the group is to write five question sentences beginning with the word 'Why '

Example: Why is the sky blue?

2. Each member is to share his or her question sentence with the group.
- 3 The group is to select one question sentence and write a story explaining the question.
4. The group is to present its explanation myth to the class, Each member of the group is to take part in the presentation.

II. Hero Myth or Folktale

1. Each member of the group is to list five people he or she considers a hero, then list the characteristics which each hero possesses that make him or her a hero.
2. Each member of the group is to share his or her hero list and. characteristics with the group,
3. The group is to make up a composite hero and write a story which describes three adventures of this hero,
4. The hero story is to be presented to the class and each member of the group is to take part in telling the story.

III. Fantasy Myth or Folktale

1. Each member is to write a paragraph describing his or her perfect or Golden age.
2. Each member is to read is or her paragraph to the group.
3. The group writer, wit the help of the other members of the group, is to create a story describing the group's Golden age.
4. The group s story describing the Golden age is to be presented to the class. Each member of the group is to present a part of the story.

IV. Animal Myths or Folktales

1. Each member of the group is to select a different animal and write a paragraph explaining how that animal acquired its physical characteristics or reputation.
2. Each member of the group is to present his or her animal paragraph to the group. Each member of the group can offer suggestions or ask questions each animal story presented.
3. Once each member s story has been read, commented on, revised and rewritten, the group

writer is to compile into book form all of the group's animal stories,

4. The group is to present its animal stories to the class. Each member of the group is to tell his or her animal story.

Footnotes

1. Ulli Beier, ed., *Introduction to African Literature* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1967) p. 12.
2. Daniel Biebuyck and Kaombo C. Mateene, *The Mwindo Epic* (California: University of California Press, 1969), p. 13.
3. Geoffrey Parrinder, *African Mythology* (London: Hamlyn Publishing Group LTD, 1967), p. 13.

TEACHER BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Betteleim, Bruno. *Uses of Enchantment* . New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976. The author discusses the significance of myths, legends, folktales and other fantasy literature in the development of children. 310 pages.

Biebuyck, Daniel and Kahombo C. Mateene. *The Mwindo Epic* . California: University of California Press, 1969. The author presents the Mwindo epic in the Bantu text and in the English translation. In the thirty-nine page introduction, the author provides information about the oral literature of the Nyanga clan. 200 pages. This book is available at Yale s Cross Campus Library.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology* . New York: The Viking Press, 1959. Dr. Campbell, in very technical language, explains the importance of mythology as the basis for understanding the psychology, cultures and histories of the people of the world. There are references to African culture, 472 pages.;

Courlander, Harold. *Tales of Yoruba Gods and Heroes* . New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1973, The author provides a great deal of information about the history of the Yoruba clan. This book contains thirty-two myths, legends and folktales of the Yoruba people. The author has included a Pronunciation guide and glossary. 240 pages,

Ennis, Merlin, ed, *Umbundu: Folktale_s from Angola* . Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1962, This book is very helpful because the tales are categorized according to their subjects. Some of the categories are tales about parents and children, tales about married life, and tales of community life. The tales are short, 312 pages.

Frazer, Sir James George. *The Golden Bough* . New York: The Macmillan Company, 1960. This book is a very technical study of magic and religion in ancient cultures. Much information is given about the magic and religious rituals in Africa. 827 pages.

Grant, Michael. *Myths of The Greeks and Romans* . New York: New American Library, 1962. This author traces each Greek and Roman myth in chronological order back to its ancient source. This 394 page book contains maps of the ancient world and photographs of Greek and Roman art.

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Olson, Paul A., ed. *The Uses of Myth* , Illinois: The National Council of Teachers of English, 1968. This pamphlet contains seven position papers on the importance of myths in education. 57 pages.

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Parrinder, Geoffrey. *African Mythology* . London: The Hamlyn Publishing Group LTD, 1967. This book contains information about the myths of various African clans. Illustrates 139 pages,

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is a critical anthology of African literature It contains much information about the oral tradition in Africa.

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