

No one “African” culture exists. Instead, many different cultural groups live side by side on the same continent. Many of these cultures have existed for hundreds and even thousands of years. Some for much longer than that.

The creation myth in this section comes from the Yoruba people. The Yoruba gods make this myth appealing because they are caring and intelligent beings. It is also interesting to recognize that this myth shares similarities with the many other myths about people who suffer the damage and losses of a great flood.

The Yoruba people represent a major African culture that has roots extending back as far as 300 B.C., when a technologically and artistically advanced people lived just north of the Niger River. Today, more than ten million Yoruba people live in the southwest corner of Nigeria, from the Benin border north to the Niger River.

Like the ancient Greeks, the ancient Yoruba identified with the city-state in which they lived rather than with their larger culture. One Yoruba city-state was as likely to fight against another Yoruba city-state as against a neighboring culture.

Historically, Ife was the principal Yoruba city and was considered sacred. Religious ideas developed there and spread to other Yoruba city-states. The Yoruba religious system of prophecy even spread to other cultures in western Africa.

The mythology of the Yoruba people contains hundreds of gods, from major gods—the subjects of the following creation myth—to minor gods who protect local villages and regions. The Yoruba gods are human in form, thought, and way of life. They relate to one another as members of a large, human family, and they experience love, jealousy, anger, and sympathy. They enjoy human beings and like to spend time with them on earth. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Yoruba gods are sensitive to human problems and receptive to human prayers.

The Yoruba creation myth shares many characteristics with the creation myths of other cultures. For example, the creation of land is similar to the Japanese myth, the creation of human beings is similar to the Chinese myth, and the occurrence of a great flood is similar to the myths of the Greeks, the Sumerians and Babylonians, and the Scandinavians. The gods in the Yoruba myth are likable because they exhibit many of the best characteristics of the human personality, most notably creative intelligence and the ability to care about others.

The Yoruba creation myth is recorded in *The Treasury of African Folklore* (1975), edited by Harold Courlander, a noted scholar of the Yoruba. Courlander relates other Yoruba myths in *Tales of Yoruba Gods and Heroes* (1973).

PRINCIPAL GOPS

OLORUN: ruler of the sky; creator of the sun; most powerful and wisest god

ORUNMILA: oldest son of Olorun; god of prophecy; advisor to Obatala

OBATALA: favorite of Olorun; creator of land and human beings

OLOKUN; ruler of the sea

ESHU: messenger god