# African religions, mythic narratives and conceptual enrichment in the philosophy of religion

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**Abstract**

Myths, or sacred narratives, have been underexplored in mainstream philosophy of religion, which has also had little to say about African indigenous religions. These lacunae impoverish the philosophy of religion by diminishing its coverage both of the range of human religious possibilities and of the diverse modes through which religious ideas and worldviews are conveyed. With particular attention to Yorùbá religion, this article promotes and exemplifies a pluralistic narrative approach that draws upon mythology to facilitate philosophical reflection upon a wider array of religious traditions, for the dual purpose of doing conceptual justice to those traditions while also furthering the discipline's conceptual enrichment.

> [Myth] is a language of expressing truths or realities for which history does not supply a full explanation. (Mbiti (1988), 70)

The present article is a contribution to the expansion of philosophy of religion both methodologically and with regard to subject matter. Methodologically, it develops the

approach that I have elsewhere termed pluralistic narrative philosophy of religion (Burley (2019)). With regard to subject matter, it exemplifies a way of engaging with ideas from African religions – with Yorùbá religion as a focal instance. The approach is 'narrative' (or narratival) in the sense that it treats narratives – in this case myths – as a resource both for the exposition of religious ideas and for illustrations of ways in which those ideas may be reflected upon. And it is pluralistic in the sense that its primary objective is to bring into sharper relief the heterogeneity – the 'radical plurality' – of perspectives, worldviews or 'ways of being human' that so easily gets overlooked when philosophical inquiry remains constrained by prevailing methods, interests and academic agendas.[1] The critical philosophical potential of this pluralistic approach resides in its ability, not to defend or advocate any particular religious or nonreligious 'truth claims', but rather to shine a critical light on assumptions that are all too frequently taken for granted, both in mainstream philosophy of religion and in Western society more generally, about what religion typically consists in – assumptions that tend to privilege some forms of religion (especially those that philosophers call 'theism') while marginalizing others.

The task of bringing radical plurality into clearer view would be of limited philosophical interest if it involved merely pointing out diverse religious beliefs and practices and noting how these differ from the beliefs and practices that have constituted the mainstay of philosophical inquiry hitherto. What is also needed is a means of showing that the forms of religion that have routinely been overlooked are themselves philosophically and conceptually rich and illuminating – of showing, that is, that they are not mere exotic quirks but are, in many instances, profoundly meaningful expressions of religiosity and ways of responding to the human condition. The point is to argue that these forms of religion – which are themselves likely to incorporate philosophical and ethical elements – are worth taking seriously. This is not equivalent to arguing that they ought to be accepted and adhered to by

oneself or one's readers. Some philosophers may wish to pursue that further question. But the pluralistic approach I am developing is principally concerned with elucidation, rather than with advocacy or repudiation.[2] In this article, I argue that turning to myths is among the methods of furthering this elucidatory objective.

Writing in 2002, Kevin Schilbrack lamented the fact that studying myths from a philosophical perspective 'is today nearly nonexistent' (2002, 1). Although the philosophy of religion might be a natural home for reflection on myths, there is little such reflection to be found, especially within Anglophone philosophy (ibid., 2). This dearth, Schilbrack proposes, has much to do with a nexus of factors, chief among which are two. One is the predominant 'focus on religious beliefs' – where beliefs, being construed primarily in terms of intellectual assent to isolable propositions, are 'deracinated' from their surrounding narrative and ritual contexts (ibid., 2, 3). The other factor – and Schilbrack is far from alone in making this observation – is the religiously constricted scope of the bulk of work in philosophy of religion. There is nothing necessary or inevitable about this constriction; it is just that the attention of philosophers of religion, whose research and teaching are driven by Western academic concerns, has gravitated towards a cluster of issues pertaining to a 'theism' that, if not explicitly Christian, is often implicitly so. Thus, even when the inquiry strays beyond the confines of theistic 'belief', its cross-cultural and multireligious ambitions tend to remain hamstrung by its Western-centric preoccupations.

Much has changed in philosophy of religion since Schilbrack's remarks were first published. The pressure in favour of a discipline that is more religiously and culturally diverse and more methodologically adventurous has gained momentum.[3] Still, however, the philosophical study of myths and of narrative sources more generally remains at a rudimentary stage, with considerable potential yet to be tapped. Also lacking in the philosophy of religion are sustained treatments of African traditions. In recent years, two

major anthologies are among the publications that have added a chapter on African religions (see Wiredu (2010), (2013)), but in the field of philosophy of religion as a whole, including the academic journals, African religions are conspicuous by their absence. This is a serious shortcoming, since it diminishes the range of topics available for analysis and, arguably, impoverishes the conception of religion with which philosophical researchers are operating.

Following this introductory section, my discussion will proceed as follows. I begin by examining the term 'African traditional religion' and appraising some of the criticisms it has received. I then consider the question of what sources are suitable for informing a philosophical inquiry into African religions, giving particular attention to myths. The subsequent two sections sharpen the inquiry's focus, investigating the traditional religion of the Yorùbá people and how an understanding of the central concept of òrìṣà may be deepened through engagement with mythic narratives. A key theme running through the article will be the potential for conceptual enrichment that derives from the philosophical study of African religions – an enrichment that is bound up with the demands of doing conceptual justice to those religions and to the ways of thinking and ways of being that they embody.

**'African traditional religion'**

The term 'African Traditional Religion' (sometimes abbreviated as 'ATR') was first coined by Geoffrey Parrinder in 1954 and was subsequently adopted by other scholars, both African and non-African.[4] Among those who have developed the term, of special note is E. Bọlaji Idowu, who sought to define what African traditional religion consists in by reference to 'five component elements'; these he characterized as 'belief in God, belief in the divinities, belief in spirits, belief in the ancestors, and the practice of magic and medicine, each with its own consequent, attendant cult' (Idowu (1973), 139). Without necessarily calling the legitimacy of

these five categories into question, certain other scholars have taken issue with the term 'African traditional religion', primarily on the grounds that, as they see it, it connotes something homogeneous and static when the reality is far more heterogeneous and fluid. Although my intention here is not to provide an exhaustive analysis of the debate, a brief consideration of the arguments on both sides is necessary if we are to avoid using terminology in an uncritical manner.

It should be registered at the outset that none of those who approvingly use the term 'African traditional religion' would deny that it encompasses multiple phenomena. As Parrinder himself acknowledges, 'there must be great diversity of religion' amid the millions of people who inhabit the African continent (1954, 10). And Idowu recognizes that attentiveness to regional variations is essential if any study of African traditional religion is to be more than superficial, for '[i]t is foolhardy to generalize on Africa' (1973, 78). The point of contention between those who favour the term and those who reject it is thus not whether there is a diversity of religion in Africa; rather, it is the extent of that diversity and the degree to which the term 'African traditional religion' might misleadingly mask both that extent and the mutability of the forms it encompasses.

The terms 'traditional' and 'religion' (in its singular form) have each been targets of criticism. For instance, the authors of a recent introductory textbook on African religions write that the problem with 'traditional' is its implying 'that African religions are fixed and timeless, or not part of modernity' (Grillo, van Klinken and Ndzovu (2019), 17). Consequently, these authors opt for the term 'African indigenous religions' instead. This does not constitute a dramatic shift, however, since proponents of the term 'African traditional religion' typically define 'traditional' with reference to indigeneity. As Idowu remarks, for example, what he means by 'traditional' is '"native", "indigenous", that which is aboriginal or foundational, handed down from generation to generation' (1973, 104). Although Idowu

does not emphasize the changing nature of religion, he does maintain that what he is describing is something that, having been inherited from previous generations, is then renewed by those who live and practise it, making a connection between past and present as well as with 'eternity' (ibid.). Borrowing a phrase from A. C. Bouquet, Idowu cautions that 'one must be careful not to engage oneself in the fruitless task of studying "fossil religion"' (Idowu (1973), 105). Concurring with Idowu, other authors have affirmed that African traditional religion is, indeed, 'not a fossil religion (a thing of the past), but a religion that Africans today have made theirs by living it and practicing it' (Awolalu (1976), 275).

So the case for preferring 'indigenous' to 'traditional' is hardly decisive, for there is nothing in either term that precludes the ideas of innovation, adaptation or modification in response to the pressures of modernity. The main purpose of each term is to draw a rough and ready distinction between, on the one hand, the religious traditions that, as far as we can tell, originated on the continent of Africa and, on the other hand, those that have, over the centuries, become prevalent despite having originated elsewhere, most notably Christianity and Islam. Treating this distinction as merely provisional is important, since there has been significant intermingling of, and mutual influence between, the various religions with a presence in Africa. Nevertheless, it remains descriptively useful to be able to refer, collectively and concisely, to the forms of religion whose origins antedate the introduction of the two large Abrahamic faiths. Provided one knows how the terms are being used, both 'traditional' and 'indigenous' are capable of serving that purpose.

As for the term 'religion', a common complaint is that this underplays the plurality that is characteristic of the African cultural, or multicultural, milieu. Without wishing to deny the existence of certain 'common features or themes', opponents of the singular term 'religion' seek to highlight 'the tremendous capacity of the religious imagination to create', in African contexts, 'diverse but equally meaningful and effective systems of belief' (Grillo, van

Klinken and Ndzovu (2019), 17). Since both sides in the debate agree that there are similarities as well as differences between the multiple religions, or religious traditions, that are rooted in the African continent, the disagreement is really over whether these similarities are sufficiently strong and durable to warrant the application of 'religion' as a singular noun.

Parrinder was aware of this issue when he first introduced the term 'African traditional religion', and he advanced two key considerations in support of the singular term. First, he offered the reminder that internal diversity is far from unique to the category of African religion, for a religion such as Christianity or Islam, let alone Buddhism or Hinduism, is no less internally ramified into multiple sects, movements or denominations (1954, 10). Second, Parrinder drew attention to the similarities in religious beliefs and customs that cut across geographical and ethnic divides, possibly as a result of communication and contact between African peoples over long periods of time (11).

As in the debate between those who prefer 'traditional' and those who prefer 'indigenous', the most important factor is not whether the singular term 'religion' or the plural 'religions' is used, but rather the acuity of attention that inquirers give to the specificities of the phenomena at issue. The use of a singular noun does not automatically imply a lack of diversity among the phenomena to which the noun applies, just as the use of a plural noun does not, in itself, tell us anything about the nature of the diversity that is being alluded to. In each case, it is only sustained comparative analysis that can bring out the particularities of, and areas of overlap between, the relevant forms of religion. For my own purposes in this article, it will not be necessary to draw any sharp demarcation between the terms 'traditional' and 'indigenous', and, in the case of the terms 'religion' and 'religions', the most appropriate term to use will depend largely on the context. I do, however, take seriously the need to avoid making loose claims concerning African traditional or indigenous religions in general. For this reason, I shall narrow the focus and concentrate specifically on

certain aspects of Yorùbá religion and myth. This will constitute a case study, but not one from which hasty overgeneralized conclusions should be drawn. As a way into the topic, I turn in the next section to a consideration of sources for the study of African indigenous religions, including the traditional religion of the Yorùbá people in particular.

**Sources for the study of African indigenous religions**

A feature of African indigenous religions that is often cited as a point of contrast in relation to Christianity and Islam is the predominance of oral over written modes of transmission. Unlike the Abrahamic faiths, which are closely associated with specific canons of scripture, the teachings of non-Abrahamic African religions are said to be imprinted not on paper but in the memories as well as the 'oral history, rituals, shrines and religious functions' of practitioners (Awolalu (1975), 53). To some extent, this situation has begun to change over the last hundred years or so, as an increasing number of stories and other aspects of traditional African cultures have been written down or documented in visual or aural media. Still, however, the differences between the indigenous religions, on the one hand, and the more scripturally oriented religions, on the other, remain significant, and this has implications for how the indigenous religions are studied, whether philosophically or by other disciplines.

In a discussion of African traditional philosophy, Kwasi Wiredu observes that its most readily available sources 'are communal proverbs, maxims, tales, myths, lyrics, poetry, art motifs, and the like' (Wiredu (1997), 36), and much the same is true of African traditional religion. In comparison with written texts, all the oral forms of transmission tend to exhibit a higher degree of flexibility, in the sense that they are liable to undergo change over time and to occur in multiple versions.[5] Of the varieties of transmission mentioned by Wiredu, the most extensive and encompassing are myths, for these often incorporate instances of the other modes of expression, such as poems or proverbs. It is also the case that myths are themselves

often transmitted not merely by means of verbal recitation, but through enacted performances that can utilize singing, dancing and the wearing of elaborate masks and costumes. In these ways, 'abstract thought is transformed into tangible, lived experience that makes religious principles vivid and real' (Grillo, van Klinken and Ndzovu (2019), 20).

With reference to Yorùbá mythology in particular, Ọmọ́fọlábọ̀ Àjàyí describes how, in public performances, different mythic figures are represented by distinctive dance movements, which in turn are associated with specific animals or other natural phenomena. For example, the divine being known as Ọbàtálá is embodied in a dance that involves bending forwards and taking slow deliberate steps, conveying Ọbàtálá's calm demeanour, characterized by humility, patience and placidity. 'The dignified coolness' of these movements reflect his affinity with the snail, Ọbàtálá's 'sacred animal', which itself is, by nature, '"cool," wet, and slow' (Àjàyí (1998), 70). In stark contrast, the dance of another divine being, Ṣàngó, is spasmodic and energetic. In one version of the dance, a female performer moves her limbs rapidly and convulsively, signifying 'passion' and 'fury', 'like the flash of lightning' with which Ṣàngó, as the Yorùbá god of thunder, is associated (Àjàyí (1998), 92).[6] In another version, performed among the Yorùbá diasporic community in Cuba, a male dancer stands tall with his shoulders back and holding in one hand a double-headed axe, the ritual symbol of Ṣàngó. He struts confidently, occasionally pausing with hands on hips before vigorously jerking his body in semi-circular movements and twirling the axe around.[7] In each version of the dance, fire is near at hand, and flaming sticks are often held by Ṣàngó dancers, again displaying Ṣàngó's association with lightning, combustion and erotic energy. In Yorùbá myth, fire is said to pour out of Ṣàngó's mouth when he speaks (Beier (1980), 27).

An important question, of course, is how any of this oral, narrative or performed material can constitute a valuable philosophical resource. A myth or dance, for example, is evidently

showing us something about the religious culture under examination. As Jacob Olúpọ̀nà notes, '"myth" refers to narratives that are regarded by a people as sacred, describe a portion of the worldview of that people, and provide significant insight into the people's rationale for their customs, traditions, beliefs, and practices' (2014, 6). But a myth is neither articulating philosophical arguments nor propounding 'truth claims'; or, at any rate, it is not doing so in a way that could readily be comprehended without extensive (and contestable) interpretive work. So what, philosophically, is to be done with such material? The answer depends, inevitably, upon one's conception of philosophy. For many philosophers, in the context of the study of religion, philosophy's 'distinctive contribution' consists in 'the evaluation of truth claims, which means the assessment of reason-giving and arguments' (Schilbrack (2014b), 25). According to this view, the tasks of understanding, interpreting and describing the phenomena being investigated can, at most, be a preliminary activity in a two-stage process: there is first 'a descriptive stage that includes phenomenology, along with hermeneutics, and then a critical stage of evaluating the religious phenomena according to the normative criteria of the philosopher' (Schilbrack (2014a), 386). Elsewhere I have argued that this two-stage model oversimplifies matters by underestimating the extent to which an approach to philosophy that is deemed to be purely descriptive can itself serve a critical function (Burley (2020), esp. Ch. 2). There is insufficient space to rehearse that argument here, but, in brief, what it involves is the making of a case for an approach that is critically descriptive and radically pluralist, in the sense that was briefly outlined in the opening two paragraphs of this article. That is, by describing and bringing out the 'possibilities of sense' that are discernible in alternative worldviews or perspectives or forms of life, a critical light may be cast upon the assumptions that are operative within the field of philosophy of religion itself and perhaps within large swathes of Western culture more generally.[8]

The crucial point to note is that the task of expanding the conception of religious possibilities that has predominated in the philosophy of religion is assisted by deepening our understanding of forms of religion that have hitherto been largely neglected. African indigenous religions in general, and Yorùbá religion as a specific case, are among those neglected forms; it is by inquiring into their mythic dimensions that, I propose, a richer understanding of these religions is achievable. The result need not be any dramatic disruption of prevalent assumptions in the philosophy of religion. But insofar as the standard conceptions of religion within the field are based on Western-centric modes of theism, the opportunity for such disruption, and for a corresponding conceptual enrichment, is at least opened up.

Now, having gone some way towards justifying the consideration of mythic sources in the philosophical study of African religions, the next two sections devote closer attention to the traditional religion of the Yorùbá people and especially to the concept of òrìṣà, which lies at the heart of that religious culture.

**Yorùbá religious culture and the concept of òrìṣà**

Although the name Yorùbá has been used as a self-designation only since the late nineteenth century, the cultural group to which it refers has a much longer history, with a 'classical' period that stretched from the eleventh to the sixteenth century CE (Peel (2016), 3). The traditional homeland of the Yorùbá people, known as Yorubaland, spans the modern-day West African countries of Nigeria, Benin and Togo. Islam began to get a foothold in Yorubaland from around the seventeenth century, and Christianity from the mid-nineteenth, though both of these major religions probably had some presence in the region in earlier centuries (Peel (2016), 3, 157; Brenner (2000), 53–55). The indigenous religion of the Yorùbá people, though not as prevalent as it once was, retains a strong cultural influence both

in Yorubaland itself and among Yorùbá diasporic communities. These latter communities are especially sizable in Brazil, Cuba and several other Caribbean islands as well as in parts of the United Kingdom, USA and Canada (Falola and Childs (2004)), largely as a consequence of the nineteenth-century trans-Atlantic slave trade but also on account of more recent migration. Owing to this widespread dispersal, it has been argued that Yorùbá religious culture has a legitimate claim to be regarded as a world religion (Olupona and Rey (2008), 3).

Central to Yorùbá religion are the myths that recount activities of the òrìṣà. So important are the òrìṣà in this context that it has been proposed that Yorùbá religion be referred to as 'òrìṣà religion' (Peel (2016), 4) or as 'òrìṣà devotion' (Olupona and Rey (2008)) or, indeed, as 'Òrìṣàism' (Taiwo (2008), 103).[9] I shall not be making a judgement on which, if any, of these terms should be preferred; what is important is that we notice the salience of the notion of òrìṣà among the Yorùbá people while also recognizing the difficulty of providing an account of what the òrìṣà are (or what òrìṣà means).

As a starting point, we might note that common translations of the term òrìṣà include 'deities' (Olúpọ̀nà (2011)), 'divinities' (Idowu (1962)), 'gods' (Olupọna (2014)) and 'spirits' (Awolalu (1979), Olupona and Rey (2008)). Less commonly, òrìṣà have been referred to as 'angels' (Karade (1994)) or as 'intermediaries between man and the Supreme Being' (Awolalu (1979), 5). Many commentators refrain from trying to render òrìṣà into English, concurring with Ulli Beier that any 'simple translation of this term would be impossible and misleading' (1975, 34). Adding that the òrìṣà are 'multi-layered', in the sense that they exist 'simultaneously on many levels', Beier observes that many of them are associated with natural objects or forces as well as being regarded as historical figures or as 'archetypes' in Carl Jung's sense of this term (Beier (1975), 34; cf. Jung (1969)). We have already seen hints of this 'multi-layered' texture of the òrìṣà in the examples of Ọbàtálá and Ṣàngó that were adduced in the previous section. There we saw that, in the case of Ọbàtálá, a dance

embodying his character instantiates the virtues of peacefulness and humility while also suggesting the natural coolness and moistness of a snail; and in the case of Ṣàngó, the dance pulsates with his fiery, thunderous, aggressive and sexual qualities, thereby encapsulating affinities between modes of volatility at the emotional, behavioural and meteorological levels. In each case, the dances are constituent elements within an intricate cultural framework that resonates with stories in which Ọbàtálá and Ṣàngó, along with numerous other òrìṣà, inhabit a narrative landscape that resembles and represents the everyday human world while, at the same time, being replete with symbolic features and events.

When Awolalu and others describe the òrìṣà as messengers or intermediaries who convey the sacrifice to the Supreme Being, the term 'Supreme Being' is being used to denote Ọlọrun – the 'Lord of heaven' or 'Owner of the sky' (Peel (2000), 116) – who is also known as Olódùmarè, Ọlọ́fin or, confusingly, sometimes simply as Òrìṣà.[10] In contrast to the notion of intermediaries, an alternative way of conceptualizing the relation between the multiple òrìṣà and the Supreme Being is in terms of aspects or partial representations. On this view, 'Each òrìṣà is the universe looked at from another angle' while 'Olódùmarè is the sum total of all the complexities, … the universe concentrated into one intelligence' (Beier (1975), 33).[11] To embellish this multi-aspectual conception, Beier cites a Yorùbá myth in which a slave of the Supreme Being who secretly despises him rolls a boulder onto his master from a hilltop, smashing the Supreme Being into a thousand pieces. An òrìṣà known as Ọ̀rúnmìlà, who is regarded as 'the first diviner and deity of divination' (Drewal (2016), 333), gathers together as many of the pieces as he can find, placing 'them in a big calabash' (Beier (1975), 34). The partially reconstructed figure is termed Òrìṣà-ńlá, the 'Great Òrìṣà', which is one of the names by which Ọbàtálá is known. Meanwhile, the pieces that Ọ̀rúnmìlà was unable to collect 'remain scattered throughout the world' (ibid.). As Beier points out, 'The meaning of the myth is made more poignant when the slave is named in some versions as Èṣù, the òrìṣà

who symbolises fate'; then the apparently murderous act is transformed from 'a vicious piece of revenge' into 'a necessary process', for the creation of the world would not be possible without 'the splitting-up of the divine force' (ibid.).

In several respects, the myth recounted by Beier is perplexing. On the one hand, it appears to concern the origin of the multiple òrìṣà out of the Supreme Being. On the other hand, however, the plot of the narrative requires that certain òrìṣà already exist prior to the Supreme Being's fragmentation into myriad pieces: Èṣù has to exist in order to roll the boulder down the hillside, and Ọ̀rúnmìlà has to exist to gather up the fragments. Literal-minded readers are thus apt to ask where Èṣù and Ọ̀rúnmìlà came from if they pre-existed the multitude of other òrìṣà. But literal-mindedness is often one way of obscuring more fruitful interpretations of a myth. In this case, the myth can be understood as encapsulating, among other things, the thought that the creation of the world – a world constructed out of and populated by divine fragments – was not, or need not have been, motivated by an unequivocally benign intention on the creator's part. Contesting Beier's suggestion that if Èṣù's attempt to kill his master was necessary for the world's creation then it ceases to be a revengeful act, one might propose that the myth does not represent these options as mutually exclusive: it could be the case that, according to the myth, an act of revenge or ill will was precisely what was needed to bring the world into being. And this need not be construed as though it were a scientific hypothesis about the beginning of the universe. Instead, it can be read as something more like a poetic image: a way of vividly conveying the highly philosophical thought that the world is deeply ambivalent, comprising both destructive and constructive aspects, which may often be hard to differentiate. By putting it in these terms, I do not mean to imply that what I have described as a 'poetic image' can simply be reduced to a non-poetic and non-imagistic paraphrase: it is likely to be the case that the poetic image – the myth itself – bears its meaning in a distinctive manner. As Wittgenstein is reported to

have remarked in a somewhat different context, 'It says what it says. Why should you be able to substitute anything else?' (1966, 71).[12]

To pursue this theme of myths embodying, not philosophical arguments, but visions of the world that may rightly be termed philosophical, let us, in the next section, further examine some of the mythology and ritual surrounding the figure of Ọbàtálá, along with his consort Yemòó.

**Myths of Ọbàtálá and Yemòó**

The most literal English translation of the name Ọbàtálá would be 'Lord of white cloth' or 'King in white clothing', which is a title associated with purity and embodied physically in the white garments traditionally worn by Ọbàtálá's votaries (Sadiku (1996), 128). It has been claimed that the name also means 'Lord of Visions', and Ọbàtálá is indeed regarded as an inspirer of oracles – one who 'unveils futurity by means of visions' (Ellis (1894), 39; see also Lele (2012), 44).[13] Though often described as the 'foremost' or 'highest-ranking' member of the Yorùbá pantheon (Adepegba (2008), 113; Olúpọ̀nà (2011), 145), there is an ambiguity in this status. As outlined in the previous section, there is a prominent myth in which Ọbàtálá, rather than being the Supreme Being himself, is assembled from many of the latter's fragments, following Èṣù's act of violence. In other myths, Ọbàtálá's primary role is that of a 'moulder' or 'fashioner' who, by the power given to him by the Supreme Being, forms human children out of clay (Olúpọ̀nà (2011), 147–148). It is in this capacity as a sculptor of people that Ọbàtálá, along with his principal wife Yemòó (or Yemọjá),[14] is invoked and propitiated by those who pray, either for themselves or for others, to have children and that the children may be strong and healthy. A prayer, uttered as part of a regular morning ritual by worshippers of Ọbàtálá and Yemòó, includes the line 'May infertile women conceive and give birth to children!' (quoted in Olúpọ̀nà (2011), 145), and it is common, in the presence of

pregnant women, for Yorùbá people to express the wish that Òrìṣà-ńlá (i.e. Ọbàtálá) may 'fashion for us a good work of art' (Awolalu (1979), 21).

Some interpreters are apt to see in prayers of the sort just described, and in the rituals that often surround them, a crude transactional performance, in which the òrìṣà are praised only insofar as they are expected to impart material benefits to the community, whether in the form of children or increased harvests or other blessings. For example, Olusegun Oladipo observes, with regard to religion in African culture in general, that 'the people fear or respect the divinities, they acknowledge their powers, but only to the extent that the divinities are able "to prove themselves" by delivering the desired goods'; he then adds that what such people display 'can hardly be regarded as a religious attitude' (Oladipo (2004), 358). These assertions closely echo those of another African philosopher of religion, Kwasi Wiredu, whom I cited earlier. With particular reference to the Akan people of Ghana, Wiredu denies that the attitude they exhibit towards the 'extra-human beings' or 'minor gods' that feature in their mythology is a religious one. 'On the contrary', Wiredu opines, 'it is utilitarian for the most part' (Wiredu (1998), 191–192).

A striking feature of the remarks from Oladipo and Wiredu that I have just cited is the confidence they exude concerning what does and what does not count as religion – or as a genuinely religious attitude. To pursue that issue thoroughly would require more space than I have here. For present purposes, it is enough to say that the assumption that a transactional or 'utilitarian' motivation is incompatible with a religious attitude is highly questionable. As several philosophers have pointed out in debates over the distinction between religion and superstition, motives in matters of religion are, to say the least, often mixed (Tilley (2000); Bloemendaal (2006), 407). Under these circumstances, to dismiss as categorically non-religious an act that is motivated either by fear or by the belief that performing a given ritual makes a certain desired outcome (such as becoming pregnant or giving birth to a healthy

child) more likely to occur, is not to make a neutral observation about the concept of religion; rather, it is to affirm a stipulative definition that bears only a tenuous relation to the messy realities of actual religious life (Tilley (2000), 349). Examples from African religions, including Yorùbá attitudes towards the òrìṣà, could usefully be adduced to drive this point home, provided one is not already invested in a stipulative definition that precludes mixed motives a priori. But I shall leave further discussion of that issue for another occasion.

When a divine being, such as Ọbàtálá, is conceptualized as being responsible for giving form to children, a question is liable to arise in connection with children who are born with physical or intellectual impairments. Some philosophers might be tempted to call this an aspect of the problem of evil – the problem of how it is that, if God is good and loving, suffering and affliction enter into human life. Embedded in the mythology surrounding Ọbàtálá are at least two distinct responses to this question. One response consists in the claim that Ọbàtálá creates 'irregularities' in human beings precisely to demonstrate his own power (Olúpọ̀nà (2011), 148), to show that he is capable of shaping the clay with which he works into diverse configurations. To conceive of Ọbàtálá in this way is not to view him as cruel or capricious, for the idea that he sometimes deliberately deviates from the standard mould is accompanied by the conviction that he offers special protection to those with impairments or deformities. As Olúpọ̀nà indicates, this conception of atypically configured people as having a special status has traditionally manifested in their being accorded privileges not enjoyed by people who are 'perfectly functioning' (ibid.). For example, 'albinos (ààfín) and those with hunched backs (abuké) are treated as sacred beings'; not only is it considered offensive to make fun of them, but they are permitted to take whatever they like from any market without having to pay: 'Such is the influence of Ọbàtálá over his creations' (ibid.).

The second mythological response to the question of how it is that people with mental or physical anomalies come into being is, on the face of it, less flattering to Ọbàtálá. It portrays

him as becoming so thirsty while moulding human figures out of clay that he pauses to make some palm wine. Having drunk the wine and returned to shaping the figures, 'his fingers grew clumsy' and he ends up making numerous slips, leaving many of the figures with misshapen bodies, missing limbs and so on (Courlander (1973), 34–35). When he sobers up, Ọbàtálá feels remorse for his clumsiness and vows to abstain from palm wine and to become 'the special protector of all humans who have deformed limbs or who have otherwise been created imperfectly' (ibid., 35). According to the myth, it is this vow that has inspired followers of Ọbàtálá to avoid palm wine themselves and has encouraged 'the lame, the blind and those who had no pigment in their skin' to call upon Ọbàtálá when in need of help (ibid.).

In these myths concerning the origin of physical and mental impairments or 'irregularities', we see how religious and social attitudes – in this case, towards disabled people or people with nonstandard appearances – can be articulated in narrative form. As John Mbiti proposes in the passage that I used as the epigraph for this article, myths constitute a linguistic means 'of expressing truths or realities for which history does not supply a full explanation' (Mbiti (1988), 70).[15] If the phrase 'truths or realities' seems presumptuous, we might substitute 'values, beliefs and commitments' instead. The important point is that the myths do not simply give narrative expression to values, beliefs and commitments that could be formulated more precisely in succinct propositions; rather, they imbue the values, beliefs and commitments with the sense that they have, making them what they are and giving them a depth that they would otherwise lack. We may, for example, observe from the ways in which certain unusual people are treated within a society that there are particular norms in play that regulate that treatment, but by coming to see that those norms are given conspicuous and evocative embodiment in a people's mythic framework, we gain a heightened appreciation of the norms at issue.

**Concluding remarks on the conceptual enrichment of philosophy of religion**

The principal purposes of this article have been (a) to advance the case for the relevance of myths to the philosophical study of religion and (b) to argue that attention to mythological sources is one means by which African religions in particular may become amenable to philosophically engaging discussion. I have framed this project as an instance of pluralistic narrative philosophy of religion because it is part of a larger enterprise to expand and diversify philosophical inquiry into religion, and hence to do conceptual justice to religious plurality, by utilizing the narrative resources that are so pervasive throughout multiple religious traditions.

Our examination of myth in relation to Yorùbá religious culture has brought into view several important features that could usefully be explored further, in relation both to Yorùbá settings and to other indigenous traditions within and beyond Africa. Especially notable among these features are the following three. First is the intimate association between mythic narratives and ritual performance, whether in the form of dance, collective prayer or other types of ritual activity. It is widely accepted among scholars of religion that myths and rituals are often closely entwined. Indeed, some theorists have speculated that it is from rituals that myths invariably originate (e.g. Raglan (1955)), though appraising such theories is not among my objectives here.[16] What is evident even from the relatively short span of this article is that rituals can give visible expression to mythic themes – and, in that respect, can embody elements of a religious worldview. This is the second notable feature to have emerged from my discussion, namely the worldview-expressing capacity both of myths and of the ritual activities that accompany them. Of the myths considered in this article, the worldview-expressing theme is most clearly exemplified in the tale involving the fragmentation of the 'Supreme Being' and his partial reconstruction in the form of Ọbàtálá. In that story we see indications of a nuanced conception of life according to which destruction and reconstitution

(or hostility and nurturance) are both implicated in the formation of the world. Further research would be needed to consolidate that interpretation of the myth and to demonstrate the extent to which such a conception plays out in other areas of Yorùbá philosophy and culture.

Third, we have seen how values that are deeply culturally embedded and yet also complex and ambivalent can be illustrated in myths, such as those in which reasons are offered for Ọbàtálá's having moulded not only human beings with normally functioning bodies and minds but also ones with unusual anatomies, complexions or other features. It is striking that in both variants of the myth of Ọbàtálá's fashioning of human beings, a commitment to the protection of atypical people – or, at any rate, of certain categories of such people – is emphasized, a commitment that manifests in Yorùbá social customs. Thus, without needing to claim (implausibly) that myths are themselves arguments that supply rational support for identifiable truth claims, we see how it is nevertheless the case that studying myths can contribute to an enhanced understanding of the religious, ethical and philosophical outlook of people within a specific cultural domain. And hence, to the extent that the tasks of philosophy of religion are held to include bringing diverse religious, ethical and philosophical outlooks into sharper focus, the study of myths is philosophically valuable.[17]

A final point to be mentioned in this concluding section concerns the notion of conceptual decolonization that has been highlighted, explicitly or implicitly, by a number of African philosophers.[18] As Wiredu observes, 'Of all the areas of African philosophy, the need for conceptual decolonization is greatest in that of religion' (2004, 15). By this he means that there is a need to avoid interpreting African religion through a conceptual filter imposed from outside and to instead understand the African concepts on their own terms. In effect, this is what I, following Wittgenstein-influenced philosophers such as D. Z. Phillips, mean when

speaking of doing conceptual justice to a religious or other way of thinking. The point is to give the relevant concepts sufficient contextual elaboration to enable their sense to become apparent without immediately reformulating them in terms that, while perhaps being more familiar to Anglophone readers, are liable to foster distortions. In addition to instantiating conceptual injustice, such distortions also worsen the impoverishment of the philosophy of religion by foreclosing the potential enrichment of its conceptual resources. Of the concepts that have featured prominently in this article, the most pertinent example is that of òrìṣà, for this, as we have seen, is both central to Yorùbá religion and in need of careful, adequately contextualized, exposition. The present article, though merely a tentative and preliminary venture in the direction of such exposition, offers some indication of the conceptual enrichment that could flow from developing the inquiry further.

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[1] I derive the term ‘radical plurality’ from Phillips (2007); see also Burley (2017). The phrase ‘ways of being human’ has been used by, inter alia, Hick (2004, 14, 142, 240 et passim).

[2] As D. Z. Phillips was wont to observe, ‘Philosophical, conceptual elucidation is different from, and wider than, personal appropriation’ (2001, 5).

[3] See, e.g., the special issue of this journal, on ‘Philosophy of religions: cross-cultural, multi-religious approaches’ (Nagasawa and Burley (2020)).

[4] As Parrinder notes, ‘African Traditional Religion’ is a term that he ‘may claim to have invented, and that others have used’ (2000, 5). Those who have used it with approval include Kayode (1984) and Imasogie (1985). Parrinder writes ‘African Traditional Religion’ with capital initials; most others tend to drop the capital ‘T’ and ‘R’. I shall be following the latter practice.

[5] This is not true of oral transmission in all cultures. In ancient India, for instance, the body of teachings known as the Vedas (or simply ‘the Veda’) ‘was meticulously and faithfully transmitted only as a sounded text by male Brahman reciters’ (Graham (1987), 72).

[6] For video footage of this dance, see Oodua Voice Television (2017).

[7] For video footage, filmed in Havana in 1992, see Brown (2007).

[8] I borrow the term ‘possibilities of sense’ from Phillips (e.g. (2001), 23 et passim). My use of the term ‘forms of life’ is a deliberate allusion to Wittgenstein.

[9] ‘The idea of òrìṣà is not merely central to Yorùbá religion: it is Yorùbá religion’ (Taiwo (2008), 99).

[10] The etymology of Olódùmarè is admitted to be difficult, but, as a name, it indicates 'one who is supreme, superlatively great, incomparable and unsurpassable in majesty' (Idowu (1962), 36). *Ọlọ́*fin can be defined as 'Sovereign Ruler' (ibid.).

[11] For the sake of consistency, I have here, and subsequently, slightly amended Beier's transliteration of Yorùbá terms.

[12] It would be possible, here and elsewhere in my discussion, to engage in more explicit comparative analysis between Yorùbá and classical theistic outlooks. One might, for instance, contrast the ambivalence of the world, encapsulated in Yorùbá myth, with theistic notion of a wholly good world in which 'evil' is a mere privation of goodness. While concurring with a referee for this journal that such comparisons would be fruitful, lack of space obliges me to leave them for a future occasion.

[13] As noted in the previous section, Ọ̀rúnmìlà, too, is understood to be a deity of divination. As one myth puts it, Ọ̀rúnmìlà is Ọlọrun's eldest son, to whom has been 'given the power to read the future, to understand the secret of existence and to divine the processes of fate' (Courlander (1973), 30).

[14] 'Yemọjá's name is derived from Yeye Ọmọ Ẹja (the mother of fish children) and is a metaphor for bodies of water where fish abide' (Omari-Tunkara (2005), 65).

[15] Compare Eliade (1963, 6): 'the myth is regarded as a sacred story, and hence a "true history," because it always deals with realities.' See also Durkheim (1983 [1955], 87): 'What religion expresses in its representations, its beliefs and myths, is social realities and the way in which they act upon individuals'.

[16] For critical discussion, see Bascom (1957).

[17] Moreover, even for someone who regards philosophy's 'proper' task as consisting in the evaluation of the truth or rationality of beliefs, the hermeneutical undertaking of gaining a rigorously contextualized understanding of the beliefs in question cannot reasonably be evaded.

[18] See esp. Wiredu (1998) but also p'Bitek (esp. 1971), to whom Wiredu refers as 'the true pioneer of conceptual decolonisation in African philosophy' (Wiredu (1998), 200).