

# CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF ESAN CREATION STORY IN THE LIGHT OF JEWISH PRIMORDIAL HISTORY

**JOHN EMMANUEL ONOMIVBORI**

Dept. of Religion & Human Relations,  
Faculty of Arts,  
Nnamdi Azikiwe University,  
Awka,  
&

**UBUANE GABRIEL O**

Department of Religion  
Faculty of Arts  
University of Benin  
Edo State  
Nigeria

## **Abstract**

*The origin of humanity is a study that has fascinated successive generations for millennia. This fascination may not be unconnected with the quest to know what happens in the afterlife. The afterlife is a concept that runs through the gamut of major religions of the world. Closely connected with the afterlife is the question of where we come from and perhaps our purpose for being here? Man has formulated certain notions which help to ameliorate the anxiety experienced over the uncertainty of those realms which are non-material. Some of those myths tend to conflict with scientific notion of the world around us. In this paper the authors have tried to establish from the analysis of a comparative point of view the question of human origins by looking at Esan creation mythology. The mythological extrapolations of Esan were pitched against the Jewish or Genesis creation history. Interesting correlations and divergence emerged.*

## **Introduction**

The cosmological worldview of primitive societies provided a basis for interpreting the universe through a set of myth. Albeit the origins of those mythologies appear to be very obscure they nevertheless showed a connection between the visible physical universe and the esoteric invisible nonphysical aspect of human existence. Those myths among other things show that there was constant relationship between the material and non-material worlds in a link delicately balancing each other. The delicate balance of relationship between them results in spiritual benevolence from the spirit beings to human beings. The assumption is that a shift in the balance of their relationship negatively affects the human race. The foregoing provides the basis for taboo and acceptable norms in most societies of the world.

One myth that attempt to answer the question that has pledged humanity for centuries is the inquiry into the origins of man. According to primordial history as contained in the Genesis creation account or narrative, man is the intentional act of a supreme creator deity who is

credited for the whole of creation. Esan like other human societies have cosmological worldview which like the Jewish creation myth in Genesis, have their own creation myth which highlights and provide basis for morality.

In this paper attempt will be made using library research method and textual analysis to study the Genesis account of primordial history and compare it with the Esan cultural creation myth. It is our aspiration to show that both Genesis creation myth and Esan creation myth share a lot in common particularly in disagreeing with the scientific notion that man is the product of an accident known as the big bang theory. Also the Genesis creation myths as well as the Esan creation myth both espouse reverence for human life which appears to come only from the supreme deity alone and this carries the idea that man is a physical manifestation of an aspect of the spiritual supreme deity. The paper will show that Esan Traditional belief revere human life and holds it in the highest esteem, and that the basis for this cosmology of the Esan people is derivable from Jewish creation narrative. This notion is replete in African societies of which Esan as a homogenous society is an integral part of that larger African homogeneity without significant difference in their orientation.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Myth:** According to Marshal (cited by Onomivbori, 2012), the term myths is usually associated with stories that is aimed at educating the people in a religious or general life issues and the author captured it in the following words:

The word “Myth” is used to refer to stories that are fictional, and hence, it has come to have a pejorative sense. Traditionally it refers to invented stories about the gods in which they behave like human beings with superhuman powers. Closely associated with this sense of the word is it’s usage to refer specifically to the stories which may accompany and allegedly form the basis of religious rituals. (P. 4).

**Comparative:** according to Webster International dictionary 6<sup>th</sup> edition, in grammar, the comparative is the form of an adjective or adverb which denotes the degree or grade by which a person, thing, or other entity has property or quality greater or less in extent than that of another, and used in this context with a subordinating conjunction, such as than, as...as, etcetera. If three or more items are being compared, the corresponding superlative needs to be used instead. (P. 4).

**Esan:** Esan is a reference to a unique ethnic group of people who are predominantly found in the southern Niger Delta region. These are found in towns such Ekpoma, Uromi, Opoji to

mention but a few. They are like every other African society govern by set traditional norms of dos and don'ts.

### **Ancient Near eastern civilization**

The ancient near eastern civilization had several creation myths. We will however for the purpose of our study focus on the epic Enuma Elish. The attraction to the Enuma Elish Myth is occasioned by the fact that it is the most elaborate and bears the mark of being the officially recognized version found in the Babylonian temple. The second attraction for the author is that Enuma Elish Epic is highly developed and written on seven tablets each containing approximately one hundred and fifty lines.

According to MacKenzie (1963) the Enuma Elish epic opens with the statement:

When on high the heavens had not been named, firm ground below had not been called by name, naught by primordial Apsu, their begetter, and Mummu Tiamat, she who bore them all, their waters commingling as a single body (P. 116).

The above opening remark carries with it the idea that the gods in ancient near eastern creation, myth were formed by the union of the personified sweet water ocean known as Apsu while Tiamat is the salt water ocean. The mingling of these waters produced the successive gods such as the sky god, the air god, earth and several other deities. As time went by the mischievous Tiamat determined to kill the gods because of their noise making, hatched a plan where she would reign supreme above the others whom she bore. Ea discovered his mother's plan and proactively attacked Apsu and killed him. Tiamat enraged by the death of her husband became violent. The gods commissioned a young god called Marduk to lead them in the suicidal war with Tiamat. Marduk against all odds attacked and successfully killed Tiamat and was eventually crowned king of the gods. It was Marduk who cut Tiamat into two equal halves. With one half Marduk form the heavens and the remaining half he used to form the earth. Ea was commanded by Marduk their king to create human beings by mixing the blood of their mother (Tiamat) with clay.

The Enuma Elish Epic has very strong resemblance with the Genesis creation myth as we find in the first Chapter and the second verse mention chaos, darkness and water all three elements are common to both mythology. The sequence of the creative activity is also similar in many respects. Boadt (1983) said that any Old Testament student will not miss the similarities in the creation sequence of both the Jewish and Enuma Elish creation myths. There is consensus among biblical scholars that the sequence and creative acts of the Enuma Elish creation myth and Jewish creation myth can be summarized as follows below:

- (a). Divine Spirits responsible for the creative acts
- (b). Chaotic vast expanse of space
- (c). Creation of Light
- (d). Creation of the heavenly firmaments
- (e). Creation of the dry land
- (f). Creation of man
- (g). celebration of creation by observance of a day of rest

As was stated earlier there is consensus in the academia that the Jewish creation week account or narrative as contained the first and second chapters of their sacred writings may have been influenced by the Mesopotamian religion. Enuma Elish epic is date 1700 BC long before the creation account of the Jewish people. Undeniable as the correlations between both religious myths may appear, albeit the Jewish creation theology is very distinct and unique in many respects which we shall soon see.

### **Genesis creation myth**

The creation epic of the Jewish people is contained in the section of the Hebrew sacred writings known as the Torah or Pentateuch. This also happens to be comprised of the first five books of the sacred Jewish religious text. The first important division of their religious text is generally believed that Moses is its author.

There can be identified two creation accounts in the Genesis creation narrative. The first creation narrative contained in the book of Genesis starts in Chapters 1:1- 2:4a while the second creation narrative can be seen to begin in Chapter 2:4b- 3:24. According to Uzuegbunam (2011) who agrees with the two creation narrative of Genesis account and stated that there are two characteristically different accounts in the Jewish creation week. The accounts are recorded in the inverse form. The first account is generally accepted by scholars as being the later tradition and consequently more fundamental. This account is considered more fundamental because it appropriately emphasizes the teaching of the sanctity of the seventh day Sabbath observance of the Jews as a mark of obedience or allegiance or fidelity to Jehova Elohim a cardinal Jewish law. According to Mackenzie (1975) the second account which is considered to be the earlier tradition “is speculated to have been composed as early as 10<sup>th</sup> century BC” (P. 56).

According to Onomivbori (2012) the second tradition as observed is the older creation story and the compilation of the Yahwist source. The relevance of the second account is the fact that it conveys the notion of nothingness as a starting point by specifying the things which were not in existence before creation:

When Jehovah Elohim made the earth and sky, when as yet no vegetation was on the earth, when as yet no plant had sprouted, for Jehovah Elohim had sent no rain on the earth. And there was no man to cultivate the soil. (P. 87).

This account even by a superficial enquirer would reveal that the trust of the narrator is the nature of man and his relationship to the creator. The narrative recounts how Jehovah took and molded moist clay which he shaped into a man and finally gave breath to this statue that then transformed into human being or to borrow the expression of the holy text a living soul.

Furthermore, as Uzuogbunam (2012) observed that the Jewish sacred history and in particular the primordial history has conflicting accounts as documentary hypothesis seem to suggest. The source also observed that the names of the Jewish deity used in the different accounts are also different. This difference is accounted for by the documentary hypothesis which states that there are two sources one of which is the priestly source.

The high point of the Jewish creation story as we find in the first creation account is an attempt and we dare to say a very deliberate attempt by the editors of the literature to direct the minds of its audience from the notion of man being the product of an accident called the big bang theory. Let us briefly consider the literary unit under discussion.

### **Definition of literary unit**

According to Ugwueye (2004) who posited that the definition of the literary unit is the first stage in the process for proper exegesis. The immediate context of the discussion in the Genesis creation account is Genesis 1:1-2:3. On the other hand the larger context will cover Genesis 1;1-2:25. The foregoing immediately reveals that the immediate context of our passage under review is a priestly (P) account which is the first creation and young of the two accounts. The documentary hypothesis ascribes the larger context of the Genesis creation account which happens to be the older tradition is assigned to the Yahwist (J) source. The genre of these literary compositions is known as prose with a very simple structure.

The Yahwist knew that they ended their account at the stage of perfect couple in their ideal Eden home, how can their account for the difference between what is today and even at the time when they were writing. There has to be some explanation for the altered state of affairs, which was located in the act of violation of the covenant between Yahweh and the first human pair in the Garden of Eden. The snake envious of the first couple who obviously enjoyed the watchful love and care of Yahweh, used his great cunning and gifted knowledge to beguile the couple. The couple in an attempt to rise above their estate plunged far below their original

status. This point is emphasized by the fact that they went into voluntary hiding even before their guilty verdict was passed. This alienation occasioned by their transgression is the first evidence that they had plummeted from their exalted station in the original creation plan. The altered state of affairs also affected the internal harmony and order of their consciences. This provides the first point of convergence between the Yahwist creation and African creation stories and in particular Esan traditional creation story.

### **Esan creation mythology**

According to Nicholas (2012) the Esan people are an ethnic group of the southern [Nigeria](#) region who speak the [Esan language](#). The Esan are traditionally agriculturalists, trado-medical practitioners, mercenary warriors and hunters. They cultivate palm trees, [Irvingia gabonensis](#) (erhonhie), Cherry (Otien), bell pepper (akoh) coconut, betel nut, kola nut, black pear, avocado pear, yams, cocoyam, cassava, maize, rice, beans, groundnut, bananas, oranges, plantains, sugar cane, tomato, potato, okra, pineapple, paw paw, and various vegetables.

According to Dalby (1988) the modern Esan civilization is believed to have been organized during the 15th century, when citizens, mostly nobles and princes, left the neighboring [Benin Empire](#) for the northeast; there they formed communities and kingdoms called *egwares* among the aboriginal peoples whom they met there. There are on the whole 35 established kingdoms in [Esanland](#), including Amahor, [Ebelle](#), Egoro, Ewohimi, Ekekhenlen, [Ekpoma](#), Ekpon, Emu, [Ewu](#), Ewatto, Ewossa, [Idoa](#),<sup>[3]</sup> Ifeku, [Igueben](#), Ilushi, Inyelen, Irrua, [Ogwa](#), [Ohordua](#), Okalo, Okhuesan, Onogholo, Opoji, Oria, Orowa, [Uromi](#), Udo, Ugbegun, Ugboha, [Ubiaja](#), Urhoi, Ugun, Ujiogba, Ukhun, and Uzea.

According to Westly (1998) the Esan Kingdoms often warred among each other. Despite the wars, the Esans kept a homogenous culture which was chiefly influenced by the Benin Empire. However, these kingdoms were colonized, along with the [Benin Empire](#), by the [British Empire](#) during September 1897, only gaining independence 63 years later in 1960 when Nigeria became independent from British Colonial rule. After independence, the Esan people have suffered from [civil war](#), [poverty](#), and lack of infrastructure.

According to Lane & CO (2013) the Esans primarily speak the [Esan language](#), an [Edoid language](#) related to [Edo](#), [Urhobo](#), [Owan](#) language, [Isoko](#), and [Etsako](#). It is considered a regionally important language in Nigeria, and it is taught in primary schools in addition to

being broadcast on radio and television. The Esan language is also recognized in the Census of the United Kingdom.

It is estimated that the Esan people who reside in Esanland number about one million to 1.5 million citizens in Nigeria

Sociologists and anthropologist have long observed that every human society hold worldviews that translate into their cosmology. Africans as a unique homogenous society share a lot in common. Esan creation myth is not considerably different from what is obtainable in other African ethnic groups. We will draw allusions from the Igbo of the South-Eastern part of Nigeria whose creation motif is not altogether too different from Esan Creation myth.

According to Afigbo (2006) who argued that the divine name which the Igbo use in reference to the creator is Chukwu and he captured it thus:

Chukwu (the Igbo name for God) combines the concept of creator of deities for all we know and are aware of, including the concept of the solar deity. According to the Igbo people from Eastern region of Nigeria, Chineke is the creator of the world and everything good in it. This God is also responsible for rain, trees, and other plants. Chukwu is supreme God represented by the sun... The Igbo creative God, Chineke has its source in Chukwu. Linguistically, Chineke is formed from the Igbo word Chi and eke (Spirit which creates). (P. 32).

The above worldview was vividly elucidated by Madu (1987) who expressed his thoughts in the following words:

The Igbo accept Chineke, the Greatest of the Great Beings, created the universe and all therein, using parts of Him-her-self. (This means that everything a person can see, touch, taste, smell and hear is Chineke). The Igbo believe that the God, Igwe and Goddess Ala created mankind and the organization of Igbo society. For a long time things worked very well in heaven, however all the Gods and Goddesses lived in one place.

The author stated further that although the Igwe and Ala deities lived a communal lifestyle, they however were independent of each other. This state of affairs created rivalry between the deities which began to threaten the existence of Chineke. The solution Chineke proffered was the establishment of law to govern social interactions in his realm. This master strategy formed the basis for Law, social equality and personal freedom based on equal value of each of the deities. The rule stipulates that a deity can establish a family only in strict compliance to the following, firstly there has to be a marriage between a male and female deity. They would thereafter found their own territorial boundary in heaven. The territory consisted of a market

place where commercial activities would be carried out among the members of the community. There was also policing structure to ensure compliance with the injunctions prescribed.

There was relative peace after the successful demarcation of territorial boundaries for all the deities that were married; suffice it to say that no deity was without a wife. Also the marriage union of the gods is unlike those of men because the married deities do not live together. The sky is the home of the male counterpart while the earth is home for the spouse of the sky god. This essentially connotes the idea that the territorial boundary of the gods is made of a sky up above and an earth down below. In the Igbo cosmology the holy homestead is the merging of the sky god and earth goddess to form the unique environment called earth that can support the existence of Igbo people and by extension humanity.

The tradition has that in the beginning, the divine couple created eight (8) individuals in the following order, four (4) were males and the remainder four (4) were female. They raw materials used were sticks from the *Ofo* tree to make human bones. The second material is clay and ckalk which was used to produce human flesh. The gods after sun baking the statues for several days wrapped them in Umume leaves from the Umume tree. The function of the Umume leaves is to develop the human five senses and sexuality. The gods were saddled with the responsibility of educating primitive man in the seven cycles of life and other related religious ritual rites of passage that every person must experience in life. These include but not limited to sex, birth, babyhood, childhood, adulterhood, parenthood, grand parenthood and great grand parenthood which flows unbroken into ancestorhood. However, we shall inquire into the Esan creation story which as we have asserted earlier in this paper that Africa has a homogeneity that runs the gamut of African life and culture.

The Esan like every human society have a myth about how their ancestors began. According to Okoduwa (2011) Esan and Bini languages belong like their Igbo and Yoruba languages also belong to the Kwa language family which in turn was a part of the larger Niger - Congo stock. This background is important when considering the creation myth of Esan people.

Esan understanding of the cosmic order was from direct observation of nature. Therefore, their creation myth concerns themselves with gods of nature, the earth, the sky, the sun, the moon, the stars, and of course their ancestors. In the beginning when only the sky above, water and marsh land below can be seen. Osanobua the supreme deity ruled the sky and the watery marsh land below. Osanobua decided to create subordinate deities to serve as functionaries and intermediaries in the vast empire he had created. The first was Edjo the symbol of goodness



and beauty whose area of jurisdiction is the sky where Osanobua dwells. The second in command to Edjo was Erhu whose responsibility for the watery marshlands is the symbol of evil and the author of disorder and wickedness in all its ramifications.

Kebe one of the deities reflected on the state of affairs and decided to approach the Edjo with a proposal that would harden the marshlands and also reduce the watery mass. The reason being to enable him gain more authority in the scheme of things. The outcome of the project pleased the other divinities and Enute accepted Kebe's request for them to create man the first who were to become the ancestor king and queen. The Onodje and his wife gave birth to the Esan people.

### **A comparison between Esan and Jewish mythologies**

There exist striking similarities between the creation myths of the two cultures under review. The first prominent similarity is the fact that both believe the world was essentially consisted of three parts. The three parts are as follows, the heaven which is the home of the Supreme Being known as Yahweh and Osanobua to the Jews and Esan respectively. The second part is the earth which is the home of man and all that is visible. The third and final part being the underworld or the home of the ancestors and the spirits, access to this realm can be gained only through the grave.

The notion that man is the product of an accidental process which modern science term as the big bang theory is completely rejected by both cultures. This is because both orientations ascribe unequivocally the existence of man on planet earth to the intentional activities of the divine. This explains why both cultures holds human life in the highest esteem and everything is done to preserve it.

Esan cosmological conception of man is a being made of three parts namely body, spirit and soul, while the breath of life is supplied by the Supreme Being. The Jews hold the perception that man is a being of many parts. The account in Genesis 1:26-27 tells us that Yahweh moulded moist clay and the resultant statue became a living soul. While the Catholic Church teaches that man is made of three parts, some other Christian denominations such as the Seventh-day Adventist hold the view that man consist of breath of God and clay. However, whatever school of thought is favoured leads to one conclusion which that man is made of at least two parts.

The creation myths of the Esan people as well as those of their Jewish counterparts started as oral traditions. The myths existed in the form of folklore and were told to children as bedtime stories or as tales on moon light nights in the context of African life and culture.

The Esan traditional creation story as well as the Hebrew creation myth seems to suggest that fertility is an act of the gods. Therefore, in both cosmological worldview the gods are usually appealed to for the bestowment of the blessing of childbirth. In 1 Samuel 1:11 we have the case of Hannah, a Jewish woman whose womb was shut and therefore could not conceive to give birth. The story line is that she entreated the Yahweh from whom the gift of the fruit of the womb comes and she received her wish.

We will turn our attention to the opposite side of our argument with a view to providing scholarly objectivity in our study. The reason being twofold, firstly we shall show clearly the strength of our study by highlighting areas of weakness in our comparative study.

Differences between the Jewish and Esan creation myths

The first extremely striking difference between the Esan traditional religion and their Jewish counterpart is the fact that Esan cosmology is pantheistic. The religious landscape of the Esan people is such that has many spirit functionaries and intermediaries between man and the supreme ruler exist. According the account in Deuteronomy 6:1 the Jewish conception of divinity is monotheistic which leave room for only one deity.

The Jewish creation myth dates back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century B.C. while the Esan creation myth is relatively younger and is date about the 15<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

## **Conclusion**

The Esan and Jewish people both conceptualize man as the product of intelligent design. This notion gives man a pride of place in the scheme of creation. This pride of place allotted to man makes it sacrosanct that human life is revered and treated with triviality. This explains why no expense is spared in the preservation of life.

The religions of both the Esan and the Jews advocate role differentiation between male and female. This is encapsulated in the gift of procreation which aims at sustainable development of the scheme that creation has put in place.

## **References**

- Abraham, J.H. (1955). *God in search of man*, New York: Farmer, Straus & Cuddy.  
Adamo, T.D. (2009). *Exploration in Adfrican biblical studies*. Benin: Justice Jeco

Barnes, M.H. (2010). Understanding religion and science: introducing the debate New York: international

Catoir, J.T. (2003). World religions New York: St. Paul

David, F.H. (1973). History of Israel. Cambridge: Press

Mackenzie, R.A.F. (1963). Faith and history in the Old Testament. Minneapolis: Press.

Obiora, M.I. (2010). The Old Testament creation narrative as the matrix for the concept of human dignity. *Nsukka Journal of Religion and culture*. 2.1. 43-65.

Onomivbori, J.E. (2012). Comparative Mythologies: Hebrew and Urhobo creation myths. Seminar Paper: Awka: Unizik.

Uzuegbunam, E.N (2011). Contemporary African relevance of the Genesis Creation myth. Seminar Paper: Awka: Unizik.