

A reasonable doubt about Crash Course Mythology

by Lays Farra, Antoine and Camille for *C'est Pas Sourcé*.
 Script of this video : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=igrsfX0sLpI>

Caveats

Two small caveats before you watch the video. First, english is not my native language, so I might mispronounce a thing or two but subtitles should be available and there's a link in the description to the text of the episode, if it can help. Second, we're gonna talk about crash course mythology, and we're gonna mention things that they don't talk about but given it's an ongoing series it's entirely possible that by the time I edit this video they will have mentioned it. Or that they will mention it in the future, so I might be spoiling crash course mythology for you.

But in the eventuality that those things are outside the scope of their show we might as well talk about it, I think it will only add to the discussion. So let's go.

1. What Crash Course copied in Leeming's book

Plagiarism is a big issue today, in Academia and beyond. The internet made it both a stronger temptation and harder to get away with it, and many students are understandably puzzled by some of the rules of citation, and can you blame them? Plagiarism is also a big deal among professors and even high-ranking politicians and for religious studies, recently, Reza Aslan, everyone's favorite bowl of room-tempered water was accused of stealing someone else's scholarship on Santa Muerte without due citation.¹ And he claimed there was nothing original about said research, and did not entail any intellectual property.² And that's always the problem : if something is common knowledge, well if it's a fact, you cannot put a copyright on it. In religious studies of course, when we deal with stories or practices sometimes shared for centuries, it's obvious that they're in the public domain. But, scholarship about those things, translations of stories, accounts of rituals, theories, all of those involve somebody's work. So when you rely on them you should acknowledge their work and cite it properly, to give proper credit and proper context to your claims.

That should go without saying, so I was a bit disappointed when I found out that the episodes put out so far by the recent Crash Course series on mythology relied heavily on, and often quoted verbatim, some authors without mentioning it. And I thought we could discuss in what way it is a problem, and maybe in what way it's not a problem.

I have to admit I'm always skeptical of mouth-sized bites of analysis, and common portrayal of mythology is essentially shallow because of some love for an endless quest for similarities, and ascribing them a deeper meaning. But it can be done right, the channel *Religion for Breakfast* in my opinion manages to make short interesting and accessible interventions on religious matters. But he is a student in religious studies, so he's accustomed to the methodological problems of the field, while they're not necessarily at crash course.

¹ David Chesney, "[Creative Writing Professor Lifts My Santa Muerte Research in CNN Trailer](#)", *The Huffington Post*, 20 mar 2017.

² "His appropriation of my research without attribution is both surprising and galling after having told me in a recent e-mail "I can guarantee you there is nothing unique or proprietary about your knowledge of the religion"." [Chesney, *Ibid.*](#)

From what I can discern their expertise lies rather in the fields of literature or drama criticism, and as we'll see, the authors they draw from are not that good either.³ [3']

While watching their preview I feared we would delve in the dreary field of the World Theologians, you know those guys like Eliade, Jung or Joseph Campbell who use Mythology as some sort of fuel for their own spirituality, and manage to analyze a myth per two in the meantime. But their first episode was good I think. The myth of Persephone, the explicative function of myth, Tylor's theory, it's all good. I was down for this a few examples, different schools of analysis each week, why not, it could be a great doorway into the complex study of myth..

Episode #2 had a lot more myths listed, so I thought that I'd go look for the sources of these and maybe different translations and interpretations and the like. My main aim was to do some sort of commentary for the show, to use their videos as a support to talk maybe in greater detail about the stories evoked, and I still intend to do that.

But it was hindered by the fact that they were somewhat reluctant to give the origin of the texts quoted. Like they admit this is one Egyptian creation myth among many, but don't give the source. And I'm not a specialist of ancient Egypt so I just google the quote and I find out that it's Spell 307 from the *Egyptian Coffin Texts*, apparently in a translation by **Clark** in 1959? **Faulkner's** 2004 translation is a bit different (pp. 226-7) and less dramatic but that's expected.

Why a translation from the fifties, though? Well, because they copied the text, like almost all the examples they use in this episode from a chapter in **David Leeming's** book *the World of Myth*. ([pp. 17-9](#))

The account of the **Genesis** creation myth is given by Leeming ([pp. 24-25](#)) with the same translation. **Hesiod's** *Theogony*, is there too although the translation is different. ([pp. 32-5](#))

The **Popol Vuh** is in Leeming's book ([pp. 60-6](#)) but the wording comes from **Virginia Hamilton's** book : *In the beginning: creation stories from all around the world*. Hamilton is, according to her website, "America's most honored writer of children literature".⁴ And to their credit it seems Crash Course altered the wording a bit to summarize. Since I think they will talk about this one again, we'll leave it out for now.

The text for the Kono Creation Myth, also comes from Hamilton ([pp. 15-19](#)), as you can see⁵ :

In one creation myths from the Kono people of Guinea, the darkness before creation is inhabited by Death, his wife and his daughter. In the beginning, there was darkness. And in it lived Death called Sa with his wife and daughter. The three of them were all that was. There was nowhere for them to live comfortably, so Sa started it. He used magic power and he made an endless mud sea.

In this mud place Sa built his house. After that the god Alatangana came to visit Sa. He found Sa's house dirty and dark. Alatangana thought Sa should do better than that and he said so. "Nothing can live in such a place," the god told Sa. "This house needs fixing up, everything is too dark." So Alatangana thought he'd better take things in hand. He made the mud solid— we now know it as Earth. "The Earth feels sad," God said. "I will make plants and animals to live on it." So he did. ([CCM #2 4:00-5:01](#))

And in the end they try their edgy-ass hot take "the Big Bang is a Myth" :

Before we leave the realm of ex nihilo creation, I want to give one more example: the Big Bang. [...] Here, we're going to use the version related by Brian Swimme in his book *The*

³ Virginia Hamilton is a children's literature author, David Leeming "is professor emeritus of English and comparative literature at the University of Connecticut." ([UCP](#)), "Eva M. Thury is an Associate Professor in the Department of English and Philosophy, Drexel University. Margaret K. Deviney is an Associate Professor and Chair in the Department of French, German, Italian, and Slavic, Temple University" ([OUP](#)). All have formations pertaining to literature or languages, the exception being "Roy Willis, Ph.D., is Honorary Fellow in Social Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh." ([OUP](#))

⁴ <http://www.virginiahilton.com/virginia-hamilton-books/in-the-beginning/>

⁵ Hamilton "An endless sea of mud" [pp. 15-9](#) [Google Books] ; [Text reproduced on this web page.](#) [CCM #2 4:00-5:01](#)

Universe is a Green Dragon: "Imagine that furnace out of which everything came forth. This was a fire that filled the Universe– (CCM #2 [10](#)'-10'28)

Oh that's funny, you know who else quoted *The Universe is a Green Dragon* in a chapter about ex nihilo creation myths? THE SAME SINGLE BOOK.⁶

And while they cite Leeming's source, Leeming himself does not elicit a mention while this is obviously where they found it. Well, another passage is quoted exactly once :

"there's a word to describe the condition before creation: Chaos. Which mythologist David Leeming defines as "the primal void or state of uniform nondifferentiation that precedes the creation of the world in most creation myths."⁷ (CCM #2 [3:17](#))

So you get the impression that this is a quote, and that the rest are, I don't know, various translations gathered by the devoted Crash Course team, on their own, but all their examples are quoted directly from Leeming or Hamilton.

I asked the writer Raoul Meyer about it and he was kind enough to respond, telling me that his drafts always contain footnotes referencing what he borrows from.⁸ Also he uses a different edition of Leeming than the one I have, which might explain the different translations.

But it confirmed that his main source was introductory Mythology 101 books⁹ which comes with a few predicaments as we will see. And I'm not gonna explain to Crash Course how to manage their successful, money-making youtube channel, okay, I don't think that I'm in any position to do so from my little french channel that virtually nobody watches. And I'm not blaming anyone involved. Like, Crash Course is a factory, so if you want to churn out one episode a week for fifty weeks, trying to cover all the mythologies of the World, you will sacrifice exactly the same things. The writer has to keep it under five pages so he just puts a few footnotes in there, and anyway it will be cut by the editor because you don't want to bore the public with a list of books, and you fill the rest with jokey jokes. Why do more research if you won't be able to fit it in there? You might as well take a chapter from one of these books rather do a few tweaks rather than starting from scratch for a very similar end result.

So, that's going to be Crash Course Mythology, I mean with that rythm they don't really have the luxury to do rewrites, it's not going to change. And I'm okay with it, I'm not asking them to change.

But, as a more general policy there's something they could do as an educational channel.

That is : what we opened with. Citing their sources.

And no I don't want them to take ten minutes of the video to do a rundown of their bibliography and methodology, but for books we invented something to cite a source without interrupting the reader, that is a footnote. I think they could adapt the concept to a video, just place a panel of text with the citation at the bottom of the video.

I know you can do it, you've done it in your sixth episode! You do it for jokes, like when you introduce a famous thinker there's always those weird one-liners, and in your openings, there are those little informative captions that apparently 300 people paused to read. So this is disgraceful but you can do it and make it look good. I know you can.

But Layz you'll tell me probably mispronouncing my name, in that case, won't it be weird citing the same book over and over again?

⁶ Leeming, *The World of Myth*, 1992:41-2. [Google Books]

⁷ While we found it in Leeming, *The Oxford Companion to World Mythology*, 2005:70-71. [Google Books] It is possible the sentence is also found on more recent editions of *the World of Myth* or other books by Leeming.

⁸ <https://twitter.com/raoulmeyer/status/846156544815304704> [<http://archive.is/hmvqJ>]
<https://twitter.com/raoulmeyer/status/846158802441383937> [<http://archive.is/xKmxj>] (26 mar 2017)

⁹ I think they might be: Leonard & McClure, *Myth and Knowing*, 2004. [[amazon](#)] ; Thury & Devinney, *Introduction to mythology*, 1999 [1st ed.], 2009 [2nd ed.] or 2016 [3rd ed.]. [[OUP](#)] ; Roy Willis, *World Mythology*, 2006. [[OUP](#)]

Yes, that's the point! Citing your sources isn't about showing off how much reading you've done nor a trick that makes you impervious to criticism ; it's about honesty. It's about letting your audience know where your discourse comes from what its limitations are.

And in their sixth video, they added their sources to the description, so thanks. It's a small thing but I really think it's important. And they even have some informative panels of text to add information.¹⁰

So it seems they can and will do better and I welcome that.

So that's about giving proper credit. What about the context? What exactly is lost in the process?

2. The Kono story of Alatangana and Death

So if the wording of this Kono creation myth comes from Hamilton, what is its source?

It seems it's a 1966 book by **Ulli Beier** (1922-2011), *The Origin of Life and Death, African Creation Myths*¹¹. It's a short account, four pages. It's in Hamilton's bibliography and she explicitly says that she was granted permission to reproduce this story. And the text is a little bit different, so I think that she retold the version that was in Beier, adding dialogues and some descriptions to make it more "living".

It's so weird, that she would cite her sources and ask for the permission to reproduce them, and you know what, Beier himself is citing his sources. Well actually he just says "a kono story" and lists all of the authors on which he relied at the start¹² without saying which myth comes from which author. But I went through their respective writings¹³ and the one that especially dealt with Kono culture is B. Holas, or, rather, **Bohumil Théophile Holas**, who wrote in french, which is expected given Guinea was a french colony. And indeed he was the one that collected that myth in 1950, from a man named Nonlo Nyinamou¹⁴ (†1953)¹⁵ "native of Gbakoré, an important village of the Lola county" after giving him a white kola nut as is customary when you're asking for a sacred story.¹⁶

Those sentences that Crash Course quoted. It's not a translation from the Kono language to english. It's a Kono tale that was told in Kono I think since Holas is giving the Kono translation for some words, and written in french, before being translated into english, then retold in english by a professional writer. It's quoted, like, it's between quotes, but those words are Virginia Hamilton's which makes it

¹⁰ CCM #6 <https://youtu.be/T6f1-nEjDdM?t=5m12s> (5'12)

¹¹ "Death and the Creator" in *The Origin of Life and Death, African Creation Myths*, London, Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., pp. 3-6 [65 p.]. [[on Google Books](#)] also [on this website](#).

¹² "The myths in this book were collected by Mallam Hampate Ba, B. Holas, Marthe Arnaud, the editor, Blaise Cendrars, Gabriel Okara, Basilius Saprason, Le Herisse, C. K. Meek, Hugh Goldie, and P. Schebesta. For permission to reproduce copyright material thanks are due to Presence Africaine for How God withdrew from the world, Buchet/Chastel for The Revolt against God from Anthologie Nigre edited by Blaise Cendrars, and Oxford University Press for The Toad and The Chameleon and the Lizard from Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe by C. K. Meek." (Beier vi)

¹³ Mallam [Amadou?] Hampaté Ba ; Marthe Arnaud, *Enfants du ventre?* 1938, *Mani ère de blanc?* 1947 ; Blaise Cendrars, *Anthologie N ègre*, 1921. (archive.org) ; Gabriel Okara ; Basilius Saprason, musician. (Tanganika) ; Auguste Le Hérisse (1876-1953) [L'ancien royaume du Dahomey. moeurs religion histoire 1911](#) ; C. K. Meek (1885-1965) northern tribes of nigeria ; Hugh Goldie, [Calabar and its Mission 1890](#). (1901 edition on archive.org) southeastern Nigeria ; Paul Joachim Schebesta (1887-1967), several books, pygmeas, central africa.

¹⁴ Nonlo was quoted as an informer in another one of Holas' works : Cf. [Les Masques Kono : leur rôle dans la vie religieuse et politique. 1952. chap. 5.](#)

¹⁵ Cf. "C'est au cours de notre visite à Bakoré en décembre 1953 que nous avons appris la mort précoce de notre ami Nonlo, survenue quelques semaines auparavant." *Le Culte de Zié* 1955:79.

¹⁶ In *Contes kono: traditions populaires de la for t guinéenne*, 1975, pp. 29-35. Already in [Echantillons du folklore kono](#) Haute Guinée, Institut français d'Afrique noire, Centre de Guinée, 1952?, 90p, pp. 9 sqq. See also *Le culte de Zié : éléments de la religion Kono*, 1955.

both more problematic from the copyright side of thing given it's a more creative retelling, and further from the "original" version if you wish.

And to be honest that's where you see that Hamilton is a writer because her version is way better! It's more dramatic and better written, so you can see why Crash Course chose to quote her.

But lazy you'll tell me mispronouncing my name again aren't you a bit contradictory? You criticize Crash Course for not making enough effort to retell the stories they're using but then you claim that retellings have no value?

Retellings and summaries have value, but they might reflect more the mindset of the people retelling them than the original material. Like there's a difference between quoting the Bible and quoting *Paradise Lost* by Milton, both can be interesting and *Paradise Lost* was an influential work but it's not the same thing.

Like, in Holas and Beier's translation, everything is in the indirect discourse, those¹⁷ are not lines spoken by Alatangana as such. You might say that it is a really small thing, and it is a very small thing, but it is a symptom of all the things you will lose in translation.

For example in the 1954 version, Holas transcribe Death's name as "Ha", saying that it's pronounced like an "s" but really deep in the throat.¹⁸ Like S or S ? I don't really know. In all later version like the 1975 one that we used, he kept "Sa" as did his translators, but that seems like it's relevant, if only phonetically.

And while it's obviously the same core story, there are a few slight differences in each of Holas' versions, implying some degree of retelling on his part.

And even when the text is pretty faithful some misunderstandings can arise. For example, Crash Course's animation team show the house lightening up as Alatangana claims it is too dark. So you get the impression that Alatangana brings light to a dark world, as do some other creator gods cited in the episode. But in this story light come into play later. And furthermore I'd argue it gives you a false impression of Alatangana's role since he's not the one that brings light into the world, but Death.

So since Crash Course only tells the beginning of the story, we might look at how light appears in this myth, given it's after an interesting story about black people and white people, that we're gonna look at now.

So Alatangana wants to marry Sa's daughter but her father ends up refusing so they got married in secret and fled to a remote corner of the earth.

"They lived happily and had many children, seven boys and seven girls, among which each time four were white and three were black.

But these children spoke languages that neither their father nor their mother could understand, so Alatangana had to, reluctantly, ask Sâ for help. [And Sâ] told him :

Yes, it is I who punished you for offending me. You will never understand what your children are saying. But I'll give to your white sons intelligence (*klî*) and paper to write (*sébéla*) so they can write down their thoughts (*lui confier leurs pensées*).

To your black sons, so that they may feed themselves and procure for themselves all they need, I'll give them the hoe (*kâli*), the axe (*yougbo*) and the machete (*gbiyé*).

And before letting him go, Sâ recomanded to Alatangana to make sure that his white children marry among themselves and that their black children do the same."¹⁹

And after those marriages, they dispersed accross the world

"and gave birth to the white and black races. From those ancestors were then born the innumerable children that we know today under the names of French, English, Germans,

¹⁷ "Nothing can live in such a place," the god told Sa. "This house needs fixing up, everything is too dark." [...] "The Earth feels sad," God said. "I will make plants and animals to live on it." (4'37-4'57)

¹⁸ Holas 1954:80 cf. n. 4. Cites Chastelain, *Grammaire guerzé*, p. 163 [GBooks snippet] who lists "Ha" as : "Mort, Mourir" (i.e. Death, Dying).

¹⁹ Translation of Holas 1975:30, almost identical to the one made by Beier 4.

Italians etc. on one side and under the names of Kono, Guerzé, Manon, Malinké, Toma, Yacouba, etc. on the other."²⁰

And it's only after that Alantagana has to ask Sâ about you know getting light in this dark universe because there is no sun, moon or stars yet but since he's afraid to talk to him, he sends the toutou²¹ and the rooster (*té siné* ou *té hiné*)²² to ask Sâ, and he tells them:

"Go back home. I will bestow singing upon you, and by singing you will call forth the light of day so that men can go about their work."²³

And that's why the Toutou sings around five in the morning and the rooster around six, and when they do, the sun rises. Also it's Sâ, death, that created the sun and moon and stars. (Holas 32)

And for that and taking away his only child he tells Alatangana that he owes him one. So as reparation, every time he needs it he'll call upon one of Alatangana's children with his calabash rattle, which must be obeyed. Alatangana accepts, and that is why all men eventually die.

This story is a creation story but it also explains the origin of death and the origin of the different human races. And it's clearly influenced by the colonial context in which it was written.

The different attributes given to the races by sa, intelligence and writing for white people and tools for black people are clearly a reflection of a society where the intellectual and political elites of the colony are white, while the workers, more or less free, are black. So Nonlo Nyinamou was telling this story about white people having intelligence and writing to Bohumil Holas that was probably taking notes in order to transmit this story to a European white intellectual elite.

Do you see that it's trying to explain a hierarchy?

3. The Bushongo story of Mbumba

And the weight of colonialism is perhaps also felt in the "Boshongo" myth of Mbomba, from what is now Congo, in their third episode this time.²⁴ Note that the federation of tribes under the authority of the Bushongo king between the rivers Kasai and Sankuru was also called Kuba kingdom or Bakuba kingdom, so the Bushongo are by extension sometimes called kuba.²⁵

Here is their creation myth as told by Crash Course. I'll overlay the text from Leeming²⁶ so you can see that it comes from there:

"In the beginning, in the dark, there was nothing but water, and Mbombo was alone. One day Mbombo was in terrible pain. He retched and strained and vomited up the sun. After that, light

²⁰ Translation of Holas 1975:31, almost identical to Beier 4. Note that the name of tribe is updated in the 1975 version. In [Holas 1952?](#) it is indeed "Manon Malinké, Toma, Yacouba, etc." which is what Beier translated, while in the 1975 version it is: "Kono, Guerzé, Mano, Toma, Dan".

²¹ "A red morning bird". Casthelain says that tutu in guerzé means the coucal (zool. *Centropus monachus occidentalis*), Cf. Holas 1955:81 n.1.

²² Holas 1952?11, 1975:31.

²³ Translation of Holas 1975:31, almost identical to the one made by Beier 5, but Beier strangely translates "Rentrez chez vous" ("Go back home") by "Enter the house" which indicates he relied on the 1952? version: "".

²⁴ CCM #3 <https://youtu.be/7fHDliqLz9w?t=2m35s> (2'35-3'30)

²⁵ A luba term meaning "people of the lightning"

²⁶ "One day Bumba was in terrible pain. He retched and strained and vomited up the sun. After that light spread over everything. The heat of the sun dried up the water until the black edges of the world began to show. Black sandbanks and reefs could be seen. But there were no living things. Bumba vomited up the moon and then the stars, and after that the night had its light also. Still Bumba was in pain. He strained again and nine living creatures came forth; the leopard named Koy Bumba, and Pongo Bumba the crested eagle, the crocodile. Ganda Bumba, and one little fish named Yo; next, old Kono Bumba, the tortoise, and Tsetse, the lightning, swift, deadly, beautiful like the leopard, then the white heron, Nyanyi Bumba, also one beetle, and the goat named Budi." (Leeming 40)

spread over everything. The heat of the sun dried up the water until the black edges of the world began to show. Black sandbanks and reefs could be seen. But there were no living things. Mbombo vomited up the moon, and then the stars, and after that the night had its light also. Still, Mbombo was in pain. He strained again and nine living creatures came forth. Last of all, came man." (2'46-3'25)

You'll notice, again, the similar wordings, but they left something out. Mike Rugnetta does echo one of Leeming's comparisons to an Egyptian creation myth: "Notice that the creator god is alone, and presumably male. This may suggest a patrilineal culture since creation occurs without a female presence. The story of the Bushongo Bantu people from Congo is remarkably similar." (2'24)

And even if Crash Course don't exactly repeat Leeming's claim that the myth of Mumba suggests a patrilineal culture, that's where Leeming becomes a problem. Because first the Bushongo are not a patrilineal culture. Leeming is guessing that they are patrilineal, because of some lack of female characters, but apparently didn't even bother to check because Torday explicitly says that "Descent only counts through the maternal line"²⁷ which is the working definition of matrilineal! Also, at the end of the nineteenth century this was one of the driving forces behind the demand for female slaves in the Kuba kingdom. Because, as foreigners, to quote Vansina :

"[slaves] had no lineage of their own, hence their children were incorporated into their father's lineage. These concubines thus boosted the growth of such a lineage compared to others, which then threatened to upset the local balance of power that existed between competing local lineages in favor of the enlarged one. It was this effect that encouraged all competing leading men to acquire as many concubines as they could obtain. As a result the demand for slaves never abated." (Vansina 31)

So they are pretty matrilineal.

Maybe it's a little known fact and I shouldn't harp on Leeming for that. Okay let's check with Google real quick -- no this is pretty well-established, it's everywhere. In ethnology, family structure is like the first thing you learn about any given culture, it's even in the *encyclopaedia britannica* entry for the Kuba kingdom,²⁸ for God's sake Leeming couldn't even be bothered to check, he just *guessed* they were patrilineal.

And second, hum I think Crash Course did use this passage from Leeming, read it at some point, that should be obvious from the similar sentences and the other examples. But interestingly, they omit the very next line:

"The fact that Bumba is white suggest that this is a late myth, affected, like so much [of] African mythology, by the presence of the white race in colonial Africa." (Leeming 39)

And indeed, after Bumba creates the first animals Leeming writes: "Last of all came forth men. There were many men, but only one was white like Bumba." (Leeming 40)

The story is so steeped in colonialism, he says, that their creator god is *white*.

So again let's look at the chain of transmission, shall we? Leeming is quoting Mircea Eliade²⁹ who is quoting a book by Maria Leach,³⁰ who translated and adapted it from a 1910 report by E. Torday and J. A. Joyce, for an expedition in 1907-9,³¹ again in French, because the Bushongo lived in what became Belgian Congo, a French-speaking colony. Torday and Joyce say :

²⁷ "La descendance n'est comptée que d'après la ligne maternelle" ([Torday&Joyce 110](#))

²⁸ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Kuba-people#ref71165>

²⁹ Mircea Eliade, *From Primitives to Zen : A Thematic Sourcebook of the History of Religions*, 1967:91-2. part one of *Gods, Goddesses, and Myths of Creation*, 1974. [[mircea-eliade.com](#)]

³⁰ Maria Leach, *The Beginning*, New York, 1956:145-7. [[Google Books snippet view](#)]

³¹ Torday & Joyce, *Notes ethnographiques sur les peuples communément appelés Bakuba, ainsi que sur les peuplades apparentées. Les Bushongo* [sometimes spelled Boshongo], Annales du Musée du Congo Belge, Ethnographie Anthropologie série 4, t.2 1910, pp.2 [[On Gallica](#)]

“The story of the Bushongo starts with a cosmogony and the beginning sentences remind neatly of the first verses of the Book of Genesis.”³²

Like even if Torday himself does not think so,³³ maybe there’s some western influence there? And they indeed say that Bumba has the likeness of a man but much bigger and white.³⁴

By the way, if this is the source, nothing here says that the sand is black, nothing. It’s just “sable”, sand. Like they don’t mention the whiteness of the creator, but they invent the blackness of the sand along the way, that’s pretty ironic.

And the text is pretty explicit, Mbumba is vomiting a wide array of species, some of which will vomit other species afterwards, and:

“Then he vomited men, a big number of them, but there was only one who was white like him ; his name was Loko Yima.”³⁵

And it doesn’t stop there it says :

“The work of Bumba was over. He called the three best men, Loko Yima, who was white, and Yele and Dumachwa, who were black, and he talked to them in these terms : "You, Yele, you will be the leader of the Bangongo ; you, Dumachwa, will be the leader of the Bangendi, but you, Loko Yima, you will be *Chembe Kunji* ([meaning] God on earth) leader of all mankind, and Yele and Dumachwa will pay you tribute". When he had spoken thus, he rose in the air and disappeared in the skies. In that way, Loko Yima (n°2 on the list of chiefs) became supreme leader of mankind.”³⁶

This myth is claiming that world dominance was given to a white guy by the god of the Bushongo who was conveniently white. Myth is often trying to reconcile or explain away contradictions, or tensions, and in that case, I think it can be argued that it’s trying to explain white supremacy and the colonization of their land.

By the end of the century it could certainly be felt. In 1899, armed mercenaries from the neighboring Zappo Zap tried to extort slaves, rubber and food from the Bushongo kingdom on behalf of the Congo “Free State”, and conducted a massacre when their demands were not met.³⁷ As a result of such destabilizing factors, while in the nineteenth century reigns could extend over thirty or forty year, there were six kings in the year 1900 alone.³⁸

In his report Torday duly notes that while the current Bushongo king laments the encroaching of white people on his land and the waning of his power, he has given up on fighting against them. The last wars and rebellions in 1904 were done without much hope or conviction and without much support from the king.³⁹

So it would only be fitting that their myth is explaining their powerlessness by an imbalance in creation.

³² Personnel translation of: “L'histoire des Bushongo commence par une cosmogonie et les phrases du commencement rappellent nettement les premiers versets du livre de la Génèse.” ([Torday&Joyce 20](#))

³³ Torday [On the trail of the Bushongo 1925:124](#). [archive.org]

³⁴ Also in Torday, E. “Bushongo Mythology.” *Folklore*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1911, pp. 41–47. [[tandfonline](#)] [[JSTOR](#)] see also the [downloadable PDF from archive.org](#).

³⁵ Personnel translation of: “Il vomit ensuite des hommes, un grand nombre d'entre eux, mais il n'y en avait qu'un seul qui fut blanc comme lui ; il s'appela Loko Yima.” ([Torday&Joyce 20](#)).

³⁶ “L'oeuvre de Bumba étant termin[e] il appela les trois meilleures hommes, Loko Yima, qui était blanc et Yele et Dumachwa, qui étaient noirs, et il leur parla en ces termes : "Vous, Yele, vous serez le chef de Bangongo ; vous, Dumachwa, vous serez le chef de Bangendi, mais vous, Loko Yima, serez Chembe Kunji (Dieu sur terre), chef de tous les hommes et Yele et Dumachwa vous paieront tribut". Quand il eut ainsi parlé, il s'éleva dans l'air et disparut dans les cieux. De cette manière Loko Yima (n°2 sur la liste des chefs) devint chef suprême de l'humanité.” ([Torday&Joyce 21](#)) Torday himself gave a pretty close english translation in [On the trail of the Bushongo. 1925:125](#).

³⁷ Vancina 23-27. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zappo_Zap#Kuba_massacre

³⁸ List of the kings from Torday https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rulers_of_Kuba

³⁹ [Torday 1925:113-114](#).

So if we admit that this Kono myth from Guinea and this Bushongo myth from Congo, both try to rationalize white dominance in some way, it poses the problem of how old these stories are. Elements of the story could be older but in that form they must have emerged after the arrival of European powers in Africa. For both of them, we have a *terminus ante quem* the date at which they were collected 1909 and 1950.

The earliest possible date would be I think the sixteenth century where the slave trade and some empires, especially the Portuguese one started to take hold in West Africa. But both Konos and Bushongos were in pretty remote areas. In the *Guinée Forestière* or "forested Guinea" the Kono had a somewhat separate culture. And the river Kasai, delimitating Bushongo territory was only explored by the Wissman in 1884, and they couldn't get far into Bushongo territory, their information on them being mostly hearsay from other tribes.

So if these stories do indeed reflect colonial hierarchies, my best guess would be the 1880s, with the scramble for Africa, the Berlin Conference, and the main exploratory and military expeditions from colonial powers, after which the Congo "Free State" was formed in 1885 and French Guinea in 1891. It could be earlier but I'd say not much earlier.

And why is it a problem? Nobody said that myth had to be ancient, right? Well...

"So, we're gonna start by saying that a myth is a story, but it's a special kind of story, that for the purposes of this series, has two primary characteristics: significance and staying power.

This means that the subject matter is about something important, something about how the world works, or how the world itself got going... how things came to be.

And then there's staying power. These are stories that have survived centuries, sometimes millennia. And this is a testament to the deep meaning or functional importance of these stories to the people who hear and tell them." ([CCM #1 5'04-5'37](#))

And of course since they're using the Big Bang or the Gaia hypothesis they are not talking only about ancient myths but I think that the average viewer will infer that those stories have been told for centuries. But if they are products of the colonial era they might not have been fifty years old when they were collected.

4. A reasonable doubt about the initial doubt

That said, I'm pretty sure the Kono myth is deeply tainted by colonialism, but I have serious doubts about the Bushongo Myth.

At first, like David Leeming, I was convinced that

"The fact that Bumba is white suggests that this is a late myth, affected, like so much [of] African mythology, by the presence of the white race in colonial Africa." (Leeming 39)

I was on board and as such first version of this video was really shorter. But the patrilineal bit made me realize David Leeming didn't know what he was talking about so I dug a little deeper.

First off, Loko Yima is not the ancestor of white people, contrary to the Kono story there are no Europeans in this myth actually, he is the ancestor of the Bushongo royal line. The function of the myth is to legitimize the rule of the Nyimi from the Bambala tribe, over the Bangendi and Bangongo tribes⁴⁰ that seem to have been conquered and put under the authority of the Bushongos at some

⁴⁰ [Torday&Joyce 9-10](#) for a list of the tribes.

point.⁴¹ *Chembe kunji*, God on earth, is not a title bestowed on the white rulers, to support colonial rule, but a title applied to their kings -- especially their first mythical kings.⁴²

Loko Yima is succeeded by his daughter, Lobamba, which has a son, Woto, described as being of somewhat mixed race.⁴³ So the whiteness of Loko Yima's line is pretty quickly diluted. Also in the Bangongo version of the myth, they say that Mbumba is an albino man, so it might not be linked with europeans at all.⁴⁴

Especially since the Bushongo had like no contact with europeans until the very end of the nineteenth century. In 1878, the german explorer Schütt could only write that they were cannibals relying on hearsay from a luso-african trader. (Vansina 14-15) And while António Ferreira da Silva Porto did reach Kampungu in 1880⁴⁵ it would take again the Wissman expedition along the river Kasai for a proper contact.⁴⁶ In 1891, Wolf, a member of said expedition, would depict⁴⁷ the Kuba kingdom as some sort of "unadulterated ancient civilization in the heart of Central Africa" (Vansina 23), but of course, as you probably realized when I mentioned these portuguese traders, we cannot take this european fantasy of an untouched people for granted. To quote Vansina :

it is entirely humbug. By the time of Wolf's visit, and contrary to his romantic picture, Kuba society had in fact been changing rapidly as the result of a significant influx of Luba slaves that had started more than five years before Wolf arrived and was to continue for almost another twenty years. (Vansina 23)

They were not cut off the larger slave and ivory trade in which the Portuguese participated from the Angola coast.⁴⁸ So we should not exaggerate their isolation. But still, european incursions up to this point were of the utmost rarity. Kwet aMbweky, the nyimi that assumed power in 1890 still forbid "anyone, on pain of death, to show any foreigner any road to the capital."⁴⁹ So, quite isolated, I'd say.

And the chronology, to me, doesn't check out. Before 1885 they were pretty independent and the story was collected around 1908 which leaves only 23 years for Mbumba to become white. They have

⁴¹ It's at least Torday's hypothesis based on local discourse about their allogeneity and their different cultural practices, cf. [Torday & Joyce 45](#).

⁴² [Torday & Joyce 23](#). Supposedly until Nyimi Longa (5th king). In his english translation (1925), Torday still applies *chembe kunji* to the current king.

⁴³ [Torday & Joyce 21](#). Torday ([Ibid. 44](#)) tried to explain it by Mbumba being an accurate memory of the Bushongo coming under the authority of a light-skinned man from north africa, maybe Amazigh.

⁴⁴ [Torday & Joyce 45-6](#). Which also relates to another creation myth where god descends from the sky and is too, an albinos. ([Ibid. 38](#)). Among the Bangongo, albino children were a somewhat good omen and were not allowed to work, but Torday notes that they never reached adulthood, and died between their 8th and 15th years which sounds sinister ([Ibid. 113](#)).

⁴⁵ António Ferreira da Silva Porto, "Novas jornadas," Boletim da Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa 6a (Lisbon, 1885-86), 450-51 ; cited by Vansina, *Being Colonized*, 2010:17.

⁴⁶ [Torday&Joyce 9](#) ; [Torday 1925:74](#). Cf. NKAY MALU Flavien, "[Hermann von Wissman et la reconnaissance du cours du Kasai](#)" in *La Croix et la chèvre : les missionnaires de Scheut et les Jésuites chez les Ding orientaux de la République Démocratique du Congo (1885-1933)* thèse soutenue le 29 juin 2006 ; Vansina 16-18.

⁴⁷ Ludwig Wolf, "Wolf's Bericht über seine Reise in das Land der Bakuba," in Hermann von Wissmann, *Im Innern Afrikas* (Leipzig, 1891), 256 , cited by Vansina 23.

⁴⁸ Vansina 13, 16.

⁴⁹ "Two elderly kings succeeded each other within four or five years after Wolf's passage in 1885, the second one being Kwet aMbweky, a septuagenarian. He assumed power in 1890, ruled over most of the country, and stabilized the situation somewhat, even though his accession was disputed by the claimant next in line, who continued to occupy part of the country. Kwet aMbweky upheld the policy of barring access to his capital and the inland regions of the realm by forbidding anyone, on pain of death, to show any foreigner any road to the capital. He was probably unaware that by these orders and by remaining an unseen and mysterious king he was actually enhancing his reputation and that of his armed might in the imagination of the foreigners in Kasai." (Vansina 22)

a pretty solid oral tradition, and a royal official charged with maintaining it so it would be weird that such a change could happen so quickly.⁵⁰

Belgian rule over the Congo was harsh to say the least and its brutality and cruelty might have been enough to alter these stories in such a short span of time, that's possible.

It's also possible that as more and more territory around the Kuba kingdom was subdued by europeans, the whiteness of Mbumba and Loko Yima found its way into the myth, or that the whiteness was there but gained new meaning with colonization, I think it's open to interpretation.

We don't know. Or at least I don't know. And I think David Leeming and Crash Course don't know either. I welcome any further information, if you know more about these stories or if you want to correct me on my pronunciation, which is probably wrong, please get in touch and we'll be happy to issue a correction, that would only be fair.

But whether it's the fruit of an ancient tradition or a consequence of european rule, one thing is for certain: Mumba's whiteness is part of the story as it was told, as it was collected. You can't just get rid of it because you think it's extraneous, it was part of the story.

And it was in Maria Leach, in Virginia Hamilton and in Leeming, so the problem is not really that the compilers don't include those facts, but that they get rid of the context and that Crash Course, then don't know what to make of it and even their animation team portrays Mbumba as black which he is not in the story.

I would understand the desire to avoid such long-winded discussions but I'm not sure it was a conscious decision, I think it stems directly from the limitations of their sources. And that shows ultimately the problem with bite-sized mythology.

To be clear, I think Crash Course Mythology can be a good series on the whole, we shouldn't judge it too harshly before it's finished and we shouldn't expect more than an introduction to these subjects. They'll probably give heed to schools of thought that I don't agree with at all but even if they don't they'll never completely satisfy a bitter scholar like me. And that's why I made this video, to add something, to discuss matters left untouched, not take away something, or argue it should'nt exist.

That said, what to conclude ?

Wait is "what to conclude" a proper english sentence ? ah before editing check the syntax and also maybe start--

5. Conclusion

What am I getting at?

I feel like I should make my main point clearer.

Those two examples show how the context in which a myth is collected can be enlightening but also misleading. It's very tempting to interpret both those myths in the same way, but again I think we should be careful with our interpretations especially when we don't know the whole context. My main point was that when mythological accounts come from colonial contexts it tends to pose a lot of problems that the people behind Crash Course are not necessarily equipped to deal with, even with the best intentions.

And I want to make it clear I'm not blaming them for... colonialism. That would be weird. This is really a wider problem in the field of let's say *mythology*. And maybe you've noticed but my biggest problem is not that Crash Course is copying Leeming's book, but that Leeming's book is really bad. Some parts are fine, but some others are really messed up, bordering on gross incompetence. Maybe the more recent edition is better, I couldn't find it. And from what I've read those other books don't seem as bad, I guess?

⁵⁰ [Torday & Joyce 38](#)

A lot of “mythologists” have literary backgrounds, thus the impetus to collect stories I guess, and there's nothing wrong with being interested in myth. But it becomes a problem when it's all you're interested in. Hear me out, like, a lot of students of myth only read books about mythology, and are under the impression that myth is the most important thing in any given culture. That from these stories, the deities involved, you can deduce many things on the societies that produced them. And Crash Course is certainly doing that.⁵¹

It goes wrong in my opinion when the myth becomes the whole face of the culture in question. For a lot of people the myth of Bumba is all they will ever know about Bushongo culture. If you google “Boshongo”, this story is the only thing you find. It's a story collected by one guy at one point but I guess it's all that matters about them now. And Leeming just assuming that it suggests a patrilineal culture instead of, you know, checking, is a concentrate of all that is wrong with this mindset, that gets rid of the context.

This mindset that abstracts myth from its context to make it into a nice little commodity that you can then exchange compare and put into catalogues.

And by comparison, Crash Course does give some context, context they cite the mayan Popol Vuh, they tell you Hesiod is a shepherd-poet from the, like, seventh century BC, this is a nineteenth century translation of the Shatapata Brahamana⁵² they do give the source.

Literate societies have the luxury of proper citation. But as for african myths they exist outside of history apparently. Kono and Bushongo are little more than names on a map, attached to a story with no timestamp whatsoever. Worse, when we find elements that can maybe be explained by the historical context, they are removed, to leave only the “mythological” parts. We're not interested in the actual human beings that told these stories, but in some sort of shared human prehistory that we could access by comparing these myths getting rid of anything explainable, with the illusion of going back to an era when human thought was purely mythical.

That might be a discussion for another day, but these attempts to rewind history to get some sort of original purity are always vain because no matter how far back you go you'll never find a contextless story.

Another consequence of this line of thinking is that now that we have the story we don't need to collect the story more than once, because we'd risk having variants of it. And now that they've come in contact with the West, you know there's the risk that their story is corrupted by us and thus has no value because?... Like there's the illusion that all these oral cultures evolve separately, creating a richness of original stories, free from influences and history, but the second we come in contact with them later stories lose all value whatsoever because somehow they're not the true story anymore. I for one think that all stories are interesting or at least it's more interesting to analyze those that actually exist rather than the purer original version you made up in your mind.

Of course mythology, is not the only way to get a shallow understanding of the Bushongos, far from it. Since pretty much the belgian conquest there's a whole market for Kuba art in the West so a lot of people will only know these sculptures which is not really better. And one of the major stories about the Kuba kingdom I found in western media was a 1960 *Time* Magazine article on how the Bakuba king had 800 wives. Because that's the only important thing, right?⁵³

But the impression I got when reading Leeming was that of a butterfly collector. Like you see all those beautiful insects pinned down and you want to ask what about this butterfly? What does it eat? Is this species still alive somewhere or is it the last remnant of some ancient era? And they tell you oh I don't know I just put them on the page because they looked alike and pretty and I guess they are patrilineal.

So to follow up on this bad metaphor: is the story of Mbumba still told, are there variants?

Well, I don't really know because Leeming, Hamilton and the like certainly don't care. They're just happy telling the story. But the Bushongos are still a thing, the Kuba kingdom survived through colonial rule, there still is a Bushongo king, a Nyimi in office since 1969, and as I understand it he's a

⁵¹ Their Pantheon series might be the clearer example.

⁵² CCM #3 (6'), citing the *Sacred Books of the East* translation.

⁵³ <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,871902,00.html> another one being his loss of 750 wives in LIFE [[GBooks](#)]

respected figure in local politics in Congo. Like just last month he addressed his condolences to the families of the two UN workers killed while investigating weapon trafficking in the Kasai region.⁵⁴

In that context I don't know if that makes sense to assume this story comes from some sort of remote antiquity.

Maybe there are some people of Bushongo descent watching me right now and thinking that I'm terribly wrong about everything and that Leeming is right, or that we're both completely wrong that's a stronger possibility. If so, if you have any further information get in touch because I didn't do that much research. That's another problem: Time. What I did here was by no means extensive research, like I just went and checked the sources that these books are supposed to rely on. And it still took me quite a while to write this video not including filming and editing.

I don't think Crash Course can afford to research every example they use with such diligence, Leeming should, since he claims to be a specialist of myth, but Crash Course, it's not really their place.

But still, the little amount of research I did just led me to have a reasonable doubt about Crash Course Mythology and I'll keep it in mind while watching their next videos.

Thanks for watching.

Credits

We hope you learned something today, don't hesitate to leave a comment if you think we got something wrong or you have a question or, well, a comment. We always like comments, and since we don't get a lot, we try answering all of them!

Don't forget to share and subscribe, although be aware that we mainly do our videos in french, although we have another english episode where we look at the history of Samhain and Halloween. I think it's a really good episode, and furthermore this time it was Antoine reading, and he has a way better pronunciation than me. I think about doing a separate channel dedicated to our english videos that would make sense, if we ever find an english-speaking audience.

We hope that you're this audience! At least we have a few videos planned in the future in english as well, so we hope to see you then.

For all intents and purposes, in the description, you will find a link to the script of this video, footnoted, with our references, and links to the sources when they are available online. As for sources, I think I cited pretty much everything on screen or in the script, I mainly went back the chain of transmission.

Leeming is partly on Google Books, as well as Ulli Beier and Hamilton. Holas' books on Kongo culture are kinda hard to find and still under copyright. but Torday's report *Les bushongos* is on Gallica, the French National Library platform, and he published a sort of abridged translation of his travel there in english in 1925 *On the trail of the Bushongo* that you can read on archive.org. I'll put link to those in the script and description. As for the Bushongo, as you've seen, we also used Vansina's book, *Being Colonized, The Kuba Experience in rural Congo* which can give a little context.

I'm not aware of in-depth analysis of these two stories, but I'd be glad to do a follow-up video if it comes to my attention, or if we get interesting comments. Until then, don't forget to check sources' sources.

And farewell.

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