Faro's Ark

The Mande peoples (Bambara, Malinke and others) · the upper Niger, Mali

Where It Comes From

The Mande peoples of Mali, among them the Bambara and the Malinke, tell a long and complex story of how the world was made. Parts of it were written down by the French anthropologist Germaine Dieterlen, who published "The Mande Creation Myth" in the journal *Africa* in 1957. Faro is the great spirit of water, linked above all with the River Niger. Tellings differ a good deal from place to place.

What Happens

In the beginning, the creator makes the world in stages. Faro, the water spirit, is sacrificed to put right a disorder in creation, and is brought back to life.

Faro then comes down from heaven to earth in an ark, bringing with him the eight ancestors of humankind and the first plants and animals.

Faro makes the waters rise over the land. In Dieterlen's account, those floods become the River Niger, and the place where the ark came to rest is given the name Mande.

In other tellings, Faro sends the flood to wash away the impure creation of a rebellious spirit, Pemba, and only those sheltered in the ark are kept safe.

What Stands Out

Why the flood came. Part of the ordering of creation; in some tellings, to cleanse a spoiled creation.

Who was saved, and how. The eight first ancestors, with the seeds and animals.

The boat or the refuge. An ark sent down from heaven.

What came after. The great river runs, the land is named, and the ancestors begin the human family.

This is less a punishment than part of how the world was set in order. Like the Yoruba story, it suggests that in Africa the waters are often remembered as part of creation, not its undoing.

THINK IT THROUGH

Here the flood gives the people their river, their land and their name. Can something that looks like a disaster also be a beginning?

Sources

Germaine Dieterlen, “The Mande Creation Myth”, *Africa* 27, no. 2 (1957): 124–138, cambridge.org.

“Mandé creation narrative” and “Faro (mythology)”, Wikipedia, for the other tellings.

Everything here is a summary in our own words. Where a story has many tellings, we follow the source named above and say so.