

MYTH AS A CRITICAL RELIGIO-CULTURAL PHENOMENON IN AFRICAN STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

Myths are accounts of the origin of societies and institutions not subject to rationalization but often used by historians and religious scholars in their quest to study African history; for it is only thus that man can comprehend the various aspects of the continent's history and culture. This paper examines the critical understanding of the African worldview from its mythological perspective, the place of African studies, and the significance of myths in the reflection of the African religious experience. On the forgoing, this work examined the phenomenon of religion; culture; religion, and cultural alignment of the concept of myth; its typologies as well as function; myth and religion; African traditional religion and mythology. These Sub-thematic assertions (notions) are been judiciously adhered to in other to productively state a comprehensive standpoint of the topic under study. In this context, the study adopted Rudoff Ottos' Functional Myth theory to solve the problem of gross hermeneutic re-contextualization of myth in African studies. This problematic fact was handled by the Emphatic Regurgitation on the Viability and Criticality of Myth in African Studies. Not also undermining the contributions and findings of the different functions myth play in African traditional religion; such as explanation, justification or validation, description, healing, renewal, and inspiration.

Keywords: Myths, Religion, Culture, African Studies, and African Traditional Religion.

INTRODUCTION

Myth serves as a life wire of every religion of humanity. This is because the myth of any religion helps to validate the irrational tales of the religion. Almost all religions especially the theistic religions have some mysterious stories that ordinarily may not make enough sense to the irreligious humans as they can not be scientifically and experimentally validated. In this case, the trueness of the myth to the religious adherents serves as enough evidence to validate every irrational tale within the worldview. In this regard, the question becomes; what is this myth all about?

Myth is a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings (elements) or events. According to Onwuka (2020), myth and other tales give valuable insights into how people practice and think about their cosmos, and as such, even when a particular culture (worldview) no longer believes that its myth is a true explanation of a particular belief, especially as a result of them embracing science and technology, to answer their ultimate question. These myths often survive as receptacles of important

cultural value. Although, myth is relative; what is conceived as true mythical tales in culture "A" may not connote truth rather a mere tale in culture "B."

It is on this backdrop that this topic examines the phenomenon of myth in the African religio-cultural setting. This implies religion and cultural alignment of the concept of myth; its typologies as well as function; myth and religion; African traditional religion and mythology. These Sub-thematic assertions (notions), will be judiciously adhered to in order to productively state a comprehensive standpoint of the topic under study. In this context, religion is contextualized.

Theoretical Alignment

This work adopts Rudoff Otto's Functional Myth theory. Rudoff Otto was a historian of religion and considered religious elements as the source of myth. He also went further by saying that myth and symbols as non-expression of religion derived from a specific religious sense which is called numinous which established its presence in all human existence.

The functional myth theory states that myths talk about what type of things should and should not be done, and the consequences for those wrongdoings. The functional myth theory also states that myths were created for social control and served the function of ensuring stability in a society. Myths were used to teach morality and social behavior. The import of the theory according to Otto was for social control and to ensure stability in the society.

Religion

Religion is usually defined as a socio-cultural system of designated behaviours and practices, morals, beliefs, worldviews, texts, sanctified places, prophecies, ethics, or organizations, that generally relates humanity to supernatural, transcendental, and spiritual elements; however, there is no scholarly consensus over what precisely constitutes a religion.

Different religions may or may not contain various elements ranging from the divine, sacred things, faith, a supernatural being or supernatural beings, or "some sort of ultimacy and transcendence that will provide norms and power for the rest of life". Religious practices according to Wayman (2011) may include rituals, sermons, commemoration or veneration (of deities and/or saints), sacrifices, festivals, feasts, trances, initiations, funerary services, matrimonial services, meditation, prayer, music, art, dance, public service, or other aspects of human culture. Religions according to Tasie & Olumati (2013) have sacred histories and narratives, which may be preserved in sacred scriptures, symbols, and holy places, that aim mostly to give meaning to life. Tasie & Olumati further asserts that religions may contain symbolic stories, which are sometimes said by followers to be true, that may also attempt to explain the origin of life, the universe, and other phenomena. Traditionally, faith, in addition to reason, has been considered a source of religious beliefs, practices, and the culture of a people. Culture without religion is demonic and religion cannot exist without culture, this is the reason why religion is discussed alongside culture.

Culture

Culture is symbolic communication; some of its symbols include a group's skills, knowledge, attitudes, values, and motives. The meanings of the symbols are learned and deliberately perpetuated in a society through its institutions. Culture also consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other hand, as conditioning influences upon further action. This may be the reason why Owete, Gbule & Odili (2012) Stated that the oversight function of culture in religion is the legitimatization of phenomenon in the study of religion and culture in Africa.

Religion and Culture

The relatedness of culture to religion is approached in this conversation as not just a mere emphasis on cultural materialism; however, cultural materialism will be discussed in this work. The focus will be concerned with an understanding of culture in terms of socio-cultural systems. Upon this background, studying religion becomes an ambiguous task. With some uncertainty as to what exactly constitutes religion (Schilderman 2014), there may be uncertainty as to what ought to be studied and how to study it. In a frame of contextualization, what is clear is where to search for forms of religion. Mulder (1985), indicates that studying religion implies religion as an expression of human culture. Religion is, thus, expressed and clothed in cultural guise. Comprehending religion then implies studying human culture. The reciprocal interaction between culture and religion must be recognized: religion is determined by culture, but religion also influences culture. The fate of religion and culture is, thus, interwoven.

Woodhead (2011) differentiates between religion as belief and religion as an identity marker. Religion as belief refers to a religious interest in dogmas, doctrines, and propositions. Religion as an identity marker refers to religion as a source of identity, either socially or as a personal choice. Based on Woodhead's differentiation, Kilp (2011) indicates how religion has currently excelled at being a cultural identity marker, increasingly so in Africa. As so many different factors are at play in determining identity, cultural identity must, however, be seen as in flux (Vroom 1996). The result is that people become alienated from the traditional religious beliefs and practices and turn to cultural-religious identities, which do not necessarily include religious beliefs. At play here are the elements already identified: assigned meaning of behavior and culture as utility. These factors must be kept in mind when cultural identity is created. This may be the reason why Waggoner (2011) argues that religion has indeed relocated. Although the shift that has taken place in religion no longer resides in the consciousness but within the culture. Waggoner's argument, in a nutshell, is that a shift has taken place. In this regard, religion is no longer perceived to be subjectively imagined, locating, therefore, religion in the bodies and brains of people participating in religion, but rather religion is located in culture or a social system. The implication is that studying religion requires a change in focus, away from the individual and group consciousness and finding the location of religion in the exterior to the subjective. The exterior subjectivity of religion over time

metamorphoses into irrational contextualization of religious dogmas latter conceived as myth.

Myth

Generally, a myth is a story that is believed to be true and has its origin in the far distant history of a people. Alagoa (1978), argued that myths are historical information transmitted orally by processes peculiar to each community. Suffice to say that myths are man-made stories that play explanatory functions in the African understanding of reality. The Encyclopedia

Britannica (2016) defined myth as;

... a story handed down in oral form from our forefathers which explains reality, concepts, and beliefs and further serve as explanations of natural events such as creations, the origin of things, history of a race or a people.

This shows that myth is not just a product of human imagination but a direct expression of reality.

Anyanwu (2017) citing Houndtonji (2019) opines that "man cannot live without myths". In African cosmology, the reason is quite obvious: man is a being that cannot bear to live with certain questions unanswered that is why he sits down to formulate myths to make those questions answerable. This is why Anyanwu (2017), states that man is a myth-making animal. For Jaja (1994) myths are pre-philosophic; thus, philosophy started where myths stopped, which presupposes that philosophy has its roots in myths.

It is pertinent to point out that myths are results of the revelation of "thou" and are often founded upon an original experience that reaches beyond the sensorial and rational, but they are not illogical. They are most susceptible to rational analysis and logical interpretation. An analysis of myth conceptualizations shows that actions of gods and heroes often presuppose a keen analysis of given circumstances and are based on rational decisions (Kirk, 1974). Again, it can be argued that some myths represent complex logical systems that are different from those which are usually found in contemporary modern societies. Nevertheless, Apostel (2018) posits that there is a radical separation between mythos and logos, between myth and philosophy.

Myth is associated with the mysterious and illogical as well as philosophy with the rational and logical. Myths are part of a way of life and state precedence and models for human actions, but they do not seek to explain them on a rational basis. Myths use images, philosophy use concepts. Philosophy asks generalized questions, relies on systematic reasoning and rejects the supernatural explanations of the world, but mythological societies are unsystematic and deal with the sacred (Apostel, 1981).

Myth is a wholeness attained to the world as a whole because those who live in myths and are guided by them are engaged on many different planes with the whole of which the myth is an integral part. By teaching man and by regulating the way of his living in devotional engagement with the whole and by gradually disclosing many layers of its meaning, myth reveals the knowledge of the whole. But the knowledge of the whole is not merely theoretical. It is not merely a partial intellectual knowledge, but it embraces the whole of life. Myth reveals the knowledge for which philosophy in a proper sense looks. But it does not disclose this knowledge without appropriate devotional engagement. Myth is completed already at the beginning, whereas philosophy seeks to be completed at the

end. Mythical societies live in eternity rather than in historical time. The societies in which philosophy of science plays an important part constantly seek their completion and are in permanent dissatisfaction with the results of their findings. They live in history and are time-oriented. Myth corresponds to eternity, philosophy to the discovery of history.

Myths are seen as vehicles conveying certain facts or truths about man's experiences in his encounter with the created order and its relation to the super-sensible world. For Abanuka (1994), the myth tells of the superhuman experiences of the community. Myth exposes the fact that man's misfortunes on earth as well as his hardships are attributed to disobedience to the divine commands and moral codes of the deities as a point in his life.

Generally, myths contain three kinds of stories namely, stories of origin, explanatory stories, and didactic stories. Each of these stories is meant to explain a particular phenomenon. Myth is not an intellectual explanation or artistic imagery but living chronicles in the minds of Africans. They contain and express the history, the culture and the inner experience of the African himself.

Africans use myths to explain how things came to be through the efforts of a supernatural being. It is concrete and expresses life better than abstract thought can do.

It is indeed surprising that before this time, some scholars still doubt the existence of African studies. The reason is that modern philosophers having studied Western philosophy treated African studies from a typical western standpoint. It is important to note that in traditional Africa there are individuals who are capable of critical coherent and independent thinking. This school of thought is the philosophic sagacity.

Philosophic sagacity retains the basic tenets of the professional school. However, unlike it, it is an exposition of the pearls of wisdom and beliefs of the individuals who have not been schooled in the formal educational system. It consists of pearls of wisdom and views of those who are professionally trained philosophers that are neither classroom-taught nor self-taught. A sage can be a very formally educated and literate person (Oruka, 1995) philosophical sagacity is an expression of the view that amongst the various African communities, exists individuals who even though they have not had the benefit of having contact with the so-called Aquinas Russell all western philosophy (such as Plato) are nevertheless, critical independent thinkers who guide their thought and judgment by the power of reason and inborn insight rather than by the authority of communal consensus (Oruka, 1990).

In this regard, myths can be classified based on their functions and modus-operandi.

The Three Typology of Myth

There are different types of myths, not just three. There are several entire theories of myth. The theoretical study of myth is very complex; many books have been written about theories of myth, and we could base entire articles on theories of myth (without studying any of the myths themselves). The problem with theories of myth, however, is that they are not very good; they do not do a great job of explaining the myths or in helping us understand them. Furthermore, Abanuka (2019) opines that the myths themselves are much more interesting than the theories. For this reason, this article will not say very much about the theories of myth, and at the same time, will not ignore the theoretical study of myth entirely, so we will limit ourselves to discussing only three types of myth:

1. Aetiological Myths

Aetiological myths (sometimes spelled etiological) explain the reason why something is the way it is today. The word aetiological is from the Greek word *aetion* (αἰτιον) meaning "reason" or "explanation". Please note that the reasons given in an aetiological myth are NOT real (or scientific) reasons. They are explanations that have meaning for us as human beings. There are three subtypes of aetiological myths: natural, etymological, and religious.

- A **natural aetiological myth** explains an aspect of nature. For example, you could explain lightning and thunder by saying that Zeus is angry.
- An **etymological aetiological myth** explains the origin of a word. (Etymology is the study of word origins.) For example, you could explain the name of the goddess, Aphrodite, by saying that she was born in sea-foam since *aphros* is the Greek word for sea-foam.
- A **religious aetiological myth** explains the origin of a religious ritual. For example, you could explain the Greek religious ritual of the Eleusinian Mysteries by saying that they originated when the Greek goddess, Demeter, came down to the city of Eleusis and taught the people how to worship her.

All three of these explanations are not true: Zeus' anger is not the correct explanation for lightning and thunder; Aphrodite's name was not derived from the Greek word *aphros*, and Demeter did not establish her religious rituals in the town of Eleusis. Rather, all of these explanations had meaning for the ancient Greeks, who told them to help them understand their world.

2. Historical Myths

Historical myths according to Momoh (2019), are told about a historical event, and they help keep the memory of that event alive. Ironically, in historical myths, accuracy is lost but the meaning is gained. The myths about the Trojan War, including the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, could be classified as historical myths. The Trojan War did occur, but the famous characters that we know from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (Agamemnon, Achilles, Hector, etc.) probably did not exist.

3. Psychological Myths

Psychological myths try to explain why we feel and act the way we do. A psychological myth is different from an aetiological myth because a psychological myth does not try to explain one thing by way of something else (such as lightning and thunder can be explained by Zeus' anger). In a psychological myth, the emotion itself is seen as a divine force, coming from the outside that can directly influence a person's emotions. For example, the goddess, Aphrodite, is sometimes seen as the power of erotic love. When someone said or did something that they did not want to do, the ancient Greeks might say that Aphrodite "made them" do it.

African Traditional Religion and Mythology

African traditional religion refers to the indigenous or autochthonous religions of the African people. It deals with their cosmology, ritual practices, symbols, arts, society, and so on. Because religion is a way of life, it relates to culture and society as they affect the worldview of the African people. This religion has gone global! The Trans-Atlantic slave

trade led to the growth of African inspired traditions in the Americas such as Candomblé in Brazil, Santería in Cuba, or Vodun in Haïti. Furthermore, many in places like the US and the UK have converted to various traditional African religions, and the importance of the diaspora for these religions is growing rapidly. To Asukwo, Adaka & Dimgba (2013), African religions have also become a major attraction for those in Diaspora who travel to Africa on pilgrimages because of the global reach of these traditions. In African traditional religion, myths embody philosophical reflections, express values, and identify moral standards. Unlike Western mythology, African myths are not recounted as a single narrative story, nor is there any established corpus of myth. Instead, myths are embedded and transmitted in ritual practice.

African mythology commonly depicts the cosmos anthropomorphically. The human body is a microcosm that incorporates the same primordial elements and essential forces that make up the universe. Twin-ship is a predominant theme in much West African myth and ritual because the human body is conceived as the twin of the cosmic body. According to Asante (2003) the cosmogony shared by the Dogon, Bambara, and Malinke peoples of Mali, the primordial beings were twins, and twins, therefore, represent the ideal. Every individual shares in the structure of twin-ship. Following birth, the placenta, which is believed to be the locus of one's destiny and the soul's twin, is buried in the family compound and watered for the first week of the child's life. Among the Asante of Ghana, twins according to Parminder (1954) are assigned a status akin to that of living shrines; a sign of abundant fertility, they are deemed repositories of sacredness. For the Ndembu of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, by contrast, twins represent an excess of fertility more characteristic of the animal world than the human, and rituals are undertaken to protect the community from this anomalous condition.

The Validity and Criticality of Myth in African Studies

Myths play a very important role in the African understanding of reality. African studies cannot operate in a vacuum; therefore myths provide the necessary analytic and conceptual framework for authentic African studies. They provide the solid foundation on which African studies hinges Amadi (1994). One must note that they are the fertile ground for African philosophizing. They constitute expressions of the inner side of individuals and their relationship with others, nature, and the supernatural. It is the philosophical reflections of the people in past, preserved and handed down to society through myths; if indeed the past is unintelligible and conveys meaning only in the light of the present, then myths convey meaning only when they establish a coherent relationship between the past and the present. The reason is quite simple. A people's worldview cannot be studied in isolation, because their past is as important as the present in deciding the future. Given this scenario, we can deduce that Myths bring to light the past experiences of the people and from there the present African studies see an avenue for philosophizing.

Uduigwomen (1995) observed, in African epistemology that myths serve as a means of acquiring and transmitting knowledge, for knowledge has a prominent place in the African mind. It enables the African to recollect past activities of men and societies which make it possible for the individual or societies to orientate themselves aimed and bewildering currents of the society.

In its validity and criticality, there have been disputes and disagreements as to the role and place of myths in African studies. To this end, some scholars have argued that myths cannot be regarded as philosophy because they fall short of empirical verifiability and logical consistency, but Horton, (1987) de-bunked this and admitted myths and rituals into the general corpus of experience which is capable of exhibiting a logical and consistent structure.

Similarly, if African studies are a reflection on African experience, myths are the stabilizing factors to African experience; this implies that African studies are a critical reflection on myths as stabilizing factors. So, the critical analysis and the awareness of the relevance of myths according to Jaja (1995), lodges that proverbs, folklores, etc. would go a long way in inculcating in Africans the habit of critical reflections on issues bordering on life.

Myths are the essential and ready tools for thinking and communicating in African philosophy. This debits the reason why through their meaningful and communicative features, myths exhibit and enhance the coherence, stability, and continuity of society. On finding out the critical function of myth in Africa studies, Jaja (1995), stretches that myths play the role of literature and fill the lacuna created by the lack of literature on the history and supplement the oral culture of the African experience. The connectedness of myth from the past to the present eschews the vestiges of the truth in African epistemology and indirectly states that they are traceable to mythological depositories and other conventional values. Hence, myths serve as sources of truth! Some myths are authoritative and appear to have a compelling force of obedience on the people of Africa. Myths also play an important role in the moral education of society. Generally, beauty is regarded as a form of moral goodness. The value of beauty and goodness is mostly couched in myths. In conformity with this, African aesthetic value is circumscribed in moral beauty, which is epitomized in myths in African culture which focus on values, virtues, attachments, loyalties, faithfulness, diligence, and other social and religious virtues (Jaja, 2001). A few examples will suffice. African Vision of the universe is entrenched in various creation myths, which serve etiological purposes. So, the African studies can not be possible and complete without the study of myth because it thus explains how and why the different natural phenomena came into existence, the forces behind their perfect working, and the relationship that existed and still exists between man and the creator God, and the universe. To Mazama (2003) articulations on African cosmology may differ from one locality to another; they varyingly depict God as the Supreme Being and that He created what comprises the universe, and that after creating the universe God dwells in it and sustains its inhabitants. This speaks of God's imminence. And for the African, that is reality incontestable.

Yoruba myth in Africa studies; According to Yoruba myth, God dwelt in the sky (heaven) which was quite low. Men originally went freely to Him to tender complaints and He responded spontaneously. However, it is related that, after some time and due to the disobedience of man, God withdrew and separated from the world He created and was no longer bothered about it. Instead, He sent His ministers, the divinities endowing them with various responsibilities. This explains the concept of a transcendent or withdrawn God. God withdrew without informing his people. This is the idea of Deus Absconditus (or Deus otiosus or Deus remotus). Africans also see man as the center of the universe.

Every other thing was created for his use. He is the being that exhibits the absoluteness of God”.

We may now look closely at the cosmogony of some African societies to illustrate our point.

Igbo myth in Africa studies; Among the Igbo, the Supreme deity to whom all power of creation is credited is known as Chukwu, Chiokike, or Chineke. According to Nwala, the cosmogony of the Igbo is based on a theogony that views Chineke as self-creating; that has always been, will always be. Chukwu, the everlasting deity, created the universe which includes the sky (Eluigwe), the heavenly bodies, the earth (Elu-uwa), and the spirits and earthly creatures.

The myth has it that Chukwu is symbolized by all oranyamvii, which is believed to be the source from which all other reforms of life radiated. The first man that was created was known as Ife-nta, meaning junior light. This name places man very close to Chukwu (i.e. Sun, the great light). Man is thus, “is” next to God in order of things in the universe. Furthermore, the first to be created was obo-omananya. Other creatures that God made are animals, plants, and spirits. All these creatures enjoyed an initial harmony with God. It should be stated that certain events were responsible for the distortion of this original cosmogonic harmony. In the first place, the Supreme deity granted man too much freedom in terms of action, and man abused it and this led to quarrels, acrimony, and confusion among the created beings. For instance, the myth has it that there was a constant quarrel among women and the careless use of kitchen utensils, particularly the pestle which was constantly hitting at the sky, the original abode of God. Chukwu was annoyed and thus the sky eventually moved away from the earth.

From the myth, we can learn the following. In the first place, there is the acknowledgment of a supreme deity with the power of creation and control over what he has created. Furthermore, man is very crucial in this creation. Man misused his initial freedom and restraint has to be imposed. It was based on this that morality and the act of appeasing the Creator emerged. Relation to this is the fact that it was the man who distorted the original cosmic harmony and to correct this, he developed certain religious practices to placate his creator.

Ibibio Myth in African Studies; According to the Ibibio an ethnic group in the Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria, the most dominant feature in human existence is the belief in the Supreme selfbegotten being called Abasi-Ibom. Abasi in this context means “a divine being who always and will always be forever, while Ibom refers to the limitlessness and infinite nature of this being. It is further held that Abasi Ibom created two offsprings namely: Abasi Enyong (male) with dominion over the sky (Enyong) and whose offspring include the sun, thunder, and lighting, the second offspring of Abasi Ibom is Abasi-Isong (female), with control over the earth (Isong) and whose offspring include Ndem in charge of the waters and Ekpo in charge of the bushes.

The Ibibio believe that this high God (Abasi-Ibom) created all things including Indemo to whom he also gives the charge of the different aspects of human affairs. Thus, there is NdemIsong (fertility deity) to look after land fertility; NdemUdua (market deity) to protect the interest of traders; Ndem Ikot (farmland deity) who is supposed to dwell in the farmland to look after the growth of the crops.

According to Udoidem (1993), Abasi Ibom having created Himself, caused the sky (enyong) Isong (earth) and Inyang Ibom (the waters) by mere verbal command. At the time of creation, the earth and the sky were separated entities that got struck together to satisfy their natural sexual desire. However, conflict later resulted between them and the sky moved away. It is reported that separation must have been caused by the earthy kids who normally rub their dirty oily hands on the face of the sky after eating and thus force the sky to move upwards.

To effect the separation, Abasi-Ibom sent a giant with an ax to force away from the sky from the earth. The Ibibio still holds that despite this separation, the conflict between the earth and the sky persists and this is manifested in the alternation of days and nights. Night reflects when the earth has overpowered the sky, while 'day' reflects the reverse.

Emphatical Regogitation on the Valiolity and Criticality of Myth in Africa Studies

From the above emphasis on myth, it shows that myths represent the African spirit and the African view of reality. Therefore for African studies to be authentically African, they must operate within the conceptual framework of myths which represent the African reality and they are authentically African. The use of a Eurocentric yardstick to judge African studies is unacceptable and immoral. The fact that African societies were pre-literate does not negate the existence of truly African studies based on the environment, experience, and culture of the people. It is worthy to remember that even in Greece, the emergence of philosophy was preceded by the rationalizing and systematizing of myths, such as we find, for example, in Hesiod's *Theogony* (Kirk, 1974). The process by which myth gave way to philosophy is thus not straightforward, extending for centuries. Now, here are those who question. African studies take into consideration the centuries of preliterate isolation of African societies, in which African myth and philosophy have spread among African peoples but have not been documented in written form.

It is a great tragedy and disservice to intellectuals if such sort of views continues among intellectuals. This essay is not intended to provide easy answers to immense problems. Even if we do like to think about this we are probably all aware of our prudent human condition. As in the Greece of Xenophanes, Heraclitus and Plato there are still temples, but merely as something that reminds us of the past. Myths also remind us of the past, the past in its real existence. In the proper sense, philosophy is the love of wisdom, the pursuit of the knowledge of the whole. But when it turns to "be scientific and attempts to look at the world "objectively", that is as if it were an object, it arrives only at the partial knowledge of a part.

Myths tell us about the reality of the universe and all its components. African myths explain in the context of African cultures, great human concerns and realities such as death, creation, the evolution of living things, man's relationship with other living creatures, etc. However, the purpose of a myth is far more than being explanatory. It has many values in the African societal setting. It acts as a socializing agent. It is used to nourish and buttress the traditions of the ancestors. Myths are also educative in that they teach people especially the younger ones the meaning of the universe and man's place in it. They place the world before us as an object of indifferent investigation, a world to be known not just as an abstracted object but as a wholistic real entity.

A universal knowledge arises from man's effective engagement with the world and myths help explain the great human concepts of his time.

Myth in African Studies

The Account of African Cosmologies has been a controversial issue among scholars predisposing to regard them as of less interest because of their simplicity and lack of theoretical sophistication in articulating visions of a cosmos generally, even in mythical terms. The African Indigenous Religions have been in a state of decline since the emergence of Christianity and Islam. These two foreign religions have prevailed and dominated African and Africans.

Many scholars in Africa have adopted the culture and the religion that is generally accepted and African Traditional religion cannot change the new generations of scholars who look at the negative value promoted by non-African sources in the cosmological paradigms because Africans have not spoken for themselves.

The cosmological paradigms which Africans relied on are patched accounts from explorers, missionaries, colonial administrators, traders, folklorists and anthropologists, historians, and art historians. The writings were at face value information based on what he had in mind. But today

Africa has reclaimed Egyptian civilization, which cosmology is part of her intellectual heritage.

Whereas it is not easy to trace African cosmology and cosmogony, non-controversial accounts of authentically African cosmologies - past or present can be identified. These African ethnic groups upheld their cosmologies.

- ❖ The Yoruba of West Africa (Principally Nigeria)
- ❖ The Maasai of East Africa (Principally Kenya)
- ❖ The Kongo of Central Africa (Principally Democratic Republic of Congo, formerly Zaire).

The Yoruba cosmology, as a pantheon. As its head, at top is the "sky" god, Olodumare. He "reign" over the spiritual (Oruu) and material (aye) worlds he ultimately is responsible for creativity though may lesser (a step down the pantheon) divinities (Orisha). Olodumare is portrayed as distant from both these lesser divinities and the created world with which they principally interact. (Hallen, 2000) said taking another step down the pantheon, one enters the physical world, where human beings as well maybe rated or ranked on one of seven different levels, depending on their talents and abilities.

They have a pathway of communication between the spiritual and the physical world. The agency of the "diviner" (Babalawo). In the Yoruba pantheon, there is no personified force of evil, especially one comparable to the Christian or Muslim Satan or devil. Therefore, on the level of humanity, individuals usually bear the ultimate responsibility for their immoral (not "evil") behavior (Hallen, 2000; Olupona, 2000).

The Nature of Myth in Africa

The Nature of Myth in Africa is that myths are pre-philosophic; that philosophy started where myths stopped, which presupposes that philosophy has its roots in myths.

This, therefore, connotes that the origin of myth should be traced to this capacity of man to know the order of nature or to the openness of the mind to reality. Because the human mind is open to reality, it can have a certain knowledge of the order of things in the

universe. That there is order in the universe is explained by the integrated nature of reality as a whole. Notwithstanding the diversity of the things that exist and their contrary qualities, reality as a whole exists and operates according to its inherent laws, Abanuka (2019).

Myths are seen as a vehicle conveying certain facts or truths about man's experiences in his encounter with the created order and its relation to the super-sensible world. Abanuka (2014) continued by saying that myth tells of superhuman experiences of the community. Myth exposes the fact that man's misfortunes on earth as well as his hardships are attributed to disobedience to the divine commands and moral codes of the deities as a point in his life. Jaja, (2014) said that

"Myth is not an intellectual explanation or artistic imagery but living chronicles in the minds of Africans. This means they contain and express the history, the culture, and the inner experience of the African himself. Furthermore, Africans use myths to explain how things cause to be through the efforts of a supernatural being. Jaja (1995) added myths connect the past with the present. And play an important role in the moral education of society. Myths are also educative in that they teach people especially the younger ones the meaning of the universe and man's place in it.

Functions of myth in African Traditional Religion

There are some important functions of myth in the African worldview. These functions according to Kamara (2000) may include but are not limited to:

1. **Explanation-** The most obvious function of myths is the explanation of facts, whether natural or cultural. One North American Indian (Abenaki) myth, for example, explains the origin of corn (maize): a lonely man meets a beautiful woman with long, fair hair; she promises to remain with him if he follows her instructions; she tells him in detail how to make a fire and after he has done so, she orders him to drag her over the burned ground; as a result of these actions, he will see her silken hair (viz., the cornstalk) reappear, and thereafter he will have corn seeds for his use. Henceforth, whenever Abenaki Indians see corn (the woman's hair), they know that she remembers them. A myth such as this one functions as an explanation, but the narrative form distinguishes it from a straightforward answer to an intellectual question about causes. The function of explanation and the narrative form go together since the imaginative power of the myth lends credibility to the explanation and crystallizes it into a memorable and enduring form. Hence myths play an important part in many traditional systems of education.
2. **Justification or validation-** Many myths explain ritual and cultic customs. According to Stiaton (2006) myths from the Island of Ceram (in Indonesia), in the beginning, life was not complete, or not yet "human": vegetation and animals did not exist, and there was neither death nor sexuality. In a mysterious manner Hainuwele, a girl with extraordinary gift-bestowing powers appeared. The people killed her at the end of their great annual celebration, and her dismembered body was planted in the earth. Among the species that sprang up after this act of planting were tubers—the staple diet of the people telling the myth. With certain circularity frequent in mythology, the myth validates the very cultic celebration mentioned in the myth. The cult can be understood as a commemoration of those

first events. Hence, the myth can be said to validate life itself together with the cultic celebration. Comparable myths are told in several societies where the main means of food production is the cultivation of root crops; the myths reflect the fact that tubers must be cut up and buried in the earth for propagation to take place.

Ritual sacrifices are typical of traditional peasant cultures. In most cases, such customs are related to mythical events. Among important themes is the necessity of death (e.g., the grain "dies" and is buried, only to yield a subsequent harvest), a society's cyclic renewal of itself (e.g., New Year's celebrations), and the significance of women and sexuality. New Year's celebrations, often accompanied by a temporary abandonment of all rules, may be related to or justified by mythical themes concerning a return to chaos and a return of the dead.

3. **Description-**Since myths deal with the origin of the world, the end of the world, or a paradisiacal state, they are capable of describing what people can never "see for themselves" however rational and observant they are. It may be that the educational value of myths is even more bound up with the descriptions they provide than with the explanations. In traditional, preindustrial societies myths form perhaps the most important available model of instruction, since no separate philosophical system of inquiry exists.
4. **Healing, renewal, and inspiration-** Creation myths play a significant role in healing the sick; they are recited (e.g., among the Navajo people of North America) when an individual's world—that is to say, the person's life—is in jeopardy. Thus, healing through the recitation of a cosmogony is one example of the use of myth as a magical incantation.

Another example is the case of Icelandic poets, who, in the singing of the episode in Old Norse mythology in which the god Odin wins for gods and humans the "mead of song" (a drink containing the power of poetic inspiration), can be said to be celebrating the origins of their art and, hence, renewing it. The poetic aspect of myths in archaic and preindustrial traditions is considerable.

Societies in which artistic endeavour is not yet specialized tend to rely on mythical themes and images as a source of all self-expression. Mythology has also exerted an aesthetic influence in more modern societies. An example is the prevalence of themes from Greek and Roman Classical mythology in Western painting, sculpture, and literature.

CONCLUSION

Doing justice to any topic requires careful examination and re-examination of thematic and sub-thematic frames that form the subject's wholeness. In many cases, the ambiguousness of a topic could pose an academic threat to research. "myth as a critical Religio-Cultural phenomenon in African studies" is a critical research area in African studies and as such, requires an extreme measure to carefully harmonize and articulate. This article was able to achieve inclusivity by way of dividing the theme into dependable and independable variables to ensure that the trust of the theme (myth as a critical Religio-cultural phenomenon in African studies) was brought to the fore decisively, and logically discussed.

The article was able to assert that explanation, justification, validation, Descriptiveness, Healing, renewal, and inspiration were core functions of the myth in Africa studies. The

phenomenon of myth as such was critically validated by its disputes and disagreement settlement roles, legitimization of unintelligible tell; moral education of the society and others. The article established a floorless ground for the criticality of myth in African study with a superior gesture to bargain for further scholarly insight into the phenomenon.

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