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## **Cooking with one's Firewood: Myth as a Conflict Generator and Conflict Resolver in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and *Idu***

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### **Abstract**

*Myth is one of the elements of folklore and its importance in the matrix of African culture can never be overemphasized. Myth which comprises of stories, tales and ideas that try to account about the origin of things and answer important questions about how certain phenomenon came into existence has become necessary and significant in the analysis of the worldview, outlook, general belief, custom, tradition, culture and perception of a homogenous group of people to life. Folklore comprises a set of belief,*

*principles, stories, charms among the bulk of other elements of oral tradition which distinguishes a given set of people from another and gives them mark of uniqueness, identification and recognition as well as maintain their link with their past with all its imperfection as a way of understanding their present and making meaningful assessment of the future. Myth as one of the elements of folklore fulfils this function even much more. Flora Nwapa is one of Africa's famous writers who like Achebe used her literary works to reconstruct the African history especially as it relates to her Igbo community against the distorted views of the European colonizers. An Igbo proverb has it that one cooks with the amount of firewood in one's farm. This obvious is why Flora Nwapa chose to cook with her native firewood by making the myth of Uhamiri a crucial element of her story. In a similar study carried early, we studied myth as a plot generator in the two novels of Flora Nwapa Efuru and Idu. We were able to showcase how myth generated the plots of the two popular novels of Nwapa. In this paper, we extended the study to demonstrate how myth as an element of folklore also functions as a conflict generator and resolver in the two selected novels of Nwapa, Efuru and Idu respectively. How myth helped the author to sharpen and create her conflicts which led to the suspense and intrigues in the novels and how it helped in the resolution and denouement afterwards is the crux of this present study.*

### **Introduction**

The word myth comes from the Greek word “mythos” which implies ‘plot’ or ‘narrative’. Myth has come to mean so many things to so many people who have tried to define it in a way it suites their purpose. Myth according to Frye et al ‘is an abstract fictional design in which gods and other beings do whatever they like’ (135). William Bascom sees myths as ‘prose narratives which in the society in which they are told are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past. They are acceptable on faith; they are taught to be believed; and they can be cited as authority in answer to ignorance, doubt or disbelief’ (4). Myths in the words of Onyeshie James are ‘stories from ancient times especially ones that were told to explain of the natural world and how it came to be (63).

This definition no doubt encompasses some general ideas of what myth entails, for it tries to answer the question ‘why’ something and ‘how’ a phenomenon came into existence. According to Gregory Schrempp, ‘myths refer to colourful stories that tell about origins of humans and the cosmos’ (63). As Edde Ije reports:

The Random House College Dictionary defines myth variously: it is "a traditional or legendary story usually concerned with deities or demi-gods and the creation of the world and its inhabitants". It is "a story or belief that attempts to express or explain a basic truth; an allegory or a parable". Myth is "a belief or a subject of belief whose truth or reality is accepted uncritically... (82).

Helen Chukwuma in her own study grouped myth and legend under the umbrella of *ita*. According to her:

*Ita* is a type of story which is purported to have happened but the veracity which is questionable bearing in mind the transience of the spoken word. It differs from *akuko-ifo* in that it contains some historical truth. People and places mentioned are validated in real life. Narrators attest to the veracity of their stories by quoting eye witnesses or sources as "my father", "my grandfather", or "the elders". *Ita* attempts a configuration and explanation of the external order of reality that appears unreal, different and disconnected. Rivers, big and outside human control, unusual natural phenomena as groves and huge trees are aptly accommodated in a mythical schema. This category of tales deals with origins and extra-ordinary phenomena (31).

This is the much we can take from the bulk of the definitions of myth that replete many literary publications. Just like we earlier stated in the previous study of the same novels and their connection with myth, we here again re-assert that from these definitions, certain ideas are most striking about the nature of myth which is the idea that myth tries to explain the origin and answers the questions of 'why' and 'how' something came into existence. It reflects also the idea that myth is often an interplay between men and certain supernatural forces which in the end takes control and dictates the fate of humans. Myth is a reconstruction of a fact, a belief that governs a given set of people, whose truth may not be confirmed or proved but is accepted by the community as truth.

African writers incorporate myths and other forms of oral literature in their works. Chinua Achebe used myths extensively in his works as well as some other writers of his time. Lindfors attests to this when he writes that

Achebe had a profound influence on many other Nigerian novelists, particularly the Igbo who began writing in the nineteen-sixties, authors like Nkem Nwankwo, Chukwuemeka Ike, Elechi Amadi, Flora Nwapa, E.C.C Uzodimma, John Munonye... have followed his footsteps ... (47).

Flora Nwapa made abundant use of folklore materials in her novels. These include proverbs, tales, riddles, myths, folksongs, incantations, charms, spells, and magic.

The myth of Uhamiri is one of the re-occurring elements and motive in the two selected works and this has a lot of shaping influences in the novels.

Chimalum Nwankwo while writing one Flora Nwapa and her works writes that:

It seems to me now increasingly that for any work to endure the writer must be comfortable in the matrices of culture and history; the bedrock of the craft... it is my belief that therein lies the difference between the novels of Chinua Achebe and Elechi Amadi, Chukwuemeka Ike, Obinkaram Echewa, Buchi Emecheta and so on. In a general sense, human problems are psycho-cultural, because the significant events in our lives meet with the culture of our environments to create harmony or generate crisis. So in order to better appreciate Flora Nwapa, we must frame her work against that backcloth of history and culture (2).

Flora Nwapa is comfortable and has apt knowledge of certain areas of her culture and the folklore of her people which unconsciously shaped the context, background, even several thematic issues in her novels. This has placed some of her works close to those of Chinua Achebe, Onuoha Nzekwu, among others, who made abundant use of folklore materials in the creative works.

### **The Myth of Uhamiri**

This research is not a historical one and so we shall not make efforts to trace the origin and evolution of the myth of Uhamiri as it replete the works of Flora Nwapa. We shall leave such worthwhile and fruitful area of research to the historians who would gladly find such study pleasurable. This research is purely a literary one and our argument will be based on the literary perspective of some writers too as it relates to Flora Nwapa and her affinity with Uhamiri goddess, the goddess of Oguta lake, her home soil. The myth of Uhamiri is a very popular one in the folklore of the people of Oguta, a town in Imo State in the Eastern part of the country, the very town Flora Nwapa came from. Undoubtedly, this myth may have survived in virtually many of her works because of her sense of pride and admiration of her culture and the folklore of the people. She may have resorted to the incorporation of this myth to showcase her people's culture, worldview and perception to life, something worthwhile that mark them out from other communities. An Igbo adage has it that firewood in a town is used to cook the town's food. Also is another that believes that a man accepts greeting with his own knife no matter how blunt. This obviously may be part of the reasons that prompted Flora Nwapa to incorporate the myth of her people, the myth of Uhamiri, the woman of the lake, the Oguta Lake in her literary works. Oguta Lake has over the time become one of the tourist attraction centers where people, foreigners and natives alike gather to celebrate and appreciate nature's beautiful endowment to mankind. Uhamiri is believed to be the beautiful and large-hearted god of the Oguta Lake who cares and watches over the land. The myth of Uhamiri is a popular one that even other writers who are not culturally bound to the town incorporated this myth of Uhamiri in their works, either in celebration or in reflection of rich cultural value, belief and heritage. Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo in her collection of poems entitled *Heart Songs* devoted a title "Uhamiri's haven" in praise and celebration of this woman of the lake. In her poem she praises thus:

Woman of the lake  
Relic of the past, you lingered in our memory  
You who held sway in the days gone by  
Powerful deity, beautiful goddess  
Your watery presence was  
Acknowledged by local and visitors  
Your priests and priestess revered

You kept alive your rituals and mores... (28).

The poet went on to praise the goddess thus:

...that fame it was drew us to your kingdom  
Ugwuta Lake to view; the home of Ogbeide  
Your other lesser known name. We were  
On excursion. Owerri our first port of call...  
Oh Goddess, our eyes lit up to behold your zone  
Sunshine courted you, swooned upon you...  
Your calm sweetness held him captive...  
Your beauty exploding in scintillation...  
You are a goddess of love, beauty and fertility  
Mothering and nurturing writers and critics  
Besides the people of your land... (28).

Flora Nwapa and her affinity with this woman of the lake is much that it appeared in many of her literary works. It was so much that Akachi believed in her poem that it was her, Flora Nwapa, who spread the name of the goddess and made her a literary figure which we now study her contributions in her novels. Akachi expresses this line of thought and her belief in her poem thus:

...but Flora it was who spread your fame  
Made your name a household word  
In huts and palaces throughout the globe  
Propelled you into the embrace of the literati  
Immortalized you in her numerous works  
Gem that adorn our literary hall of fame... (28).

Flora Nwapa achieved this feat and projected the Myth of the Uhamiri goddess to the outside world and one would wonder how farther still she would have taken this if not for her premature and untimely death just at the blossoming moments of her career as a literary artist, a mother and a wife. The myth and belief in the supremacy of Uhamiri, the woman of the lake is a serious one, that at sometimes in the year, several ritual performances are been undertaken to appease this woman of the lake; to thank her for her great deeds, protection and goodwill and to implore for more blessings from the fountain of her heart, where kindness, beauty, riches and good fortune are believed to overflow. Uhamiri goddess also selects from generation to generation, from time to time, people she falls in favour with and marks them

out to be her worshippers. These chosen people are often respected and accorded with some degree of importance; they themselves are to play several roles in the worship of Uhamiri, the goddess of the lake. This is the background, the myth that informed Flora Nwapa in the writing of her two novels and which in no small way exerted an exuding influence in her creative pieces as well as the very background and foundation of her works. In the previous research we were able to demonstrate and showcase how myth, a genre of folklore functions as a plot generator in the two selected novels of Flora Nwapa, *Efurū* and *Idu* respectively. The myth of Uhamiri was the foundation Nwapa needed to create and plot her stories with which she hopes to showcase the rich Igbo culture, communal life, egalitarian system of life as well as high and profound belief in gods and ancestors. This myth helped her to sharpen her plots and achieved her story. This has been extensively argued and analyzed in a previous related study carried out on the same subject. This present study concentrates how Flora Nwapa used myth to generate and create conflicts in her two selected novels. The study argues that the story may have become lifeless and will lack some artistic touch if the myth of uhamiri should be expunged from it. On the same vein the incorporation of the myth is a conscious effort of Nwapa to generate the conflicts of her stories. The incorporation of this myth made certain conflicts which are all parts of the makings of the novels possible. The conflicts led to some degree of suspense and responsiveness to the novels and helped to build the level of intrigues and emotional captivation which one is bound to have while reading the novels. This myth did not only generate these conflicts it also resolved them and led to the falling actions, and the denouement afterwards which are what in real sense make a good novel interesting and appealing moments after one is done with the actual reading. It is to this we shall now turn to argue and highlight in details.

### **Myth as conflict generator and conflict resolver**

In the section we shall x-ray and analysis the myth of Uhamiri as a conflict generator and resolver in the selected novels of Flora Nwapa. The idea here which informed the whole study is that Flora Nwapa used the myth of Uhamiri to generate several conflicts that governed the actions of the two novels. One can argue that the stories could have taken a different turn or direction but the myth of Uhamiri helped to govern and control the actions of the story which is a conscious element and device employed by Nwapa to write a novel with which she hopes to project the rich cultural past of the

Africans and join in clearing the remnants of doubt that Africans did not hear of culture, philosophy, poetry and other conventional artifacts that make a community great first from the Europeans. In *Efuru*, several conflicts came with the novel as a result of Efuru's involvement and affinity with the woman of the lake. The initial conflict generated in the novel is the problem of bride price. This is the fore-most conflict that ushers us in into the mainstream of the novel. Efuru had met Adizua during one of the festivals in their town. in one of her moonlight outings both fell woefully in love with each other and was ready to sacrifice their lives to make the marriage work. The love was so great that I could move mountain. Flora writes about it thus:

Efuru told him that she would drown herself in the lake if he did not marry her. Adizua told her he loved her very much and that even the dust she trod on meant something to him (7).

Such is the power of their love that one could wish no obstacle to come their ways. The love is powerful, refined and rare and it was the power of that love that made Efuru abandon her home and went to elope with Adizua. Efuru went to live with Adizua without her bride price irrespective of what people will say, the shame it will bring to her father Nwashike Ogene and her entire kindred. The author writes thus:

On Nkwo market day when everybody had gone to the market, Efuru prepared herself... she took some of her belongings and went to her lover's house. The mother of the young man went to the market; when she returned she was surprised to see Efuru's clothes and a few other possessions in her son's room the young man was quick to explain. He told his mother that Efuru was his wife. I have no money for dowry yet... (8).

The news soon like a wild harmattan fire scattered all over the town and it grieved her father, Nwashika Ogene that his daughter will be spoken of with such scorn, but Efuru was determined and did not consider or blink at her resolve to stay with Adizua against all odds. Efuru's hand produces abundant wealth as a result of the Uhamiri favour on her, though it was still unknown to her. As a result of the gift of wealth bestowed on her by the woman of the lake, she was able to join Adizua in his business and both were able to make enough money and the bride price as well as other marriage rites where

fulfilled in due course. This conflict was resolved and one would expect the novel to flow in harmony as the couple will settle to a peaceful marriage life but that was the irony of it all for Nwapa still has a lot to expose and create with Efurú's affinity with Uhamiri goddess.

The next conflict generated in the novel was the problem of a child. Efurú for several years of marriage had no child and the husband was heavily under attack to marry another woman but obviously as a result of Adizua's love for Efurú and the wealth which she generates through her hand, made him not to consider another wife as an option. This problem of child was as a result of Efurú's affinity with the woman of the lake. The quest for a child had led them to visit the dibia and the dbia with his third eyes saw the future of Efurú which later manifested in the novel till the end. He had told them thus:

... I am sorry about your daughter, Nwashike, but you have come in good time. Your daughter is not barren. She will have a baby next year if she only do what I am going to ask her to do. Again she has not got many children in her womb. Some women are like that. It is not their fault. It is not God's fault either ... This is what your daughter will do every Afo day. She is to sacrifice to the ancestors. It is not much, but she will have to do it regularly ... Every Afo, she is to buy uziza, alligator pepper, and kola nut from the market ... she should put these things in a small calabash and go down to the lake... (26).

Even though the dibia later intervened and Efurú was to have a child, after she has placated the mind of the river goddess, the conflict of child bearing was resolved but it was not to last very long, for the fear soon came back to Efurú, the fear of not having another child and this hurt her feelings so much. Coupled with these, Adizua began to avoid her and started keeping late night. The cause may be in part, Efurú's sophisticated act strange nature and her series of dreams which she often narrate to her husband, dreams Adizua failed to understand. Adizua may have had the premonition that Efurú is not an ordinary woman, and may be closely connected with the woman of the lake. He may also have suspected that she does not have many children in her womb. The level with which she generate wealth and other weird occurrences and bad omen which the dibia indirectly expressed as part of the things that will come in the future may have fueled Adizua's desire to leave Efurú and settle with a more natural and unsophisticated woman. This is part of the

conflict generated as a result of Efuru's affinity with Uhamiri though she was initially unaware of that. The fear of not having much babies worried her too as she complained:

I am sure I have not offended him in any way. I have not even quarreled with him for not eating my food. For a long time now we have not lived as husband and wife, if he wants to marry a wife I shall be only happy. In fact, I have been thinking of it for some time for I have not had a second baby and now I wonder whether one will ever come (50).

Indeed, the tension was in the air, the tension and conflict of interest on whether Adizua will keep accepting Efuru and her unnatural ways of life or will marry another woman but the opposite of Efuru's initial thought happened. Adizua abandoned her for another woman and later the child died. This broke Efuru's heart. She has nothing keeping her other than to go back to her father's house and wait for another man, since Adizua did not come after many years, not even when her only daughter died. It was the dibia who later told Efuru and her father the cause of her dreams and the reasons for her unusual blessings and misfortune:

You are a great woman. Nwashika Ogene, your daughter is a great woman. The goddess of the lake has chosen her to be one of her worshippers. It is a great honour. She is going to protect you and shower riches on you. But you must keep her laws... look round town nearly all the story buildings you find are built by woman who one time or another have been worshippers of Uhamiri (153).

It was after the death of Ogonim and following Adizua's disappearance that the realities of the dreams she often had began to dawn on her:

I dream several nights of the lake and the woman of the lake. Two nights ago, the dream was very vivid. I was swimming in the lake, when a fish raised its head and asked me to follow it. Foolishly I swam out to follow it ... I got to the bottom of the lake and to my surprise, I saw an elegant woman, very beautiful, combing her long black hair with a golden comb. When she saw me, she stopped combing her hair and smiled at me and asked me to come

in ... I followed her like a woman possessed ... Then she showed me all her riches. As I was about to leave her house under the water, I got up from my sleep ... (146).

Efurú had to cope with this realization. Later she fell in love and married Gilbert and the conflict of child bearing came once more. Gilbert fell under the pressure of marrying another woman. The heat generated was much that Omarima cautioned and warned Efurú's mother in-law, Amede thus:

... The chances of your daughter-in-law ever getting a baby are very remote now. You must marry a girl for your son whether he likes it or not. If you like take my advice. It is said she makes money ... are you going to eat money? ... You and your son know why you have not looked for another wife all these years. Efurú must have bought you over with medicine. Any woman who worships Uhamiri must frequent the dibia ... (162).

Such was the heat generated by the tension of Efurú's involvement with the woman of the lake that it destroyed the peace in Gilbert's life, even that of his family. Everybody was greatly affected by this problem. Ajanapu had to advise Efurú to find a wife for her husband. Efurú was sad but was happy that she has once housed a child in her womb for nine month. Yet she cried for the abnormality of her life. This conflict was resolved with Efurú's coming to terms with the realities of her life:

As she lay awake that night, she thought of Uhamiri ... Then suddenly it struck her that since she started to worship Uhamiri, she has never seen babies in her abode. 'Can she give me children?' She said aloud ... 'She cannot give me children, because she has not got children herself (165).

This realization made her to accept her fate and resolved the conflict by finding another woman, Nkoyeni for Gilbert but the marriage though blessed with children was not a success. Ogea was to be given to Gilbert a situation made possible because of Efurú's inability to conceive as a result of her affinity with Uhamiri. This had made Gilbert to disappear like Adizua and did not even come to bury Efurú's father. But unlike Adizua, he later came back.

The last conflict that generated the most turbulent moment that ended the novel was when Efuru was sick and Gilbert accused her of adultery following a false proclamation. Ajanapu had cursed Gilbert and broke his head with mortar pestle when he slapped her. Efuru's sickness was later divined to be a punishment from Uhamiri because she offended her. After the necessary sacrifice, she was healed but the conflict led her to divorce Gilbert and lived alone, with an acceptance of the fact that Uhamiri can only give her riches but not children and this will always be a hindrance to a prosperous marriage life which a good woman like her so deserved.

In *Idu* several conflicts of interest even though not pronounced like in Efuru were made possible because of the influence of the Uhamiri myth that echoes in the novel. A good example of this conflict was that created by the death of Uberife's son, who was drowned in the lake. The author writes thus:

They said he went to fish. He left the stream where children fish and went to the lake, near the shrine of the Woman of the Lake, the great Uhamiri. He went to fish there... they said his hook had struck on to something in the deep water. He said he would go and investigate and when his friends told him not to go he ignored them and dived in. in a short time he came up with charcoal in his hands.'...the other children were afraid. He told them it was a palm fruit he had plucked and that he was surprised to see a charcoal, and so he would dive again. That was the last they saw of him... (124).

The boy had gone with other boys to swim and fish. While fishing, he had struck something and went down with and until he reaches Uhamiri's abode and plucked her palm fruits and when he came up her saw it was charcoal that he had. The boy was surprised and had dared back into the river and that was how he got drowned. This affected Uberife greatly. Nwasiobi expressed: I heard in spite of all her courage there were days when she locked up herself up in her room and just wept and wept ... (125).

This occurrence affected Uberife's life and that of her family and tore apart their joy, a situation which her husband recovery from madness managed to heal. Other instances of conflicts made possible by the myth of Uhamiri abound in these novels and one could see how Flora Nwapa artistically

maneuvered this genre of folklore, myth in the form of Uhamiri myth to generate conflicts and resolve them till the novels came to the desired ends.

### **Conclusion**

At this juncture we shall conclude this paper by stressing some of the points we raised in the previous study as well as bring home and throw more light on the new ideas and argument which this present study obviously generated. This paper once again has not said it all neither has it exhausted all that has to be said on the use of myth in African written literature especially as it relates to the works of Flora Nwapa. What this paper has faithfully done is to add to the already existing knowledge as it relates to folklore as a crucial ingredient in telling a story that will capture the true African side and project her unique cultural realities irrespective of all her other imperfections. This study one can comfortably argue has succeeded in bridging some existing gap in knowledge in the field of oral tradition and its connectedness with written African literature. The search and study of folklore in the works of Africa writers is still a virgin and fertile ground still begging to be explored, cultivated upon for a bountiful and fruitful academic harvest. It is this idea that triggered a deeper search and critical study on the use of folklore materials in the works of Flora Nwapa. Even as we conclude, we deem it necessary to be frank and optimistic as possible that there still remain much to be said and explored on the topic this paper sets out to study. In a previous study, we concentrated on the use of myth as a plot generator in the two selected novels of Flora Nwapa. We were able to bring to lime light facts and ideas that will support the contention that Flora Nwapa intentionally incorporated the myth of Uhamiri to sharpen the plot of her stories and achieve a desired tragic end. Myth functioned significantly in the logical and sequential flow of actions in the novels until the stories came to their tragic ends. The myth of Uhamiri made certain actions unavoidable in the story and one can argue strongly that if it is expunged, the story might become lifeless or a different story all together that may veer towards the side of comedy. In this present study we pushed our frontiers a little forward to argue that Flora Nwapa also used myth, an element of folklore as a Conflict Generator and Resolver. So many events and bizarre conflicts unavoidable as they were presented were made possible because of the incorporation of the myth of Uhamiri. Efurú's affinity with the goddess of the lake was the trouble of her life, the trouble that affected many characters, destroyed some and left others in perpetual agony. This is inevitable as Nwapa weaved all together. In *Idu*,

the involvement of Uhamiri though not as pronounced as in the case of Efuru still affected some of the characters and led them to divergent and conflicting measures and actions in the novel. Nwapa in the end was able to resolve these conflicts by the use of the same myth as Efuru in the end accepted the worst in her life and Idu met a tragic end. To this end one can end by saying that myth is a crucial element of storytelling and apart from other functions like giving writers identity and uniqueness, and project their rich cultural past it also serve as a vehicle to plotting and creating a good novel. This is the contention of this paper as myth is discussed and appraised as a Conflict Generator and Resolver in the selected works of Flora Nwapa. It is this argument that this paper hopes to raise and it is the conclusion of it and acceptance of the generated notion that the paper as a research effort has done which in no doubt will trigger further studies and stem more interest in folklore study as it relates and affects the written African literature.

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