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Re-reading Flora Nwapa's *Efuru and Idu*: Myth as a Vehicle for Cultural Transmission and Awareness

Asika, Ikechukwu Emmanuel

Department of English

Anambra State University, Igbariam Campus

Email: excellency4life@yahoo.com

Phone number: +2348038679214

Akabuike, Ifeoma

Department of English

Anambra State University, Igbariam Campus

Phone number: +2348035504029

Abstract

Folklore is the traditional art, literature, knowledge and practice that are disseminated largely through oral communication. It consists of the things that a given set of people traditionally believe, do, know and say; their worldview and outlook to life, handed over to them from generation to

generation orally. Myth is an important element of folklore that accounts for the origin of things, and events and try to answer the very important why questions on how several events and phenomenon came into being. This is important in helping a homogeneous set of people accept the realities of their lives; condition and express their perception and outlook to life as well as project those intricate elements that mark and distinguish them from other group of communities. Just like earlier stated in a previous study, Flora Nwapa is one of the pioneering and leading voices in Nigerian and African literature. She, alongside Achebe through their writings was able to showcase a very important fact that Africans did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans. This was made possible by the incorporation of folklore materials along all other cultural artifacts in her novel. In our previous studies carried out on the two novels, we looked at myth as a Plot Generator, Conflict Generator and Resolver. On a re-reading one realizes that myth in the novels performs some other significant functions as a vehicle for cultural transmission worthy of critical discourse. This study highlights on how the myth of uhamiri in the works of Nwapa functioned significantly as a vehicle to transmit the culture and create a deeper awareness on the rich cultural heritage of the African people against the distorted and disconcerted image created by the Europeans during their earliest contact with Africa.

Introduction

The word folklore was first introduced in folklore studies by W.J Thoms in *The Athenaeum* (1846). The term refers to the traditional beliefs, legends, and customs current among the common people; and their study.

In the words of Benjamin Botkin, folklore is a body of traditional beliefs, customs, and expressions, handed down largely by words of mouth and circulating chiefly outside of commercial and academic means of communication and instruction. Every group bound together by common interests and purposes, whether educated or uneducated, rural or urban, possesses a body of traditions, which may be called its folklore. In these traditions enter many elements, individual, popular, and even “literary”, but all are absorbed and assimilated through repetition and variation into a pattern, which has value and continuity for the group as a whole.

Folklore embodies the totality of the people’s existence, worldview and outlook to life. It comprises all the lore, rich cultural heritage and the rich traditions of the people handed over to them from generation to generation

orally, that is through a mouth-to-mouth contact. This lore makes a given set of people or community unique and distinguishable from other people and other communities. Stating this fact is like stating the obvious.

According to Jan Brunvand:

Folklore comprises the unrecorded traditions of a people; it includes both the form and content of these traditions and their style of technique of communication from person to person. Folklore is the traditional, unofficial, non-institutional part of culture. It encompasses all knowledge, understandings, values, attitudes, assumptions, feelings, and belief transmitted in traditional forms by word of mouth or by customary examples.

In the words of Charles Nnolim

By folklore we mean the unrecorded tradition of a people as they appear in their popular fiction, custom, belief, magic, ritual, superstition and proverbial sayings. Folklore also includes myths, legends, stories, omens, charms, spells found among a homogeneous group of people; it is a major component in the total folk culture of such a homogeneous group of people. The most inclusive part of folklore is the folktale; a popular tale handed down by oral tradition from a more or less remote antiquity and usually told either about animals or the common folk, to draw attention to their plight and to teach a lesson (p.16).

African folklore has become part and parcel of what many literary African artists weave in their works in order to give it a true touch of beauty and glamour, something African and very close to their hearts.

Myth is one of the important elements of folklore worthy of critical attention and study. The idea of myth has been given various interpretations and analysis by writers and critics who obviously define it from the angle, view point and dimension it best suits their purposes. This accounts from the varying degree of definitions and analysis of myth in many scholarly publications. We shall quickly take a critical look at some of these definitions as a way of adding insights and providing a better atmosphere and common ground to understand the topic and issues under discourse.

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 Onyeashie 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... (p. 82).

This is the much we can take from the bulk of the definitions of myth that replete many literary publications. 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 among few others.

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

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 centres 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 work.

This paper is not a historical research and we should not concern ourselves with the history and origin of the myth of Uhamiri as a river goddess. It is purely a literary study, and our concern is on the effect, significance and role

of the myth of Uhamiri as one of the crucial elements of folklore in the works under study.

Myth as a Vehicle of Culture and Traditional Norms

Literary artists write to reflect the realities of their time and environment, and literature functions as a preserver of people's culture, tradition, norms and beliefs. This is one of the functions which the folklore of any given community fulfils for them. Folklore is the unrecorded tradition of a people as they appear in their popular fiction, custom, belief, magic, ritual, superstition and proverbial sayings. Folklore also includes myths, legends, stories, charms, spells found among a homogenous group of people; it is a major component in the total folk culture of such a homogenous group of people ... (Nnolim, 16), folklore has a deep way of explaining the hidden part of a community's life that may not be shared by others and a manifestation of the people rich cultural reserve and practices that distinguish them and make them superior over others. In the words of B.S.C Nwaozuzu :

Folklore has been variously interpreted by many writers. For some, it is the corpus of traditional stories intended to explain why something exists or happens. For others, its purpose is amusement and entertainment. Folklore is not just an explanation in satisfaction of naïve curiosity, but a narrative resurrection of primeval reality, told in satisfaction of deep religious wants, moral cravings, social submission, assertion and practical requirements (1).

Myth is one of the elements of folklore and fulfils the deep religious wants, moral cravings, social submission and practical requirement as seen in the works of writers who incorporate them in their works, and so it is in the novels of Flora Nwapa under study. The myth of Uhamiri in the both novels exists as a vehicle for cultural transmission, and portrayal of the religious, ethical and traditional values of the Igbo society. This idea has its origin from the manifestations of Chinua Achebe, who believes that Africans did not hear of culture for the first time from the Europeans and this he sets out to prove; to recreate the traditional and rich cultural African past, something worth extolling and applauding even with its bad sides, just like some cultures of the Europeans in their primitive past. His novels became a tool, a vehicle for cultural transmission and preservation. Helen Chukwuma speaks of Chinua Achebe and his contemporary writers thus:

It is this spirit of self extolment and affirmation that motivated the renowned writer Chinua Achebe to base his novels on our cultural past to prove the very essential point of a culture we should be proud of. For him role of an African writer is that of re-education and regeneration, correcting the ingrained feeling of social inferiority resulting from the colonial past. He and a host of other writers like their forebears seek to preserve tradition by being themselves traditional (219).

Flora Nwapa was among the writers whom Helen Chukwuma refers to and her novel *Efuru* was among the novels she selected for study. It is then obvious that Flora Nwapa incorporated several elements of folklore in her work to preserve and promote the culture of her people as it was and may never be in our modern age. She writes to show the religious inclinations, beliefs and interests which once governed the behaviours of the society expressed in the people's folklore and worldview. Thus, the myth of Uhamiri in the two novels could be argued to have been used as a vehicle of cultural preservation and in the effort of Flora Nwapa to recreate her society as it was, the rich cultural practice and religious belief before the coming of the white men, even after. The myth of Uhamiri may after all be a myth as some people look at myth as something that ought to be believed, respect and regard even when it may not be true. The myth of Uhamiri in the novels preserved the rich cultural and religious practices of the Oguta people, the people that provided the setting for the both novels of Flora Nwapa. In recreating this myth, its importance and the religious inclination attached to the worship of the woman of the lake, Flora Nwapa was able to preserve in her literary works part of the cultures, religious beliefs and traditional practices unique and peculiar to her people, which colonialism could not take away from them; a duty require of a genuine artist. This is what Chinua Achebe did in his *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God* with other writers of the time in their bid to preserve and showcase the culture of their people, against the back ground of inferiority and barbarism projected by the Europeans.

In creating the myth, Flora Nwapa also showed the religious values inherent in it which the people respect and value in their hearts. Every society has its culture, religious and ritual practices and Flora Nwapa exemplified this with the myth of Uhamiri.

In *Efuru*, the author showed the value and importance of this belief when the dibia told Nwashike Ogene that his daughter is a great woman and will be blessed with riches but this must be accompanied with several rituals and religious practices for Efuru was sanctioned by the Dibia thus:

... If you are to worship her, you must keep her taboo. Orie day is her great day. You are not to fish on this day I know you don't fish, but you should persuade others not to fish. You are not to eat yams on this day. You are not to sleep with your husband. You have to boil, roast or fry plantains on orie days... when you go to bed, you must be in white on Orie nights. You can sacrifice a white fowl to Uhamiri on this day when you feel particularly happy.... Above all keep yourself holy. When you do all these you will see for yourself what the woman of the lake will do for you (153).

This is the religious and ritual undertone accompanied the worship of Uhamiri, a function Efuru laboured to fulfill even without the gift of a child. Orie day are marked out for the worship of Uhamiri that people help to preserve this day and caution people who try to defile orie day as omirima cautioned Amede in these words:

Going to fish, Amide? You allow Ogei to fish today being orie day. The day our Uhamiri says, we should keep holy – a day when our women must not be disturbed. And your daughter-in-law is an ardent worshipper of our lake? ... I am ashamed of you, that is why there are no fish in the lake. That's why our Uhamiri is angry with us ... (195).

This is the belief of the people and it became part of their culture to respect and value orie day because anything to the contrary might lead to poverty in the land.

Also Uhamiri is a respected god who is always called upon in the time of great need, danger and sickness. Efuru was asked to sacrifice to the woman of the lake those early years of marriage with Adizua which she did and conceived. When Ossai was deeply sick by the continual disappearance of Adizua, his son, the dibia had told her that no medicine will cure her; all she needs to do is to sacrifice to the ancestors and after thus:

She will sacrifice to the woman of the lake. The woman of the lake will approved the Great River and the Great River in turn will soften the heart of Adizua and he will come home to his mother (151).

The woman of the lake is so much revered that people worship and invoke her in their distress and respect her rulers. Farmers and fishermen honour her greatly. This is seen when Nwosu and the fishermen paddled on the great lake, surprise to see it very calm. As they paddle, they placate Uhamiri's heart by praising her:

We have arrived, Ezenwanyi", the first man greeted Uhamiri the owner of the lake as he said this, he took some water with his hand, washed his face and drink again and again (201).

The ritual practice is to assuage the heart of the woman of the lake and delight her spirit:

Uhamiri, the most beautiful of woman, your children have arrived safely, we are grateful to you, Nwosu said as he washed his face and drink some water. They paddled on with more vigour ... (201).

It surprised the two men how the white men do come to fish in the lake and Uhamiri did not capsized their boats. They cannot catch anything because they do not observe the rule of the woman of the lake and their noisy boats disturb her and chase away the fishes. The both men found answers in the fact that Uhamiri is kind:

You forget, my friend, that our woman of the lake is the kinder of women, kinder to strangers than her own people. She is understanding, she knows that the white people are strangers to our land, that is why she is lenient with them. We, her people, dare not be so disrespectful (202).

Also Uhamiri is seen as god of justice, equity and vengeance for once a fish caught someone in the finger and refused to let go irrespective of all attempts because the woman complain to Uhamiri to catch her thieves. She rejoices:

One god, have fought for me today. The woman of our lake has fought for one of her daughters today. Where is

the woman? The little girl held the woman's hand with one hand, she tapped the fish on the head, just a gentle tap and the fish dropped. The people were amazed (130).

In *Idu* we see how the woman of the lake visited Obiaku with madness because she had joined prostitution and did not listen to all the years of warning of the woman of the lake to change her ways and settle to a good life. Also when Adiwere was sick, he was asked to sacrifice to the woman of the lake. In *Idu* Flora uses the myth of Uhamiri to consolidate her claims in *Efuru* about the role of Uhamiri in ensuring faithfulness among married women in Igbo land. It is a taboo for a woman to leave her husband to go to another man while she is still married to her husband. In *Idu*, Uhamiri visits any unfaithful wife with madness. The woman of the lake was so much respected and revered in the two novels and her decision and rules guided the religious and traditional practice of the characters in the novel. Nobody was in a hurry to offend her knowing the consequences of such offence. This religious, cultural, ritual and traditional inclination attached to the woman of the lake is part of the culture, belief and way of life of the Oguta people, a town in the Eastern part of Nigeria, one of the communities of the Igbo people. It is this culture and tradition that Flora Nwapa alongside Achebe and others tried to project and preserve to the outside world as part of their duties as artists in manifestation of African culture. This myth of Uhamiri reflects the religious, traditional and ritual outlook of a people Flora Nwapa writes about thereby making myth one of the elements of folklore used in her novel as vehicle to project and showcase the culture and tradition of her people which is one of the crucial tasks the works were written to achieve.

Conclusion

In conclusion it becomes glaring that myth is an important element of folklore and its functions in literary works of African writers can never easily be exhausted and over emphasized. Myth in African written literature does not only add local flavour but has a way of shaping and enhancing the plot, conflict and events in a work of art. In our previous study, we looked at myth as a plot generator and were able to prove extensively how myth in the novels of Flora Nwapa, *Efuru* and *Idu* respectively functions as a plot generator. It was concluded that the two novels would remain lifeless or perhaps would have gone virtually in an entirely different direction when the myth of Uhamiri is expunged from the story. On another study, we looked at myth as a conflict generator and resolver. The study raised an important

argument that many conflicts generated in the novel were made possible with the aid of the myth of Uhamiri. Many of the conflicts generated in the novels wouldn't have been there outside the myth. It is the same conflicts that made the suspense of the novels captivating and our degree of responsiveness intriguing. In the same vein, some of the conflicts were resolved with the aid of the myth also. Interesting and arguable it may sound as well but the study was able to highlight on vital aspects that will add credence to the purpose of study and the resultant conclusion. In this present study we have demonstrated how the myth in *Efuru* and *Idu* serves as a means of cultural awareness and transmission. Literature does more than entertain, it teaches and instructs. It also serves as a means of preserving some historical and important aspect of people's culture. Achebe and some of his contemporary writers set out to showcase the rich culture of Africa before their European contacts which dealt a devastating blow on the culture, values, ethics and way of life of the African people, a blow we are yet to fully recover from. They wrote to showcase that Africans did not hear of culture for the first time from the Europeans. Thus, Nwapa embellishing her story with the myth of Uhamiri is to showcase and highlight on that important aspect of the culture of her people, the Oguta people and Igbo community at large. The novels showed how we lived; the reverence and great importance attached to Uhamiri, the woman of the Lake which serves as a guide and law to the people for right and morally accepted ethical values. Many of these aspects of our culture and tradition one can quickly add are gone and where they still exist may have lost their high religious and ritual values but are preserved in the works of Nwapa for posterity sake. Thus, the knowledge of this, spurs up the idea and argument in relation to myth as a vehicle for cultural transmission and awareness in the novels under study, *Efuru* and *Idu* respectively.

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