

Myth and Mystery from an Igbo cosmological Worldview and her Relation to Them

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Abstract

Everyday life is filled with stories of myth and mystery and life in general seem riddled with them or better still should we say everyday living and existence is filled with its own share of myth and mystery. And everybody at some point seems to have experienced such. This is common to both Africans and Westerners as they are not free of this. The history of humanity is replete with myths as every culture is built and surrounded by them as it also reflects, express and explore a people's self-image. Myth tends to play a central role and function in all cultures and tradition because it affects every facet of human existence and endeavour. The place of mystery also cannot be overemphasized as the universe is filled with events and nature that cannot be rationally or logically explained thereby relying on the notion of myth in other to gain an understanding of the nature of the universe. This paper intends to investigate and analyze an Africans experience of myth and mystery using the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria as a backdrop as we seek answers to the following questions; should myth and mystery be viewed only from a negative perspective? Do Africans (Igbo in particular) like to be awed by things they cannot explain and would always prefer this or do they so much value the mysterious as against reality?

Keywords: Myth, Mystery, Igbo and Africans

Introduction

We all grow up hearing one story or another about something mysterious that is believed to have happened most times before we were born or even after we have been born while in some cases still, some of us have gotten a firsthand experience of such.

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The universe is beset with a variety of myth and mysteries and it is no gain saying the fact that some of this are real while majority are false but they are intended to teach or tell us something in earnest.

The notion of myths dates back to ancient times where there was the need to explain the nature of the universe and how it came to be. Once, myths were believed to be simply fantastic stories about extraordinary events. Today myths are accepted as having broader functions in society (www.americanart.si.edu/education: November, 2013). In order to understand the universe, stories were told and formulated, some true others false but each was meant to achieve a particular explanation of things as they appear. They not only provide information about the quest for self-fulfilment, but also express humanity's search for universal harmony and common origin. For anthropologists Emile Durkheim and Jane Harrison, myths functions as explanation of rituals that express the social consciousness of a group. Vico views myths not as false narratives or allegories but as a collective mentality of a given age.

Joseph Campbell in his work *Myths of Light: Eastern Metaphors of the Eternal* starts by introducing myth saying; "myths do not belong, properly, to the rational mind. Rather they bubble up from deep in the wells of what Carl Jung calls the collective unconscious" (Campbell; 2003: xvii) this implies that myths are symbols that are built up either by individuals or societal communities to explain the reality that confronts them.

Philosophy I would like to describe as "a rational analysis and systematic enquiry into the ways, culture and tradition of a people" and it is somewhat saddled with the project of raising questions and finding answers to issues and matters that affect or appeal to the human person.

The role of philosophy in this regard following Stanisland description of philosophy as "the criticism of the ideas we live by" calls to mind that whatever we hold dear to us and whatever it is that rules our passion or dictates our relationship with the universe we exist in should be investigated and not necessarily be viewed as negatives but rather, it should be subject to critical appraisals thereby leading to its modification, reformation, conservation or outright rejection. Myth play the role of literature and fills the gaps that exists due to lack of literature on past history about Africa and help to supplement the oral culture of African experience (Jaja, 1995:28). Since this being the case we intend to interrogate Africa's idea and understanding of myth and mystery since she also has her own fair share of myths and mysteries.

That which becomes pertinent in this paper are the following; do we revel in myth and mystery as against reality?, how do we relate to them; do we so value them as against reality or are they just stories or happening that determine our relationship with the world we live in? To answer these questions and many more, we would be using the culture of the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria as a backdrop in attempting this issue.

The Idea of Myth and Mystery from an African Perspective

The *Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* defines myth as “a story handed down from olden time, containing the early beliefs of a race.” Defining *Myth* from the Greek *mythos* means story of word (Magoullick; www.faculty.de.gcsu.edu October 24, 2013). Myths as stories articulate how characters undergo or enact an ordered sequence of event. It has also come to refer to a certain genre of stories that share characteristics that make this genre distinctly differentiate them from other genres of oral narratives. According to Alan Dundes, a myth is a sacred narrative explaining how the world and human form assumed their present form (Mythology; en.wikipedia.org September 16, 2013).

William G. Doty in his work *Mythography, the Study of Myths and Ritual*, gives a very good definition for mythology which will help us along:

A mythological corpus consists of a usually complex network of myths that are culturally important imaginal stories, conveying by means of metaphoric and symbolic diction, graphic imagery, and emotional conviction and participation, the primal, foundational accounts of aspects of the real, experienced world and humankind's roles and relative statuses within it.

(The) Mythologies may convey the political and moral values of a culture and provide systems of interpreting individual experience within a universal perspective, which may include the intervention of suprahuman entities as well as aspects of the natural and cultural orders. Myths may be enacted or reflected in rituals, ceremonies, and dramas and they may provide materials for secondary elaboration, the constituent my themes having become merely images or reference points for a subsequent story, such as a folktale, historical legend, novella, or prophecy (Doty: 11).

The point Doty is trying to make is that myths are usually a complex network of stories that are culturally important to a people as they help to account for the nature of reality as it appears to them and also helps them to relate with the universe in which they exist. Myths may also help in explaining certain aspect of culture that the people practice or engage in.

Vanisa views the notion of myth based on the subject they try to refer to; myth could form stories which “deals with and interpret the relations between the natural and the supernatural and are concerned with all that part of religious life that lies beyond the moral order” (Vanisa; 1965: 157). He explains that they “attempt to explain the world, the culture, the society ... in terms of religious causes (Vanisa; 1965: 157). Bruce Lincoln defines myth as “ideology in narrative form” (Mythology; en.wikipedia.org September 16, 2013). Gregory Schrempp refers to myth as;

Colourful stories that tell about the origins of humans and the cosmos attitudes towards myth vary greatly. Some regard it as a source of spiritual growth, while others see only falsehood. Some see in myth the distinct character of particular cultures, while others see universal patterns. Some regard myth as “contemporary” and “alive”, while others think of it as “ancient” and or “dead” (Magoulick; www.faculty.de.gcsu.edu October 24, 2013).

Anthony Mercatante leaves the following line as his thought on the idea of myth as:

...traditional story, orally passed on from one generation to the next, believed to be literally true by the culture that produced it, about gods and goddesses, heroes, heroines, and other real and fantastic creatures, taking place in primeval or remote times (Mercatante; 1988, xiv)

For the functionalist theory whose Chief advocate is Malinowski, myths are like songs and fairytales which are owned by certain sub clans. According to him, it is a rule that a myth will be best known in its locality, that is, known with all the details and free from any adulterations or not quite genuine additions and fusions (Malinowski; 1922: 327-329).

Myth from an African perspective is not so much different from how it is viewed by the West.

OderaOruka defines myths as “the traditional tales of a people, gods, nature and the universe” (Oruka; 1972, 9 [10]:6). BolajiIdowu on his part describes myth as thus;

Myth (is) a vehicle conveying a certain fact or ascertain basic truth about man’s experience in his encounter with the created order and with regard to man’s relation to the supra-sensible world (Idowu; 1976:84).

Afigbo considers myths as having the “tendency to explain historical institutions and development by appeal to non-historic factors and forces” such as stories that see “the supernatural acting at times through the agency of man, at times through the agency of the lower animals and other times even through the agency of inanimate object, as the original and continuing cause of motion in a society” (Afigbo; 1997, 122[23]:84).

Myths according to Nwankwo are “generally very old, which emphasize that there are no accurate records or proof that they happened” (martinsuchennanwankwo.blogspot.com: October 24, 2013). This implies that myths are usually old stories passed on from one generation to another which in most cases could actually have been true events but as it ages, there are embellishments, certain details are forgotten or omitted because they are usually not written from its outset which in the end makes them unreal or even untrue. In the same vein, Isidore Okpewho defines “myth as a set of ideas about man and his environment” (Okpewho; 1983:1).

Myths when viewed from an African perspective are mostly created to deal with certain universal themes such as the origin of the world and the fate of the individual after death, while many others spring from the continent’s own settings, conditions, and history.

There is the tendency to view African myths from a negative light especially by today’s generation because of the misconceived notion of what myths stands for or is all about. This stems from the fact that *myth* now means falsehood which is not always the case. Many a times, we forget that even the history of western civilization was also built on myth as the true origins of things cannot be known in their entirety and stories or legends have to be built in other to better explain this reality.

In Bill Moyers and Joseph Campbell's conversation in the work *The Power of Myth* as cited by Roberta Mazzucco speaks about four functions of myth:

Mystical function – myth helps the individual; to realize the mystery of the universe and how awesome it is.

Cosmological function – this is the aspect which science is concerned with. I may know the scientific principle of flight but it still doesn't really explain it. In other words, explaining the universe but keeping the mystery.

Sociological function – myth supports and validates the rule of certain society.

Pedagogical function – myth helps to teach us how to live (African Myths and What They Teach: www.yale.edu).

Basically myths in essence are the highest form of a culture's ideals and belief as they help an individual in understanding the evolution of her civilization. Campbell further sees myth as a "field based on the common experience of people in the community"(African Myths and What They Teach: www.yale.edu). Myths tend to survive for so long, sometimes for millenniums because they have great symbolic power that they were made or set up to achieve.

Myths in their entirety are not doctrines but one need to believe them sometimes in order to understand the role that they play in the history of a people and their religion. Myths are not just stories with morals; they contain true stories that teach about lessons from the past and for the present. Myths from African cultures and traditions carry much weight amongst her people even though not all could be said to be true or its actual origin known but its intended lessons and messages are passed across.

Closely related to the idea of myth are mysteries which means, something not understood or beyond understanding (Myth from Merriam Webster Dictionary in Encyclopedia Britannica). It also means something which baffles or perplexes or a situation/event that is difficult to understand or explain (Mystery in Microsoft Encarta Dictionary). Other description of mystery includes; something that cannot be fully understood by reason or less strictly to whatever resists or defies explanation. Some mysteries are solved. Some await a solution. Others remain unsolved for purely contingent reasons.

Still others remain mysteries because we lack the intellectual ability to solve them or because trying to think of a solution is already wrong-headed (Understanding Mystery: blogtalkingphilosophy.com).

The idea of mystery is also related to religious experiences and activities but for the purpose of this paper, we would restrict our description of mystery to the general notion which is something or events that baffles, perplexes or defies understanding/explanation.

Africans are not strangers to the notion of mysteries as there surrounds her events, situations or nature that defies explanation and even with the recourse to myth cannot be fully described or explained. Mysteries to an African are not necessarily evil in them-selves but goes to portray that not all can be understood using human reason. Let us distinguish between natural from supernatural mysteries. Natural mysteries are things we do not understand, but which, if we finally dispel them, we will understand by thought, observation and experience without appeal to supernatural intelligence or agency (Understanding Mystery: blogtalkingphilosophy.com). Natural mysteries can either be big or small for example why it rained living fish in the desert (small mystery) or the big bang and the ultimate composition of the universe (big mystery).

The Igbo Perspective and Her Relation to Myth and Mystery

The Igbo are an indigene of West Africa living in Nigeria and are basically found in the South-eastern part of the country. They are no strangers also to the idea of myth and mystery as they have a rich sense of it. Myths have been defined as a traditional story accepted as history which serves to explain the world view of a certain people, especially in writing their political, economic, religious and socio-cultural history (martinsuchennanwankwo.blogspot.com: October 24, 2013).

Just as myth and mystery play an important role in the development of any people this is not lacking amongst the Igbo people. The Igbo view myth and mystery as a source of knowledge from understanding the environment in which they find themselves and have used it explaining their own existence. The Igbo understanding of myth and mystery and her relation to them does signify that she rely only on them for explanation of events or otherwise but she relates with them in a healthy fashion taking from it what is necessary an important and discarding that which is of no use.

In traditional Igbo setting, myths are passed on orally from one generation to the other which in a sense shows that her idea of myth is also not devoid of some of the negatives that is associated with it. In the light of mystery which quite abounds everywhere, the Igbo sense of mystery is one that is dependent on what nature has to offer. What we mean here is that that which is found inexplicable or beyond understanding for the Igbo is based mostly on the nature of such an event that precedes/ projects it.

Myths and mystery are real for the Igbo in the sense that though not all of myths and mysteries origin could certainly be accounted for or proven, but its overwhelming importance to the people is one that cannot be denied. It should be mentioned at this point myth and mystery are part of the social norms of the traditional Igbo societies. Despite modern religious beliefs, the indigenous belief system remains in strong effect among the rural and village population of the Igbo.

Myths and mystery in the traditional Igbo setting is not seen as an all in all as the reality of things as they appear do not elude them but have learnt to give myths and mysteries a place in their daily existence as no society no matter how advanced can deny the place and value of myth and mystery in and from their everyday living.

A popular myth amongst the Igbo is that of the first man named Eri from heaven to discover the first Igbo kingdom of Nri. This story tells of the establishment of the Igbo and it goes thus; Eri is considered the father of all Igbo people. It is believed the he was sent by God (Chukwu) from the sky to the Earth. Eri sat on an ant-hill because he saw watery marshy earth and when he complained to God (Chukwu), he sent an Awka blacksmith with his fiery bellow and charcoal to dry the earth, after which Akwa the blacksmith was given Ofo as a mark of authority for his smithing profession. While Eri lived, God (Chukwu) fed him and his family with Azu-Igwe (fish from Heaven).

After the death of Eri, this special food ceased and Nri complained to God (Chukwu) for food. God (Chukwu) ordered Nri to sacrifice his first son and daughter and bury them in separate graves which he complied with. Later after three-Igbo weeks (Izuato = 12 days) yam grew from the grave of the son and cocoyam from that of the daughter. When Nri and his people ate these, they slept for the first time. Later still Nri killed a male and female slave burying them separately. Again, after Izu-ato, an oil palm grew from the grave of the male slave, and bread fruit tree (ukwa) from that of the female slave.

With this new food supply, Nri and his people ate and prospered. Chukwu asked him to distribute the new food items to all people but Nri refused claiming he bought them at the cost of sacrificing his own children and slaves but he made an agreement with God (Chukwu) (martinsuchennanwankwo.blogspot.com: October 24, 2013).

There are two versions that tell of how what agreement was reached by Nri and Chukwu. The first tradition according to the work of M.D.W. Jeffrey (1956), “as a reward for distributing food to other towns, Nri would have the right of cleansing every town of an abomination (nso) or breach, of crowning the Eze at Aguleri and of tying Id have the Ngulu (ankle cords) when a man takes the title of Ozo. Also he and his successors would have the privilege of making the oguji or yam medicine, each year after ensuring a plentiful supply of yams in all surrounding towns, or in all towns that subjected themselves to the EzeNri. For this medicine all the surrounding towns would come in and pay tribute and Umumdiri people then could travel unarmed through the world and no one would attack or harm them” (Afigbo; 1989).

The second version claims because Nri would not sell yam to his neighbours, he then demanded seven fowls, chalk, a pot and goats, with these he made medicine (ifejioku) the yam spirit, which he gave to the applicants. They took this home with the new crops and sacrifices to it. This tradition still exists in the Igbo society till today.

There are other Igbo myths that have great influence on the Igbo people which has lasted over a long period of time and it involves supernatural beings whom they believe strongly have great influence over their lives and entire affairs.

The Value of Myths in Igbo Cosmology

Myths we have tried to analyze from varying perspectives but we would like to make a general statement concerning the fact since in a sense they all point to one in the same direction which is “they are stories formulated about events whether real or imagined that has happened for the purpose of explanation, admonition and or transmission of ideas that helps to shape understanding of the universe they live in”.

Cosmology which is a combination of two Greek words *Kosmos* meaning world and *Logos* meaning discourse implies the study of the origin, structure and development of the world in its totality (Udefi; 2012, 12[10]: 60). Nwala as cited by Udefi defines cosmology from the aspect of metaphysics in the following terms;

... framework of concepts and relations which man erects in sanitation of some emotional or intellectual drive, for the purpose of bringing descriptive order into the world as a whole, including himself as one of its elements. The resulting cosmology will accordingly reflect the sociological, philosophical or scientific predilections of the individual and his group (See Nwala, 1985: 7).

Taking these two concepts together we would realize that they both aim at an attempt of addressing through narratives, the problems bordering on the origin and nature of the world, man and existence generally. The Igbo we would realize from the foregoing following this line of thought in essence places a premium status on myths and mysteries not because they cannot or do not rationalize, or do a critical analysis of the events that tends to mystify them or that which they classify as myths but they understand that it is way of explaining, admonishing and understanding the curves that nature's balls throws at us. There is an aura that pervades the recounting, retelling or recitations of stories classified as myths on the younger generation as it helps to stimulate them to rise up to certain challenges that surrounds them especially when the story told or poem recited is expected to inspire such reactions.

Taking a clue from Leeming who says that;

The person who lives without myths lives without roots, without links to the collective self which is finally what we are all about. He is literally isolated from reality. The person who lives with a myth gains 'a sense of wider meaning' to his existence and is raised 'beyond mere getting and spending (Leeming; 1973: 321).

This implies the importance and value of myth in the life of every individual and this thought is not lost on the Igbo people as it has helped shape the belief and understanding of the universe in which they inhabit. Because failure to admit the place of myths in the lives of a people is the denial of their roots be it Western or African.

Cicero in his book *On the Laws* discussed the value of myths and mystery in the following light;

For it appears to me that among the many exceptional and divine things your Athens has produced and contributed to human life, nothing is better than those mysteries. For by means of them we...have been civilized. The basis not only for living with joy but also for dying with a better hope (Cicero; *On the Laws*, 2.14.36)

Transposing this into the Igbo worldview we can say that one of the many things that the value of myths and mysteries have for them is that it brings about the notion of joy for the living and the notion of better hope for the dying.

Through their meaningful and communicative features, myths exhibit and enhance the coherence, stability and continuity of the society. They play the role of literature and fill the lacuna created by lack of literature on past history and supplement the oral culture of African experience (Jaja; 1995:28).

Myth and mystery are closely related to philosophy been that they help the human person to wonder or rather opens the human sense to one of wonder upon which a critical reflection ensures about the nature of reality which is an attempt to answer questions about reality and in turn leads to a better understanding of the reality of the universe in which he/she exist. They are also the essential and ready tool for thinking and communicating in African philosophy. The traditional Igbo could be said to have an idea of philosophy it may not have developed in the sense of the West but in recent times it could be argued that the Igbo have a well-developed philosophy now as critical reflections are been dwelt with using both the Ethno-philosophical standards and the professional methods of doing philosophy. It should be noted here that a people's world view cannot be studied in isolation of their past and the 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 the present African philosophy sees an avenue for philosophizing.

Myths connect the past with the present. The vestiges of what truth is in African epistemology 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 (Jaja; 2014; 6 [2]: 12).

Myths also play an important role in the moral education of the 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. This is epitomized in myths in African culture which focuses on values, virtues, attachments, loyalties, faithfulness, diligence and other social and religious virtues (Jaja; 2001:99).

Conclusion

In the desire to understand the nature of the universe and the cosmos, human beings have developed the idea of myth and mystery in order to explain this reality as they appear. Myths and mystery play a vital role in the existential nature of the human person as there is the need to explain the origin of things and their existence. Culture and tradition happens to be vehicles through which myths and mysteries are transmitted from one generation to another.

Myth and mystery abounds in every culture and civilization, be it the Western or the African as they serve as major tool in explaining their origin and why they act the way they do or perceive the world from a particular point of view. We have tried to show in the course of this work that the Igbo worldview in relation to myth and mystery has helped them in explaining their place in the universe. It may not be scientific or logical but as far as the Igbo culture is concerned, a whole lot rides on it as their relation to the universe is shaped by them. This goes to inform us that myth and mysteries are not exclusive to any particular segment of the world.

The nature and origin of the universe has to be explained from a culture's own point of view so that they can relate properly with the universe that is why we have several formulations in this regard from various standpoints. The Igbo likewise in this sense have attempted to explain and understand the universe from their own perspective and have come up with various myths and mystery to explain the events in nature. We may not be able to ascertain the origin of all myths or be able to explain and understand all mysteries, but their essence and lesson or their purpose would certainly not be lacking because each of them were created or formulated to achieve a specific goal.

Myths are not seen as mere stories for the Igbo community but are considered as binding factors and are also symbol that shows their true nature and perception of the universe.

For the Igbo still, their myths and understanding of mysteries has also served as symbols of socio-cultural, political, religious and economic realities and of the forces at work amongst them. Myth and mystery happens to be of inestimable value to the Igbo as its essence is that which they are more interested in rather than in considering it as mere folklore/tale, illusion or probably fiction.

At this juncture we like to end this paper by saying that there is every indication that myths will continue to alter the course of human events as long as humankind inhabit the planet and that myths be encouraged not necessarily for the purpose of fooling people but for the main reason of inspiring heroics especially in the younger generation who seem to be bereft of any knowledge of them or even considering the ones they have heard as mere stories to pass time.

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