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# MYTHOLOGY AND THE COLLECTIVE UNCONSCIOUS: REFLECTIONS ON THE SHARED VALUES OF SELECTED INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

## Abstract

Many cultures treasure fabulous tales that seem to interpret the mysteries and unfathomable realities of the universe. The manner in which they view the world and represent it through mytho-poetic impressions determines their respective identities, belief mechanisms, historical antecedents, cultural affiliations and metaphysical impositions. As would be expected, they describe the origins and the nature of certain phenomena or practices. These accounts unsurprisingly are replicated in other cultures with which they share neither geographical proximity nor historical affinity. This study draws on Carl Jung's notion of the collective unconscious to argue that myths are undoubted legacies that are unconsciously activated as they constitute a significant portion of the cultural heritages that are transmitted from one generation to another. The article argued that irrespective of the absence of empirical proofs, the role of myths in confirming the existential necessities of cultural groups should not be undervalued. It discussed selected myths that form the belief systems of some indigenous communities and argued that they are sacrosanct and indeed crucial for the survival and the continued bonding of their members.

**Key words:** *mytho-poetic, cultural affiliations, collective unconscious, existential*

## Introduction

There is hardly any human society that does not have stories that attempt to explain what the world with the phenomena around it is all about. The distinction of cultural groups gives them their respective identities that are guided and bound by beliefs that may be linked to certain historical or metaphysical realities. As would be expected, explanations are readily available stating when, why and how certain practices evolved. These explanations unsurprisingly turn out to form the foundation of the beliefs of such people. And this indeed is what myths are all about.

It will help to quickly state that myths belong to the "folklore genre involving narratives that reveal essential features of a society such as foundational tales or origin myths. The main figures are usually gods, demigods or supernatural humans (Doniger 1975:19; Simpson & Roud 2003; Bascom 1965:9). Featured as tales that are told and passed down from one generation to another through the medium of oral tradition, myths are narratives about what make one group of people different from another. Their primary role is to attempt giving an explanation for the

creation of the universe and what the first inhabitants experienced. Nyamndi (2008) sees myths as components of “age-old devices contrived by man for a comprehensive grasp of his environment. Even before science and technology came to enrich his paraphernalia of cognitive aids, man had relied almost exclusively on myth for guidance through the maze of existence.”

Myths account for natural phenomena like seasons, light and darkness and several other universal experiences, origins of which may not be verified through rational evaluation. It is through myths that the cultural nuances of a people can be explicated. Whether they are appreciated as sacred narratives that are accepted as precipitators of a people’s religious creed, or considered as easily dismissible tales, fit only for the amusement of unassuming children, myths remain as rich resources that cannot be ignored even by the most informed and rational. The conscious and the sub-conscious reality of members of every human society is structured by their shared world-view which remains as the very crux of most myths. By implication, myths determine a people’s way of life and their collective behavioral traits. These are what the fields of sociology and psychology are always preoccupied with. The objective of this work is to discuss the influence of myth on the social life of a people and how it impacts on their behavior. It seeks to establish whether myths emanate from the sociological and psychological background of a people or *vice versa*.

### **A Review of the Framework of the Collective Unconscious**

A myth can generally account for creation as is evident in various cosmogonies from across the globe. It can also account for great historical events like wars that members of a clan have experienced or have survived. The preservation of a people through such trying periods may be attributed to the heroic prowess of their warriors. Sometimes it may be as a result of a congenial and a favorable landscape that has proved to be crucial to the collective survival and sustenance of a people. Naturally, such a site that had served as a haven for a people during critical moments automatically becomes their ancestral home. An example is the narrative of the divine call of Abraham, the progenitor of the Jewish people, to birth a nation that is to be settled in Canaan, the present-day Israel. Even though the descendants of Abraham went into slavery for a long period, they were eventually liberated in an epical fashion that was climaxed in their crossing of the Red Sea, an event which destroyed a significant portion of Pharaoh’s

strong army. Another example is the legend of how the Egba tribe of present-day Abeokuta in south-west Nigeria sought refuge under the rock that made their community unassailable to their enemies, hence the coinage of the Yoruba phrase – *Abe okuta* (under rock) to reflect the Egba people’s collective passage from a perilous site to a new stronghold that played a significant role in preserving their tribe from extinction.

According to Bade (1984), myths are “the true and sacred narrative account of the various activities of the gods, their entry into and exit from the world, and their creation experience and account.” Beir (1966) on his part, sees myths as “answers given by man to the problems and the mysteries of life and death.” They play the essential role of defining a people’s collective identity and destiny. To state emphatically, man cannot live or make any sense of his world if he does not have myths to rest on (Houndtonji cited in Anyanwu 1987)

A myth may be a folk narrative woven around elements of character and plot as seen in the Greek tale of Perseus who saves the Ethiopian princess, Andromeda from a sea monster and then marries her. Also significant for mentioning is the African allegorical folktale of the tortoise who ends up with a shattered shell as a result of greed and self-aggrandizement. (Lansford: 2009)

More often than not, myths are generally replete with narratives about gods, supernatural beings and processes which manifestations are beyond rational explanation. For this reason, they are often dismissed as a dimension of religion which usually propagates dogmas that remain unproven and unchallenged in every culture.

Although several myths have religious underpinnings, there abound several others that try to explain natural phenomena while a few others are fables that teach moral lessons or serve only for amusement. Some examples are the ones that attempt to provide explanations for the reasons why certain landscapes are shaped in peculiar ways or why they signify certain significant roles in a particular community. Ngugi wa Thiong’o makes frequent use of this in his repeated allusion to the Gikuyu myth in his novels, *Weep Not, Child* (1964) and *The River Between* (1965).

### **Categorization of Myths**

Broadly stating, myths are categorized into three types: cosmic myths, myths of the gods and myths about heroes. Cosmic myths are concerned with the world and how it is ordered. Creation stories, descriptions of natural catastrophes such as flood, fire, death and experience of afterlife fall within this category. Examples are the biblical creation story of the world formed out of the void of massive water and darkness, and also the Yoruba creation story of the descent of Orunmila from the sky, having obtained permission from Oludumare, to form a solid base in the mist of the watery mass of the lower part of the universe (Akporobaro: 2009 and Jaja: 2014).

The second category of myths are those of gods which are concerned with the activities of divine beings, particularly of gods. In many mythical narratives, there is a pantheon of gods who preside over the affairs of men. Even among the gods where a kind of hierarchy had been instituted before the advent of man on the scene, the contest for superiority or dominance may not be unusual as some myths reveal. An example of this is in the biblical narrative of the rebellion of Lucifer against God in heaven. Another is in the account in Greek mythology where the earliest gods Gaea (Earth) and Uranus (Heaven) were parents to Titans. Cronus, the eldest of the Titans displaced his father. Shortly after this, he also was overthrown by his own son Zeus, the ultimate master of the universe. A similar trend is also narrated in the Yoruba mythology where Esu is revealed as a mischievous deity who serves as a messenger between the gods and the human race. (Akporobaro: 2009). He plays a significant role in many rituals not only for the Yorubas, but also for the Fons and other West African groups. (Lansford, 2009).

Myths about heroes constitute the third category. There is hardly any culture that does not have a cortege of epical figures that they are proud of as tribal heroes. Such figures who sometimes are remembered as pioneer settlers, founders of institutions or progenitors of a race are almost revered as mortals that have now ascended the ladder of metaphysical existence to become deities themselves. For the Jews however, although their patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – are not venerated as gods, Jews across all generations have always been proud of the direct and remote links with them. They have also remained as models of spirituality that are worthy of emulation. Similar ancestral connections are found in most cultures. Examples include the veneration of princesses of Oma Idoko and Inipki of the Igala kingdom in Kogi State Nigeria,

who submitted themselves to be sacrificed for the liberation of their people from foreign invasion. Also, Oronna, the brave warrior of Yewa land is fondly remembered as a demigod for his legendary exploits to secure the land from invaders from neighbouring kingdoms. Such an exploit is similar to that of a very brave woman called Moremi in Ile Ife, a mythically proclaimed source of the Yoruba race. Moremi, as claimed, used her woman prowess to liberate her people from the incessant invasions by the Igbo warriors.

It is significant to note that certain progenitors are believed to have been elevated to the status of gods because of their supernatural exploits during periods of crisis. Sango and Ogun in the Yoruba mythology for instance, had at one point lived as mortal men until they were transfigured into gods. (Akporobaro: 2009).

Examples abound where human heroes are created as the metonymic representation of kings as monarchs whose reign is eternal. The Attah of Igala in Kogi state, north-central Nigeria is an example of a lion-ling fondly greeted *Agaba Idu*. As the Paramount Ruler of Igala land and Father of Igala people world-wide. On the throne of his fathers, the Attah is exalted and sacred, more or less deified because it is believed that as a reigning king, his tenure is endless. It is believed that there should never be a vacuum on the throne. Thus, his death is never announced in the sense of an obituary. The insistence that Attah never dies is the reason why no obituary is usually announced when he dies. The only acknowledgment of the incident by people adept in tradition is to state somberly that the “Palace Tower has developed a cracked.” The implication is that the Tower should be managed to avoid an imminent collapse. Traditionally, his death may also be announced by saying that “the Attah has gone on a hunting expedition from which he will never return.

Some myths are built around heroes who are so esteemed because of the offices that they occupy, their importance during the process of carrying out certain rituals on behalf of the community or the spectacular prowess or extra-ordinary sacrifice that they are reported to have displayed during critical moments that the race was confronted with a disaster. Sometimes the narrative came in the form of a seemingly dismissible fairy tale. An example is in the interesting Grecian narrative of a young man, Persus who slays a sea monster that threatened the life of an Ethiopian princess, Andromeda. Thereafter, he wins her heart and marries her. Some myths

may come in the form of animal allegories. An example is one which has a common structure in most African cultures: the tortoise who receives an invitation from a group of birds to attend a feast somewhere in sky. With the goodwill of the birds, he manages to fly to the venue of the event. During the feast his greed takes a better hold of his behavior which is awfully antisocial. Incensed against him for his unreasonable behavior, his benefactors withdraw the feathers that they had earlier lent him to fly to the venue of the feast. So left with no safer mode of transport, the tortoise takes a jump and crashed on the hard surface of the earth. The narrative explains that this is the reason why the tortoise spots a cracked shell.

Usually, there are moral lessons to be learned from folk tales. They serve prominently as shapers of the norms and traditions of the people who treasure them as their collective heritage. When a narrative has some moral angle to it, in spite of the fact that it is common knowledge that the story is imaginative, it still manages to find a strong place in the culture and the tradition of the people who propagate it. This, perhaps is the reason why myths are characterized as stories that have compelling drama and deal with basic elements and assumptions of various cultures.

Because several myths feature tales about gods and other supernatural beings, there is a temptation to dismiss them as incredible yarns which present religious themes that usually do not accommodate or tolerate critical philosophical rationalization. But those philosophers are reluctant to admit that these myths make irrefutable attempts to account for exotic events or phenomena for which even philosophers lack rational explanations. For example, it would take only the audaciousness of a myth to attempt to account for the experience of life after death, or adduce reasons why certain landscapes or geographical locations take a particular forms or manifest certain unusual occurrences. To this end, Nyamndi (2008) avers that the mythical narrative is fabricated around certain social and rational prescriptions; for when the collective order is upturned, man turns to myth for comfort, and when logic is overwhelmed, myth once again is harvested in to salvage the helpless faculty.

### **Engaging Jungian the Collective Unconscious**

All creatures, according to Jung share a collective unconscious that is often revealed through myths. The seeming replication of mythical characters across cultures is a kind of affirmation

of his psychoanalytic doctrine of human archetypes. Sometimes referred to as “objective psyche” or “autonomous psyche”, even though more commonly in contemporary usage in the practice of depth psychology, the collective unconscious refers to the notion that a fragment of the inmost unconscious mind is usually inborn and is not molded by individual capability. (Corbett 2012:42). According to Jung, the collective unconscious is common to all human beings and is responsible for a number of deep-rooted beliefs and predispositions, such as spirituality, sexual behavior, and life and death instincts. (Doyle 2018: 173). Jung believed that such natures are genetic from the past collective experience of humanity (Segal: 4). It is one aspect of psychoanalysis where Jung and Sigmund Freud disagreed with each other. While Jung believed that the collective unconscious is made up of a collection of knowledge and imagery that is inborn in every person and is common among all human beings due to familial experience, Freud believed that the unconscious is a creation of personal experiences. Though human beings may not know what opinions and images are in the collective unconscious, it is understood that in moments of crisis the psyche can tap into the collective unconscious.

Jung believed that the collective unconscious is expressed through universal concepts called archetypes like signs, symbols or forms of rationality and conducts that are inherited from ancestries. These mythical images or folk codes are not inert or stationary. Instead, many different archetypes often intersect or fuse together at various stage. Some examples of archetypes that Jung proposed include birth, death, power, rebirth, the animal, the child, the hero, the mother, the father. (Fritscher 2020)

In the earlier stages of Greek civilization, as in other cultures, the truth of myths was taken for granted. The word “*mythos*” was originally used to refer to all kinds of narrative. But as philosophers began to challenge the veracity of some of the traditional claims, *mythos* became more or less a synonym for implausible narrative. They consider them to be naïve explanations for natural events and things that human beings are not willing to verify.

The belief of a people serves as a tool for communal cohesion. Their group narrative engenders a social bonding which translates as the very defining event that puts irrefutable checks and restriction on overtly expressive individuals that might embark on actions that are inimical to the collective wellness of a civilized society. In spite of the frequent repudiation of the place



of myths, they still feature prominently as cultural realities that guide people in most societies. They contribute handsomely in fashioning the belief system of every given people. From this belief system that moral values are preached, sanctions are imposed and virtuous acts are rewarded. Through them, cultural and social norms are defined, and it is difficult, especially in very traditional settings, to divorce this from the spiritual beliefs from which religion with its rigid dogmas emanates.

According to Tylor (2010), myths are “a store of inherited materials from out of which province of the poet’s land has been shaped and built over and peopled.” Through myths, societies and cultures understand their own world as distinct from others. However primitive and mundane some of the tales might sound in the ear of a critical audience, there is always a thread which links the modern man with the man who lived in antiquity who was always seeking to account for the events of his life through the oversight roles of supernatural beings that control the universe. This may be what Matthew Arnold seeks to address in his “Man’s thoughts as he floats along the River of Time”:

*“As is the world on banks  
So is the mind of man...  
.....  
Only the tract where he said thoughts  
He wots of: only the thoughts  
Raised by the objects he passes, are his.”*

By this, he means that man is only able to account for the things that he has witnessed and experienced. And this is the exact thing that myths do for people. They account for their respective peculiarities. According to Lansford (2009), the human mind “has the capacity to reshape and modify impressions that often seem new and strange to express its individuality.” The agency of our thinking, is to develop, to combine, and to derive, rather than to create; and the consistent laws it works by are to be discerned even in unsubstantial structures of the imagination.

Human communities have convincing reasons why liberties are assured and sanctions are imposed, and as no body usually challenges their prescriptions, myths are the tools that are used to convey these realities, Myers (1993) believes that recognizing and conforming to a social order is a function of geography and cultural exposure. There may for instance, exist a practice

or an object that is revered as sacred in one province but may be abhorred as a sacrilege or a taboo in another. Through myths, the creative power of the human mind is at its elements.

### **Significance of Myths in a Fast-changing World**

As incredulous as most myths may sound in the ear of the modern man, they still retain their original significance as even modern man with all his seeming sophistication returns to in his quest for explanations for aspects of his world that philosophy and science cannot explain. By this realization, we can surmise confidently that even the advanced science of the modern age is yet to attain the heights that myth has transcended, especially in aspects where myths provide irrefutable explanations for certain natural phenomena that continue to confound scientists.

Towing to the fact that traditional societies are predominantly superstitious, they engage myths to allocate social roles for members even when no rational or logical reasons are adduced for such assignments. To this end, all myths instill fear or a sense of reverence in the hearts of the people of the concerned society. Usually, they are meant to ensure that law and order are maintained in a society. They serve a cohesive role whereby members of a given community are given a sense of collective identity where they are bonded in a common destiny. They often account for the benefits of virtuosity and the consequences of viciousness. By adhering to the tenets propagated by myths, the future of a human group or a race is ensured.

Quite a number of world religions (particularly, Christianity and Islam) propagate the belief that women are actually responsible for the predicaments of mankind. This has of course, etched in the hearts of men the erroneous perception that women are a different kind of creatures from men, and as such regarded as the other. They are portrayed in most myths as beings who wield such negative influence that diminishes the realization of the destiny of mankind. With the advent of modernity, certain barriers are being deconstructed and traditional boundaries are fading away. However, certain societies like Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and Northern Sudan have maintained their primordial dogmas especially in the area of subjugating women. Education and increased enlightenment should play a significant role to dismantle some of the deep-rooted traditions.

In diverse ways, this notion has affected inter-gender relations across cultural groups. The confirmation of this is the socio-cultural notion that the woman is incapable of keeping a secret, so it will be a disaster if sensitive information were to be disclosed to her. Cultures, world over usually have tales to support this assertion. In the modern era however, the media has evolved as a social tool used for propagating beliefs. Advertising and social networking have shown great capacities to shape or sway perceptions across previously divergent groups.

As reluctant as modern man may be to admit the importance of myths, he must come to terms with the fact that so much of his life is built around mythical experiences that are not usually verifiable by empirical evidence. For example, the ancestral masquerades, especially in African aboriginal communities are not mere art works or costumes of fun-seeking people. They are symbolic representations for the relationships between the living and the dead. The religious function of mythical figures continues to put societies in positions where their actions and inactions are rewarded or sanctioned by spiritual powers that are beyond their comprehension. Lansford (2009) believes that it is misleading to separate the art objects of myth-making humanities from their sacred and rational contexts. The statute does not exist mainly to gratify an appealing whim, but to serve as tools of religious performances.

Myths have made immense contributions to creative works. Since ancient times till date, art has always borrowed from myth. Examples of such contributions that myths have made include the epics of Homer where Greek mythical figures like Zeus, Aphrodite and Apollo were featured as characters. William Shakespeare, Eugene O'Neill as well as celebrated African writers like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ola Rotimi have in diverse ways, exploited myths from their respective cultures as part of the informing elements that enrich their art.

Proofs abound that there is no other notion in the entire field of the humanities that has inspired as much argument as myth. (Okpewho: 1980). Through it, according to Tala (2003) attempts are made to resolve the primary physical contradictions that man has always been confronted with. They are therefore not just flimsy inventions for human entertainment or imagination, but a direct communication of an indubitable reality. (Jaja: 2014)

Over the centuries, myths involving the gods have also provided inspiration to many a visual artist. The Greek god and goddess, Apollo and Venus have remained as symbols of beauty and aesthetics. Their names now feature as brand names for some cosmetic products that line the shelves of supermarkets across the globe. Without the influence of mythology, art, music and literature would today be quite different from what they are to the modern man. There is no mincing words in admitting the fact that even in the contemporary era, social psychology has drawn so much from myths. Myths, especially those with religious slants, hold out some kind of hope for humanity as they account for several phenomena that philosophy and science are still groping in the dark to understand. They remain crucial to man who will always be on the quest for survival on his planet that is perennially under threat. Cords and Gerster (1991) admit that the application of myths in scholarly endeavours is crucial as it serves as a countervailing constituent through which ideological intentions can easily be communicated.

## **Conclusion**

It is easy to conjecture the reason behind the assertion that myth is core to the very existence of human. Every human community will always find some explanations for what happens around them. Myths help to achieve this and in the process sanctions are imposed on members who contravene some social rules of conduct. This goes a long way to regulate human behavior for the sustenance of the balance that gives hope to man in his wild universe. Without myths, too many questions about human existence would have lingered as unresolved puzzles or unanswered questions. That would have left a yawning vacuum resulting in man living a hopelessly confused life. Through the realities explained by myths, man has an inspiring belief in something to live for, and in some instances, die for.

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