A Literary and Linguistic Analyses of Types and Aspects of Ogba Myth

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Abstract

Myth is a story-telling event and the linguistic aspect of ritual. The analysis of myth in this paper is based on a corpus of variants of Ogba myths. It attempts to demonstrate the dynamic nature of Ogba myths in their evolution and development which are highly explored to explain the literary/linguistic content and relevance of Ogba myths in the taxonomy of oral literature. The paper adopts Dennis Tedlock's, Dell Hyme's and Harvilatili's strands of ethnopoetics theory which emphasises the study of the oral nature of texts and performance, as well as the fieldwork and advocates emphasis on Culture-specific interpretation of texts, Vladimir's Historicism theory is also adopted. The literary/linguistic analysis of myths in the paper reveals that myth is more than an ordinary story because it has some distinguishing factors; and the people's conception of it provides an insight. The paper establishes that Ogba myths are literature in their forms because there was a time, (before the emergence of this paper) when Ogba myths were not conceived as articles of faith for religious or cultural activities. Besides, Ogba myths as literature and means of entertainment are rehearsed at various occasions for the unity of the people. In fact, they are means of cultural cohesion among the Ogba people and this led to the coming together of the people as a unit. The paper recommends the sustenance of this development through continued sponsorship of researches on Ogba myths.

Keywords: Literary, linguistic, analysis, types, Ogba myth.

Introduction

Myth cannot be ascribed a single strait-jacket definition that shuts out other definitions. In other words, according to Aristotle (1920) it is protean in nature, hence it has several definitions and means different things to several people and communities ranging from "plot" and "tale" to "fable" and "legend" (Aristotle 1920, p.361 & Eliot 1920, p.148). Therefore one chooses the definition that serves one's purpose. Ethymologically, myth is derived from the Greek root "mythos" and in its original Greek sense, it signifies any kind

of story, real or imagined. But the modern realisation of myth contradicts this ancient Greek thought or conception of myth as both true and untrue stories.

Scholars in various ways have tried to bring out the different aspects of myth in their definition. For example, Frazer (1966), a social anthropologist in the *Golden Bough* defines myth as an imaginative story while Aristotle (1920), Chukwuma (1986) and Guerin(1992), view myth in their different perspectives as literature.

Mbiti (1967) and Shipley (1964) as religious and literary scholars respectively conceive of it as a spiritual and religious phenomenon and Wellek and Warren (1956) perceive it in a sociological perspective as literature functioning in society.

Commenting on myth as culture, Okpewho (1983) explains that myth is a symbol of an object which influences man's perception. He says that "the most notable contribution in recent times, (however has been made by Ernst Cassirer who, more than any of his predecessors undertook to explore the symbol as the nucleus of all cultures (p.148). Ernst Cassirer, a symbolist scholar observes a symbolic system in man, within which the source of myth-making can be traced. He identifies stages of activities. According to him, an object exercises a serious influence on man's perception.

Ogba myths as literature

Myths as it relates to Ogba people in particular can be understood from the culture and it is their literary expression. A people's myth reflects, expresses and explores the people's self-mage. Many scholars discuss myth as literature which joins the natural to the preternatural. It is an imaginative literature though laced with history. Myth is to be defined as complex of stories. Some no doubt fact, and some fantasy – which for various reasons humans regard as demonstrations of the inner meaning of the universe and of human life.

Ogba myth is a complex of stories, which are real or imaginary. It is found in the old beliefs of Ogba people and generally presents a picture of the supernatural events. Ogba myth differs from other narratives in oral literature with the presence of supernatural events and characters, the deification process and the narratology. All these make a clear distinction. Hence mythic characters are different from other characters. Through myth, Ogba people know something about their history, religion, culture, literature, philosophy and belief system. Myth also reveals the mind and character of people (*Britannica vol.12*, p.739). With brilliant audacity, Frye identifies myth with literature, asserting that myth is a structural organizing principle of literary form "and that an archetype is essentially an element of

one's literary experience. (Guerin et al, 1992). Going by this explanation, Ogba myth structures are literary in form and the archetypes are elements of the literary style. Hence the literary analysis of the rendition or performance of characters, entertainment, narrative, events, content, context and so on of Ogba myth brings to the fore the "literariness of the myths". Ogba myths are products of imagination, while the events and characters are basically romanticised. Myth is literature and must be considered as an aesthetic creation of human imagination (Preminger et al, 1994).

Using the bipartite structure, Chukwuma (1986) explains the structure of myth both in a diachronic and synchronic time reference as follows: "For the literary meaning of myth is linked to its form and vice-versa. The sequential ordering of its parts is its peculiar distinctive quality". In this explanation, the parts of myths make it distinct from other narratives in the oral corpus. In Aristotle's *Poetics*, myth is the word for plot, narrative, structure and fable. Therefore, he conceptualises myth as a narrative and a story (literature).

> In any discussion of myth in the context of literature, two issues surface, first is the language of myth, the verbal component seen usually in its adjunctive, relation to ritual. The second issue is the historical background, which informs the tale, the attempt by mystifiers to wedge myths on historical figures and incidents. (Chukwuma 1986, p.99).

Chukwuma tries to create a dividing line in myth in literature. From this explanation, it is clear that myth is literature (an imaginative story). Therefore, any attempt to discuss myth in isolation of this idea may be an aberration. Some scholars see myth from the sociological point of view. Myth is obviously related to questioning man's social life because the narration of myth is proper to community and communal tradition (*Britannica vol.12*, p.796).

But myth in literature has literary/artistic value in poetry because of the specific use of language in the narrative. "To speak of the need for myth in the face of the imaginative writer, is a sign of his felt need for communion with his society, for a recognised status as artist functioning within society" (Wallek & Warren, 1956, p.192). The two scholars agree that though myth is literature, it is laced with sociology because of its function in human society. Hence, two aspects of myth surface which involve the practical aspect (ritual) and the verbal aspect which is the process of rendition. It is averred that myths usually take their specific forms from the cultural environments in which they grow. "But pure myth

tries to offer explanations for the great forces in nature; in other words, it tries to explain away the origin of life and death and account for actual phenomena (Nnolim 1999, p.17).

Mbiti (1975) in apparent agreement with Nnolim analyses myth to mean the explanation of some actual or imaginary reality which is not adequately understood and cannot be explained through normal description. "Myths represent people's perception of the deepest truths about nature through narratives that stir us as something, once familiar and strange (Nnolim 1999, Pp.17-18). The emphasis is on "truth" about nature. Hence myths perceived in the religious point of view cannot be false; though myth thrives on the realm of imagination. In rendering the myth, the story-teller knows that it is an imaginative story but the people perceive it as a true story. The basis for this assumption is because of the age of the person rendering the myth. In most communities, the story-teller is an adult. In Ogba, the narrator is generally a male adult. Myth traverses religion, history, anthropology and sociology because it is the scientific study of people, their societies and culture and is rendered as literature.

Types of Ogba Myth

The Ogba name for myth is *ata a* which literally means history. Myths are the main sources to learn about the culture, philosophy, religion, traditional belief and history of the kingdom. In other words myths explain the origin of the Ogba people and land. In the absence of written records, myths become the most effective means of disseminating information and circulating ideas from place to place and from generation to generation. This is still used till date. Through myths Ogba people explain some actual or imaginary issues when they are not understood in their proper meaning or sense.

> One of the most curious phenomena in Ogba traditional religion is the belief that members of the different onuobdos can transmigrate into various lower animals such as python, leopard, elephant, crocodile, ants and beetle. This is obviously an extension of the universal totemic culture characteristic of many indigenous groups, which is still depicted today in their various "coats of arm". But Ogba treat their totems with extreme respect almost raising them to the level of humanity in a most peculiar association (Ellah, 1995, p.102).

Ogba myths are transmitted in a similar pattern as *eluu* (proverb), *atita a* (folktale), *akịkọkọ l'egwu/ebowu* (folk song) and *eeghno/ikne* (riddle). The Ogba mythical ideas are often expressed on carved wood, clay, ivory and stone tablets. For example, the totem objects are often carved in wood and molded in clay. Some of the totemists bear the tattoos of the

crocodile, leopard, elephant, scorpion, tiger, lion, etc. Some mythical ideas are represented in arts and crafts; others retained in dancing, rituals / festivals and other ceremonies.

Most often Ogba myths explain the relationship between man and *Chuku - Wne Abiama* (The God of Creation), about creation, origin of man, values of traditional institutions and the possible signs of death. They also play back the history of past heroes, leaders, kings and chiefs. For example, in Ogba there are mythic tales about *Ezeali's* (priest of earth goddess) power to talk to the land and it listens and vice versa. This was explained to mean his closeness to God and to prove his right of ownership of the land.

There are other myths which explain divine relationship as those of extraordinary human beings, like Umeri Nwube, Osima Nwaodumiya, Isaiah Nwambu, Theo Nwaekuku, to mention a few. Umeri Nwube is believed to have visited heaven and returned to earth to perform some magical acts. According to the myth, in heaven he was given some herbs to heal people and on his return from heaven he was recognised in *oru la igbno*, that he was acclaimed a strong medicine man worldwide.

A history of Ogba people (Ali Ogba) captures it thus:

> Umeri Nwube claimed to have visited heaven and have seen God. It was claimed that God sent a rope down from heaven.... But Umeri himself said that he...stayed in heaven for thirty-two days i.e eight ekes, plus eight ories, plus eight ahuos, plus eight akwos...that he was warned not to narrate all he saw in heaven and given great powers... (Ellah, 1995, p. 47).

The Ogba people look for models by which all things can be measured, hence in Ogba mythology, there are various mythological types (Characters) which are most appealing and resembles the heroes of ancient and classical myths. Consequently, the following types of myth exist in Ogba; ranging from myth of cosmogony and creation, myths of God and gods, myths of death: eschatology and destruction, myths of culture heroes and myths of fate and destiny. This paper will not lose focus of its emphasis which is myths of origin which other myths also incorporate. A brief explanation will be made for each type of the myths in this discourse; considering the limited scope of this paper.

Myths of origin

The myths which relates to cosmology in Ogba, focuses on the origin of events, stories of creation, spaces, etc. In Ogba Cosmology like African Cosmology, the earth is pre-existence. According to the myths on the origin of the earth in Ogba, the earth was covered

with water (seas, creeks, lakes, rivers and oceans), so, the creator sent the cock with a wrap of sand in cocoyam leaves to cover the waters. This purported assignment that God gave to the cock is believed to have originated the habit in fowls to scatter everything before they eat. The inability of the cock to cover the entire earth as directed by God brought about the existence of creeks, lakes, rivers, seas and oceans in some part of the earth.

After the execution of the assignment haphazardly by the cock. Chuku-Wne-Abiama (the creator) placed a ladder with which man descended from a higher place of abode to inhabit the earth. It is clear that these images are often related to the ideas of reincarnation or origin of new born babies from the realms of the ancestors. This also explains man's place or duties to the gods because of his limitations. There are very many of the myths of origin in Ogba which cover origin of institutions, crimes, initiation ceremonies, rituals, etc. The myths of origin explain the harmony of man and other forms of nature.

Myths of Death: Eschatology and destruction

These myths deal with the end. This is the direct opposite of Cosmogony and forecast the origin of death or the end of the world. The Ogba myth of death portrays life as a continuous process. Hence there are two kinds of death - good and bad deaths. The good death is *ila la oweyi* or *ọwnụọma* which bad death is *ịwnụimidna* in form of accident as a result of bad diseases and juju, drowning, suicide, hanging, etc. And any person who dies a bad death is buried without a ceremony and as such *nwnaoruke*, the spirit that stands for the dead person in the land of the dead, will never intercede for him/ her, and as such he/ she cannot reincarnate.

In Ogba myth of death, it is believed that death came into the world because of the delay of the dog that could not send the message of mankind to *Chuku-Wne-Abiama* (God of Creation) imploring him to remove death. The final message of the opposing group that wanted death was sent to God through the tortoise. This myth also implies a conception of the world, nature and man in terms of cyclical time. In other archaic traditions, it is referred to as myths of reincarnation, rebirth and renewal.

Myths of culture heroes.

Ogba has myths to celebrate and appraise the achievements of culture heroes who did not participate in the creation exercise but performed one action or another to make the earth habitable. Most importantly is that certain festivals are celebrated annually to herocise these personalities. Among the ceremonies and festivals for these heroes are: *ọraborachi* dance, ime-ọknụ, abọpo dance (exclusively for female), awudi dance, ide-ogudu (for male) to mention a few.

Concerning the *Ogundu* festival, Ewoh (1972) posits:

> This is usually performed for a very wealthy man or one who has done some deeds of bravery like killing a man and bringing home his head during tribal fights, or killing a tiger or similar wild animals....The Ogudu is simply a sham fight.

Myths of Fate and Destiny

This myth is called *ekra-obeka* in Ogba. It explains the presence of destiny and predestination. Consequently a man's fate relies on his destiny and as such man is predestined for whatever he is on earth. This is viewed against the backdrop of providence, justice, divine law and philosophical problems of determinism. Some characters / agents of fate and destiny in Ogba include the spirits of the sun-*eyna-owna*, earth or mother earth-*ejna-ali*, stars-*mbo*, etc.

In accordance with belief in this myth, these agents are often consulted for vengeance on a wrong deed, as they possess power of remedial actions to the offender. Hence, an offended Ogba person spreads his/her arms to the agent for justice, fairness, equity, even in the midst of low intermediary.

Myths of God and gods

Ogba myths identify the Almighty God as *Chuku-Wne-Abiama* (God of Creation) alongside other lesser gods as in the other African cultures. The Supreme Being is placed highest among other celestial and territorial beings in Ogba mythology. This supremacy is very well noted and refers first to his perfection. Hence *Chuku-Wne-Abiama* is considers sacred in Ogba mythology as it is everywhere "...the people were able to think of God (*Chuku-Wne-Abiama*) in a limited way even though they recognised his existence as the Supreme Being but unfortunately and woefully they failed to accord Him absolute loyalty (Osia 1999, p.8).

There are myths of other lesser gods like gods of the land *ejna-ali*, storm (*omu*) lake (*avrnaa*), rain (*mini-ozno*), thunder (*ama a*), etc whose power the people extol. The picture that emerges here is that these myths provide Ogba people with the explanations of their distant past and the activities of deities, persons, etc. Such deities and divinities as *erisi - omoku, erieja-ka-okansu, erusimini-ka-ede, agboaznuno-ka-ogbidi, nchalaukwu, ogboluke, utuera, ugbredei, ovnu, arekene-ka-obie, edeminiukwu-oriebulu*, etc.

Based on the explanations by myth, sometimes the stories are considered as pre-historic truth and at other times viewed as false version of reality by ignorant people. The falsity is very much captured. Okpewo (1983) explains this when he says: "we are free to call myths a real story".

Further, Ogba myths connote among other things stories with super human and spirit characters in line with the claim concerning most European cultures. "Myths are considered as narratives which are in some way or the other believed to be true and concerned with the origin of things or the activities of deities" (Finnegan 1976, p. 78). The Ogba myths composed in form of folksong (*ebo-owu*) performed during second burials) by masquerades and non - masquerade members for adult males trace the history of lineage without a written record. This is used in rituals, festivals and dances, especially during *egwu - ogba*, *nchaka* festivals, *otu*, and *okrosnu* masquerade dances respectively.

Setting in open square

Ogba myths most often are set in open square during the performance. This situation arises in the ritual aspect of the myth stage. In Ogba, such settings include: *ahia-orie* square, *anama-owu*, *anama-usomini*, etc.

For example, the royal myth is usually performed in open squares to teach the later generation of the antecedents to the kingship (obaship) in Ogba nation. The myth of "Ogba / Aboh war" and "the forbidden bitch" explain why the Umuokoya family of Umuebe kindred clings to the Oba thrown on Ogba nation. The narrative explains that when Obi Okoya, the first Eze-Ogba was beheaded by the Aboh warriors, the Umuokoya family descendants of the late king, told the families in Ogba that any family that would choose any important person in their family like Okoya to be killed for the sake of the kingdom will enjoy equal rights with them in the kingship. When no family presented its person, the entire kingdom swore an oath making the kingship an inheritance of the Umuokoya family of Umuebe kindred. It is apt that Ogba myths may have the setting based on the performance and the text respectively. These two aspects are what this paper captions the primary setting and secondary setting of Ogba myths.

Setting in Ogba myths, especially myths of origin such as those concerning rivers and river essences transits from procurement of the river and essence, its transformation to a river proper, and the deification of the human character as a god. All these processes are accomplished in specific location, (settings; which also form the basic setting in Ogba myths. The setting climaxes at the point (location) of ownership of the river (by the major character) which possibly could be secured by a covenant. In the case of myth of River

Omoku, it climaxes at the ownership of the River by Eke Okrieta. Setting is a very important aspect of Ogba myth and myths in general.

Literary / Linguistic features in Ogba Myths.

In Ogba, myth composition is a story-telling event which presents fictions with some historical data to prove their authenticity. The Ogba myths portray the dynamics of lively and theoretical art form with some characteristics or features of literature. The mythic story is purportedly real but with a questionable veracity because of the transcience of oral communication. The following genres of oral literature are embedded in Ogba myths and they include: *elu* (proverb), *atita a* (folktale), *ebo-owu* (folksong), *eeghno* (riddle), *okwu-ịtabiire* (tongue twister), *egwu la nka a* (arts and artifacts), *ịgba-egwu* (dance), *iri-egwu* (festival), etc. What is in Ogba is not peculiar but is also found in other areas such as in Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, Benin, etc.

"In traditional Igbo homes, story-telling is an art commonly performed and enjoyed by both parents and children. Usually after dinner, men and women regale one another until they are carried off by sleep" (Egudu 1973, p-13).

In similar manner, Ogba men and women, children and adult gather to enjoy one narrative and another. In such a gathering, myths can be rendered. The *Nchaka* myth is an apt example. In the *Nchaka* myth,. Ogba people believe in and accept the presence of a spirit character called *Nchaka*. This spirit essence of the festival is said to kill all evil doers in the land and it is symbolised by an effigy either in male or female form, which is venerated annually by adherents before the commencement of the festival. According to the narrative, this spirit essence is in - charge of procreation and success hence sons-in-law send drinks and kola nuts to their fathers-in-law to invite/invoke the presence of the supposed God of procreation and fertility. The ceremony takes place on *orie* night for the female preceding *ahụọ* the day for the festival. The picture of the performance is eloquent in mythic narratives of parents to their children. The following example suffices:

Leader: *Nchaka gbu oyne ijne labu, gbu oyne amisu, gbu oyne mgbasị, gbu oyne whne ka madụ ibne a abọnịọma*.
Translation: Nchaka kill the jealous man / traitor, kill the witch, kill the wizard and kill all enemies of progress.
Response: *Tua njọ li*
Leader: *Tua njọ li - Nchaka gbu oyne njirenjire*.
Translation: let evil be gone, *Nchaka* kill the evil men and women in the land, witches, wizards, enemies of progress and others in this category.

Response: *Nchaka gbu oyne amisu la oyne mgbasi*
Translation: *Nchaka* kill the witch and wizard.
Leader: *okoama* (3x), *uruoo, uru-ahia, uru-ego, uru-nwna.*
Translation: Victory !, Victory !!, Victory !!!, Profit in business, profit in money, profit child - bearing
Response: *Ugno ! Ugno !! Ugno !!!.*
Translation: Eagle feather! Eagle feather!! Eagle feather ooo!!!

The festival commences with ceremony and dancing, after firing the guns and cannons, the participating elders throw fire, kola nuts and drink into the river and retreat to their various homes to eat the *Nchaka* meal of yam porridge and pounded yam accompanied by drumming and dancing with shouts of joy and victory - *okoama! okoama!! okoama!!! Ugno! Ugno!! Ugno!!!*

This is usually an acclamation of triumph after a conquest in war.

Physique of the main character
From the various Ogba myths discussed in this paper, it is clear to identify some literary features such the physique of the main character and other characters which are mythical. For example, they are extra- ordinary super human beings. They are similar to the characters in other genres of literature like in the novels and plays. Most significantly they resemble characters in fairy-tales. The characters of mythic stories are gods, goddesses and human beings with extra-ordinary features. The human beings in the story are usually deified and imbued with traits such as invisibility, invicibility, inner vision and other spiritual powers. This character trait is seen in Eke, Oguaroh, Akalaka, Obi Nwachukuma, Okoya, Obi Ossai, Ajie, Akogu, Isoma, Owurre, Iyasara, etc as characters in some of the myths analysed in this paper. These characters because of their distinguished activities have excited literary creativity.

Literary narrative incidents.
Literary narrative incidents have preponderance feature in Ogba mythic story. The arrangement of incidents in the causal pattern that is explaining the "cause and effect" sequence of the incidents is literary. Some of the literary features in the incidents include: the plot, theme, conflict and resolution. There are also some important dramatic movements considered for the effectiveness of the story, employed by the narrator in consonance with the traditions of narrative performance in Ogba. The story can be told in convenient movement or episodes, with each proceeded by miming of its basic details. These subtle efforts by the artist make the story interesting and understandable.

The Natural Features

Ogba myths usually derive their non-literary (natural) features from images which are archetypes. For example, there are myths which explain the origin of different phenomena like land, sky, water, sun, colours, mother, father, etc. In Ogba, water symbolises the mystery of creation, purification and redemption. Examples suffice in Ogba myth of God's creation of heaven and earth, Ogba / Aboh war myth, Nweze totem myth to mention a few. In Ogba myth, land originated from water and fire was brought down from heaven through the toad as a messenger. Land symbolises birth-death-reincarnation or resurrection, fertility and growth. These symbols are better understood from totem myths, reincarnation/initiation myths and eschatological myths. Sun, fire and sky are closely related as explained by various myths of origin of sun, fire, and sky respectively. They symbolise origin, wisdom, creation, birth, enlightenment, etc. The origin/creation myth, birth/death/reincarnation myth, etc. illustrate the above stated symbolisms. Colour is also symbolic in Ogba - red symbolises blood, sacrifice, danger, violent passion and disorder while black represents darkness, death, mystery, evil, chaos, etc. White is highly multivalent, signifying positive aspects like light, purity and innocence. The examples cannot be exhaustive but represent some of the characteristics or features of Ogba myth

The Linguistic Features

Idiomatic phrases are a linguistic feature adopted in Ogba myth. The use of this feature in Ogba myth makes it unique and pleasurable. Ogba myth fashions out its own idioms and its own language system; these are peculiar / idiosyncratic elements of Ogba myths. Some examples are:

a. Onu - Omoku - mouth of River Omoku - abode of the river essence (water mermaid).
b. Okpasi - Omoku - tail of River Omoku - less concentration of power by the river essence (water marmaid)

Ogba myths adopt oral form of emphasis. The myths make use of epizeuxis (immediate repetition and ploche (intermittent repetition). For example; *Nchaka* kill! *Nchaka* kill!! *Nchaka* kill!!! *Nchaka* kill!!!!

Nchaka kill witches, *Nchaka* kill wizards, *Nchaka* kill all evil doers. Ogba myths use adjuncts to words or idiophones which are features of oral language. They are echoes of natural sounds whose meaning may be distorted if translated into the English language. For example; *Tua njọ li*, Nchaka gbu oyne amisu la oyne mgbasi translated as, *Nchaka* kill witches and wizards. In this exclamation above, "Tua njọ li" is an adjunct or idiophone

used to derive local meaning. Its equivalence in English is "let evil begone or disappear from the land".

The personification of the inanimate characters in Ogba myths is the linguistic features which are highly explored. The characters or objects are made to perform human activities. For example, in the myth of River Omoku, the river is personified as the river essence called *erisi-omoku* and in the myth of culture heroes, the *ogudu* drums make sounds which are interpreted denotatively by humans. Similarly in the *Nchaka* myth, *Nchaka* is personified as the spirit human that is capable of killing witches and wizards and also genderised in male and female. These linguistic and literary features are used in the compositions of myths in the Ogba nation.

Conclusion

This paper reveals the high level of complementarily between myths and literature, with the examples of Ogba myths. Further to this, the similar motifs or themes that may be found among many different mythologies and certain images that recur in the myths in different times and places tend to have a common meaning or elicit comparable psychological responses and to serve similar cultural functions.

These are some of the universal symbols in myth called archetypes which have been explained in this paper. Finally, this paper has so far articulated the historical antecedents of the Ogba myths of origin in comparison with myths of origin of other communities. The various works cited and the interviews conducted in this paper elucidate these elements of Ogba myths as a piece of oral literature. It is hoped that if these issues are properly explored, Ogba myths and other myths from Nigeria, Africa and the world would be fully appreciated as a piece of oral literature, which is a conscious artistic effort and sustained means of leisure, history and socialization.

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