

Entrenching Legendary and Mythic Resources in Modern African Literature

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Abstract

The study is premised upon the enormity and relevance of African myths and legends as congenial substance for the continuity of African culture and writing tradition. Existing literary engagements have focused on the usage of myths and legends in African literature, their consistent usage in fictional writings is aesthetically commendable, however, the modern days African writers appear to be delusive in this literary endeavor. This is the lacuna this paper seeks to fill by advocating for the reinventing and entrenching of mythical and legendary characters in contemporary and future African writings. The paper investigates the extent of import, inculcation and exploration of myths and legends in some extant African writings, it pontificates their literary aestheticism, cultural beautification and prognostic values in African society. Significantly, the paper elucidates the pedagogical didactics that are intrinsically inherent in the myths and legends in spite of the seemingly archaic existence attributed to them. African writers that have creatively used mythical and legendary sources are highly commended and appreciated and passionate appeals have been made through this paper to the contemporary and future African writers to effectuate the representation and entrenchment of the continental cultural myths and legends in subsequent creative writing for the purpose of cultural integration and propagation, rejuvenation of cultural material and dispersal of moral values.

Keywords: Myths, legends, African writing, aesthetics, cultural values.

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INTRODUCTION

The emergence of modern African literature is orchestrated by the gradual pyrolysis of the oral tradition into the written form. This transformation is occasioned by a fusion or blend of oral literature and Western literary convention. Modern African literature appears to be the real literary contribution of colonialism in Africa, as it has provided models for the contemporary expansion and integration of African literary tradition. It is succinct to attribute the success of the modern African writers to the significant commixture of orality and Western literary exigencies. According to Olaleru (2018, 361),” writers began to engage their creative writing skills in constructing modern narratives while utilizing resources from the oral tradition to achieve their purpose.

The opinion of Olaleru above is sacrosanct as it illuminates palatably the inclusion of African myths, legends, cultures, beliefs, etc. in modern African literary tradition. Saliently, oral narratives are in three

forms – myths, legends and folktales. Subsequently, copious writers across African continent have concomitantly explored these folds of oral narratives in their writings in a bid to project and preserve African cultural heritage and to socio- politically improve their society. To successfully deploy the essential aspects of the oral narratives tradition in a newly literary environment will rejuvenate African cultural grandeurs and it will reverberate undying literary vivacity in both skill and purpose.

Observably, modern African writers consciously incorporated into their writings an audience not too far removed from the original ambience of orality (Quayson 1997, 12). Quayson designates this enterprise “strategic transformation and a tradition experiencing continuity”. It is expedient that the success of this new writing tradition depends largely on the individual styles and responses of the modern writers to imbibe this radical transition for effective artistry, aesthetics and appropriate dissemination of

pedagogical significance. Notably, (Osundare 2017, 41) decries the gradual but unmistakable disengagement of most activities of the oral culture from those of the emergent written culture. He (Osundare) believes that this disengagement has consequently brought an unprecedented dwindling in different areas of literary arts in modern times.

This paper attempts to advance the exploration and significance of African writers' aesthetic inclusion of legends and myths as integrals of oral narratives in the contemporary African writings. The reason for this is that among the legendary and mythical heroes there is a strong concern for imitable good morals, social justice and great respect for the taboos and norms of society which are the necessary accoutrements and wheels of social, economic and physical growth and development of a nation. Considering the high level of decadence, social vices, violence and insecurity in African shore, it is high time that writers should begin to inculcate mythical legends with outstanding moral and gallant attributes as main characters in their works. By so doing, they are immortalizing and externalizing African oral culture, they are promoting African culture, they are contributing immensely to ensure peaceful and enabling environment for the betterment of Africa and Africans and they are making their artistries contemporarily relevant.

Myths and legends have remained the enchanting stories creatively produced by man for the purpose of existence and understanding of their domain. They are appealing to man's sense knowledge of discernment and the need to cultivate good deeds and morals in the midst traverses, struggles, challenges and unpalatable experiences (Mucano 2005, 34). Utilitarian value of the import of mythical and legendary resources in modern African literature is priceless and inestimable as they are the shapers and stimulants for laudable morals and deeds. Similarly, they are encouragers of gallant feat and bravery. Due to man's quest for creative knowledge, he invents or formulates the content of myth and legends, and performs them in real life. Though the mythical and legendary texts may be superfluously hyperbolic, yet the thematic tilts make them appeal to the inner fear of man's soul and stimulate man with the ideal principles of posterity and good humanity. Campbell (2008, 29) emphasizes the literary importance of myths: It is the business of mythology proper, and of the fairy tale, to reveal the specific dangers and techniques of the dark interior way from tragedy to comedy. Hence, the incidents are fantastic and 'unreal': they represent psychological, not physical, triumphs.

The revealing fecundity that emanates from Campbell's opinion is that myths and legends reside in human psyches and are capable of providing

psychotherapeutic breakthroughs to man in a world of different fluxes.

Yerima (2009, 21) corroborates Campbell's psychological machinery of mythical resources: Myths have also remained in the metaphysical and psycho-physical aspect of our consciousness. They do not inhabit our dreams alone, but also shape our reality. We believe in myths, and sometimes allow them to inhabit our fears, our worship, our sacred ritual, the inner man, the being, and the essence of our very existence

In another dimension, Ruthven (2017, 27) opines that myths have even referred to as "comprehensive sociology of morals". According to Ruthven, mythical and legendary resources in literary texts should be seen as lustrous partners to moral didactics. Hence, it becomes imperative and expedient for creative artists to preserve and explore these veritable resources in their works because the society needs them as documentations of the unwritten laws for inter-human relationships.

The crux of this paper largely centres on the close examination of the extent of the exploration and employment of legends and myths in modern African literature and to examine the percolation and significance of the import of legends and myths to make visible the pedagogical didactics that are intrinsically inherent in them in spite of their seemingly noncurrent existence. It will provide the need to re-invent and entrench legends and myths in modern African writings in order to find literary and lucrative approaches to the menace of dwindled morals, decadences, violence, insecurity, crimes, etc. that are the distinguishing but shameful hallmarks of contemporary African society. This will serve as catalysts for a change from abysmally distorted African society to a morally improved and socio-politically balanced society. Consequently, it will serve as sources and stimulants for the expansion of frontier of knowledge in African literature as well as African culture.

Exploration of Legends and Myths in Modern African Literature

The use of legendary and mythical materials as valuable resources in African narratives has taken a premier position even before the advent of Western education. These materials have been grafted as parts of African society and they have remained the mystery and magic of Africans' lives. They have remained the tonic that replenishes the sources of survival and continuity of African culture and ways of life for they help immensely in the impartations of ideal morals and principles from one generation to another. Legends and myths have traversed the various existed generations of African writers. Indeed, they have stimulated the writers' ideologies and thematic tilts. Some writers use

them as aesthetics and they form the writers' idiosyncrasies, more often than not, both the writers and the audience acknowledge and even embrace the impacts of legends and myths in the actualization of the thematic affinities of modern African writings. This remarkable nexus between legends and myths as elements of African culture and African writers can be considered sacrosanct and should be kept at bay from one generation to another. In view of this, it therefore, becomes expedient to take a copious and in-depth analysis on how legendary and mythical resources have fared in African literature, taking cognizance of play and prose as the generic division of literature.

Legendary and Mythical Characters Employed in Modern African Plays

According to Tobalase (2017, 16), African drama in its definitive form or pattern evolves from wordless actions like ritual rites, dances and mimes during festivals to celebrate and commemorate African mythical and legendary characters that have been deified as gods and goddesses. It is succinctly glaring from Tobalase above that, the remarkable and primordial activities, actions and appeasements of the gods and goddesses (past legends and myths) in African belief and culture are prototype of present day African drama. Several notable African playwrights have creatively employed legends and myths as sources for playwriting throughout the ages but for the sake of this study, we shall only consider Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun*, Emmy Idegu's *Inikpi* and *Omodoko* and Ahmed Yerima's *Igatibi* and *Yemoja*.

Reminiscently, in *Morountodun*, Osofisan delves into the archive of legendary heroines in Yoruba history and culture to interrogate unpleasant contemporary social and political realities through the instrumentality of traditional antiquity. The play has its root prominently in Yoruba mythology as an attempt to promote African culture to the forefront globally and to disseminate moral principle and gallant bravery to the audience. The playwright's preoccupation is perhaps to aim at rejuvenating and invigorating the past remarkable and heroic deeds of legendary Moremi of Ife, the ancestral capital of Yoruba tribe in Nigeria. The play commemorates the singular acts of heroism, commitment, patriotism and selfless sacrifice of the heroine.

The legendary Moremi is a renowned historical personage because history has it that she saves her people and tribe from the gruesome invasion by strange marauders that have succeeded in killing the warriors of her tribe. She determines to deliver her people from the hands of these wicked invaders through her radiant beauty. She decides to elope with the leader of the invaders to understudy the secret behind their successive and successful invasions. She engages in the elopement as a sacrificial arrangement to know the

secret and stronghold of the military might of the invaders. She succeeds in this gesture and returns home to wage a retaliating war against the invaders and eventually she liberates her society from an age long excruciating invasion. Femi Osofisan, the playwright is overwhelmingly public as he is perturbed with the oppression of the masses by the few but privileged political elites in his society. According to Osanyemi (2018, 113), Osofisan is artistically determined to bridge the wide gap between the rich and the poor masses. This is why he uses the historical story of the legendary Moremi of Ile-Ife and blends it with his fictional Moremi (Titubi) to really expose the wide gap between the leaders and the led socially, economically and physically. Similarly, this aesthetic fusion of legendary resource and literary astuteness to showcase prevailing social and political realities has provided credence for inward utilization of mythic and legendary resources in modern African literature. In spite of the fact that Titubi, the fictional replica of legendary Moremi comes from a rich background, Osofisan transforms her artistically to lead the struggle against the rich political leaders who represent the force that oppresses and condemns the masses.

This legendary feat becomes attainable due to selfless sacrifice borne out of genuine patriotism and nationalistic determination to unravel the source of mystery and to find a lasting solution to a state of social quagmire and political hara-kiri in an otherwise peaceful, beautiful and well-endowed society. The passionate empathy displays by the fictional Moremi in the text depicts her as the shaper of good ideologies and changer of unpalatable occurrences in human society. She empathizes with the plight of the poor masses, "you know ... before this ... I could never have believed that was so unkind to anybody" (Osofisan, 65).

Emmy Idegu's *Inikpi* and *Omodoko* are historical plays with outlandish import of legendary characters to portray bravery, heroism and selfless sacrifice. They are plays with morbid but captivating and heroic experiences of African princesses who gallantly lay down their lives for the peace, survival and continuity of their kingdom. The two legends jettison their unalloyed beauty, pride and position and uphold what is highly beneficial for all and sundry at the cost of their precious lives. This uncommon act of patriotism and nationalism arouses Emmy Idegu, the playwright to aesthetically remember the legends of his kingdom by turning them to fictional characters for wider audience even outside the playwright domain. Historically, *Inikpi* in *Inikpi* is an extremely beautiful and intelligent princess and the only daughter of the king of Igala kingdom in Nigeria whose selfless commitment and sacrifice helped rescue and keep the survival of the Igala nation. She displays pure love for her society by offering her life as sacrifice to appease the gods of peace and war at a critical period of war. During the

war between Igala and Benin kingdom, to survive the war, history has it that a prophecy from the gods demands that the princess must be buried alive. She complies dignifiedly to the voice of oracle in spite of her beauty and position.

Omodoko, is also a play that employs legendary character who sacrifices her life for the safety her people and tribe. She is another princess of Igala kingdom, at the time of communal war between Igala and Jukun people, she offers herself as sacrifice to the gods for an appeasement and subsequent victory. Miachi (2012, 21) provides the heroic and cultural outcome of Omodoko's selfless sacrifice "at the riverside where Omodoko's body was buried, the river was poisoned by Igala gods and goddesses, leading to untold death of the invading Jukun forces". These female legends are brave, courageous and very caring towards humanity in their time, their unrivaled contribution to the survival of their society should be worthy of emulation by the present and future members of African society. These legends eschew pride, selfishness, greed and avarice which are the obstinate and bulwark banes of development and advancement in contemporary Africa continent. Emmy Idegu in an interview with Gbemisola Adeoti (2010, 60) gives the reason that informs the artistic commemoration and creation of *Inikpi* and *Omodoko* as literary texts:

African theatre and history, to a large extent, should be promoted by Africans. When I looked round, there was a personality like Inikpi who willingly gave herself for sacrifice. It was not just a story, it happened. She willingly gave herself for live burial as a sacrifice to avert the destruction that was looming on the Igala kingdom. Here was a heroine that had not been given prominence that she deserved. I took it as a challenge to work on Inikpi. Omodoko is another heroine, a princess that also offered herself for sacrifice ... If you talk about selfless sacrifice in Igala land today, these two princesses ring a very loud bell.

There are some levels of didactics in these Idegu's plays. The plays make both the playwright and the audience as part of the society that must be worried when things are not happening the way they ought to be, like the legendary heroines, we must utilize the very tools at hand to make an input into the unpleasant situation for the sake of posterity and survival of society.

Ahmed Yerima's *Yemoja* gives an account of mythic character whose actions are consistently mediatory during critical power tussles between two remarkably strong and powerful gods in Yoruba mythology – Ogun (god of war) and Obatala (god of creation). There is an impeccable juxtaposition of an excellent creative talent and exploration of mythic resources to address contemporary issues of clash of interest among the political leaders in *Yemoja*. Adeoti

(2007, 4) sees the importation of myth in *Yemoja* as a modification that explains the trans-continental manifestation of the Yoruba (African) goddess and assertion of multi-culturalism and gender complementarity. Adeoti further opines that the use of mythic consciousness in the text stresses the need for improved interactions among Africans towards mutual development in the face of contemporary global challenges.

Aesthetically, Yerima's *Yemoja* embraces the rich cultural heritage of Yoruba (Africa) and belief in gods and goddesses who culturally provide the modus operandi for human's co-existence, interaction and growth. It will be succinct to categorise *Yemoja*, the fictional heroine as an intelligentsia who culturally makes an indelible footprint on the socio-political activities of her society. Adekoya (2007, 251) aligns with the paramount and seemingly mediatory role of mythic *Yemoja* in his view that *Yemoja* and other mythic resources provide and demonstrate vividly divinity and succour to members of the society that appreciate them. These divinity and succour are only subtle disguised or metaphoric norms and expression for humanity. He (Adekoya) pontificates further *Yemoja* mythology provides the playwright with the facile machinery for explicating human experiences.

There is an enormity of mythic presence in Ahmed Yerima's *Igatibi*. It is artistically employed to profligate the past remarkable deeds and to commemorate *Igatibi*, the mythic hero and protector of Afonja dynasty in Ilorin, Kwara state, Nigeria. The playwright bemoans and ridicules the way Afonja descendants neglect the worship of *Igatibi*, their great and mythic ancestor (culture and belief) and rush gregariously over new religion (Islam). *Igatibi* satirically presents the pitiful and unfortunate setback and defeat that befall the people of Afonja lineage. The play throws into the open the pain, setback, lack of peace and unprecedented failures and uncommon retrogression that befall the descendants of great *Igatibi* and subjects them to a hilarious expedition with an intention to admonish them to return to their "roots" – their religion, culture and tradition. The play through the aesthetic creation of mythic character emphasizes the urge and need to embrace the mystery and prowess of *Igatibi*. *Igatibi*, the mythic hero in the play significantly symbolizes the intermediary between the Afonja people and their ancestors, he represents the gallant warlords of Ilorin who have been once united by their culture and tradition, and who have witnessed great heroic and comfortable past. Nga, a character who is an ardent worshipper in the text eulogizes him, "I shall call on you Baba, leader of the people, fierce warrior of Ilorin. See how he leads them to war. See how we trample on our enemies. See! ... Afonja Ilorin will be proud of you" (*Igatibi*, 40). It is quite unfortunate that in spite of the protective role of *Igatibi*, his offspring renounces him at

the wake of a new religion. His offspring also represents contemporary Africans who neglect their culture and rush uncontrollably after European or Western ways of life, little wonder, African continent is somewhat at a cross-road.

Didactically, the exploration of mythic character, Igatibi suggests three things. Firstly, it shows that mythical hero is in possession of the ability to model and shape the lives of his followers and offspring that will never neglect or forget their root. Secondly, it suggests remarkably that the ancestors have an indelible link with their offspring and, by extension that African culture and values are necessary condiments of African survival if Africans want to grow and be relevant palatably and globally. Thirdly, it shows the futility and stasis in the rush for foreign ways of life. The major concern of the import of mythic hero in the play is the direct admonition to contemporary Africans to have a rethink and deviate from the abysmal neglect of their past and culture, until Africans link their present with the past, the needed socio-economic and political sanity will be elusive. It may also be a social enjoinder that a fusion of new and old traditions and values should be embraced and entrenched for the growth and advancement of African continent (Osanyemi *et al.*, 2014, 120). If these are observed by writers and other stakeholders in Africa, lives will be more conducive, habitable and livable with great and lofty achievements in all spheres of life.

The Involvement of Mythical Resources in African Prose

There exists crystal nexus between oral narratives and modern African prose fiction that evolved since the emergence of African novel in the 20th century. The connection further integrates and incorporates consciously mythic resources and characters that are distinctive features of oral narratives into the written African narratives. They manifest and influence the narrative techniques of the early and modern African novelists that write in both English and indigenous languages. Notable writers that blend the oral tradition with Western written conventions are Amos Tutuola, D.O. Fagunwa, James Ngugi wa Thiongo, Violet Dube and others, these writers juxtapose mimicry, reciprocity and elevated hilarity in their narratives through the instrumentality of mythic resources. It is instructive to note that these novelists make recourse to the mores of the traditional oral society where oral communication is extolled above most other forms of communication. For the sake of this study we shall briefly observe the mythic involvement in the prose narratives of Amos Tutuola and James Ngugi wa Thiongo.

Amos Tutuola in his *Palmwine Drinkard* writes with an elevated style that combines euphoric entertainment, traditional ethos and creative

aestheticism to address his audience. His mythic material, description and narration of characters exhume his particular creative ingenuity. His novel emphasizes the premium integration and dispersal of the existed mythic resources and appreciation throughout the ages in his society. Amos Tutuola in his work considers the externalization of his mythic resources as the effective fulcrum to disseminate morals, mores and acceptable cultural norms of his domain. It is apt to see him as an advocate of literary continuity of myths in spite of technological civility and scientific advancement that perpetrate 20th century African writing culture. It is evident that his hyperbolic mode of description and expression percolates the salient emphasis for rich interchange of shared values and mores of traditional culture and language. The literary advantage of his style enjoins the contemporary and future novelists to ensure unbreakable inculcation of mythic materials in their writings in order to reminiscently indicate the African 'root' for global awareness.

Similarly, Ngugi's narrative talents evolve beautifully with the exploration of mythic material to show his firm affinity with the oral tradition of his society and to fraternize with the sacredness of land as a divine cultural and familial inheritance bequeathed on his society by their ancestors. This indicates that foreign encroachment of the land is culturally prohibitive and must be restricted vehemently by members of the society. With the sacrosanct belief and injunction placed on land, Ngugi's fictional character, Ngotho in *Weep not, Child* narrates the importance and myth surrounding land to his children:

And the creator, who is also called Murungu took Mumbi from his holy mountain ... Yes, God showed Gikuyu and Mumbi all the land and told them, this land I hand over to you. It's yours to rule and till in serenity sacrificing only to me, your God, under my sacred tree (24)

Devi (2019, 20) sees the employment of this myth as symbolic not only in the author's desire to present genuine history of his people, but also in his secret attempt to act like the elders noted above to provoke Kenyans to the realization of their deprivations orchestrated by colonial rule. Subsequently, the myth, just like land in the novel must be held sacred in African prose narratives for the continuity of African race, belief and culture and possible entrenchment in African literary tradition.

It is also worthy of note, to take a glimpse of the use of mythic resources in Ngugi's *The River Between*. Intuitively, Ngugi decries and bemoans the act of betrayal exhibited by Africans (Kenyans) during the era of cultural conflict emanated from the extorting colonial masters. He narrates the orderly presentation and preservation of natural endowment with a myth of

creation. The novelist is somewhat perturbed physically and psychologically to see a trespassing Kenyan that supports foreign encroachment of the land and succumbs to the whims and caprices of the whiteman on the altar of materialism. The novelist recapitulates the societal myth, “the two ridges lay side by side. One was Kamenno, the other was Makuyu. Between them was a valley of life” (*The River Between*, 1). From the exordium of this myth of creation, it is glaring that it abhors cultural encroachment and infringement by foreigner; it also detests any act of neglect and mad rush over Western civilization. Kikuyu, God of Ngugi’s fictional society is God of peace and orderliness, he has placed or located everyone to a place suitable for everyone’s existence. Santhanakrishnan and Shanmugam (2018, 230) emphasize the thematic occupation of the mythic materials as “the central conflict of *The River Between* does not revolve around the struggle between the colonizers and the colonized, but rather among the natives themselves, as a result of the divisions and rifts created by colonization. From the mythic materials employed by Tutuola and Ngugi, they apparently reveal the aesthetic narrative ingenuity of the novelists and they preach constant usage of them in African writing expeditions.

CONCLUSION

African writers consistently employ myths and legends as sources for their writing throughout the ages. Some of the usages of these myths and legends are in form of allusions, anecdotes and folklores in fictional writings. The essences of the import of mythical and legendary materials as evident in this work are enormous; they are to project, profile and explicate the mythical and legendary characters, their remarkable deeds and prowess as chronicled in the cultural archives. It is discovered also that their (mythical and legendary characters) constant inculcation in modern African writings is to modify their recognition as changers, shapers and catalysts for definitive models and morals that are needed for the growth and advancement of African society. The development of moral, cultural ethos and mores is the exigent creative and aesthetic imperativeness of myths and legends in modern African writings. Succinctly, the appearance of myths and legends in modern fiction and creative plays and performances is to rejuvenate history, to turn history to reality; to make the past present and to ensure the continuity of the present in both imaginary writings and true life. African writers have achieved great feat in the employment of myth and legend in literary engagements, however, their efforts must be intensified by the incoming generation of writers not to rescind the use of these materials on the altar of civilization and technological advancement. Bearing in mind the expansion of frontier knowledge in literary studies, African writers should always romance their cultural myths and legends as patents and legacies bequeathed to them culturally and immemorially.

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