

MYTH, MEDIA AND CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

Myth is the compact historical whole of a people's experiences codified in their peculiar cultural frames for re-enactment in secular and religious expressions. Myth is thus the currency for apprehending individual cultural modes of seeing, evidenced in the production and consumption of art forms. Against the backdrop of westernised opinions that tend to classify African arts, media and cultural expressions as inadequate because of the recourse to mythology, this paper makes the point, with literature and photographs, that the mythic in art is not an exclusive malaise of Africa. For as this paper evidences, western art forms are no less rooted in the mythical.

KEYWORDS: Myth, Culture, Art and Religion.

Even where intellectual trends concede the obviously negative repercussion of acculturation, some cultural dissidents and other agents of cultural attrition have agitated otherwise. Declining to grapple the fact that the myth of any one culture subsumes the religion, philosophy and science of that culture, these voices seek either to separate soul from culture or deny the existence of culture and religion altogether (Johnson 1969 and Ludwig cited in Idowu 88). Other times scholarly opinions merely wish to confine and apprehend African – non-western culture – products in the restrictive global but western frame (Haynes 1995). By so doing scholars actually transplant an invading superstructure and virtually sterilize and suspend the African culture in hell. For hell is definitely the spirit prevented from evolving, it is arrested in time between two states of being. In one state, that which is African is denied its uniqueness and self-containment, and in the other, it is equally denied the truly global (western) identity by which out-of-context parameters it is crudely apprehended. Often times the scandalous voices come from within, and must be confronted by the stark reality of intrinsic African cultural perspectives. This paper aims at not just defining the logic of African myth media and culture products but also at confronting the negative approach to apprehending African arts and media productions. What then represent the African thought system? For it is this system wrought over apprehensive ages, that subsumes the key to the understanding of African mythic essences that are so very inseparable from patterns of artistic production and consumption.

The African system of thought is a holistic enterprise. It expresses itself in the fluid contiguity of art and religion (see fig.1). While man uses drama, a unit of art, to re-enact his experience, he also resorts to power – as an aspect of religion

– to affect those experiences that awe his own ability. At some experiential point the distinction between art and religion is, in African terms, a needless intellectual exercise. Right from the first contacts with western missionary colonizers, verbal and non-verbal assault has marked African belief systems. As opposed to the African creative personality, the assault is representative of the archetypal cultural intolerance marking the western cast of mind. Again too, it dramatizes the contrasting African and European worldviews. Whereas one functions with a retributive comprehension of contiguous realities, the other is a destructively assertive system of departmentalized thoughts. Myth, media and culture in African thought are cohesively understood as representations of one continuous religio-social phenomenon. In western thought however they are dialectically dismembered and individually digested in a separatist carnal. Wherever the western mind has encountered cultures strange and foreign, the imperative is always the same – tear down, assimilate separately or annihilate definitely.

As a people's way of life, culture though dynamic must be somewhat infallible since it is defined by what people choose to call their doing. Thus defined, the whole gamut of media or artistic production – traditional or otherwise – is subsumed in the myth and the culture of that particular people. For time is the critical and transcendently permeable membrane defining myth from media. In actual fact media when crippled with age becomes myth. While both function samely within culture, they are separated by a dense chasm of time. Jones (1965) defines myth as what one wants to believe about the past and is based on belief and emotion. This conception is rather narrow. And, even if we were to conceive it in much narrower terms, Jones' conception would be inadequate since he invests upon the myth a triviality, which stems from the feeble nature of emotion, and the consequential fallibility, which overrides what a people might call their myth (Ajibade 1999). For myth becomes fallible only in the limited perception of a cast of mind uninitiated to the modes of doing and seeing of the local culture. It is therefore easy for a foreign or local (but acculturated) mind to, for instance, misconceive African mythic extensions etched in the deep crevices of diverse creative and artistic expressions.

African mythology functions as a socializing and educational agent. This includes all other functions of the contemporary media such as agenda setting, status conferral, transmission of culture, etc. As entertainment myth provides emotional and psychological easement through the evoking of suspense, sorrow, sympathy and most of all laughter – for

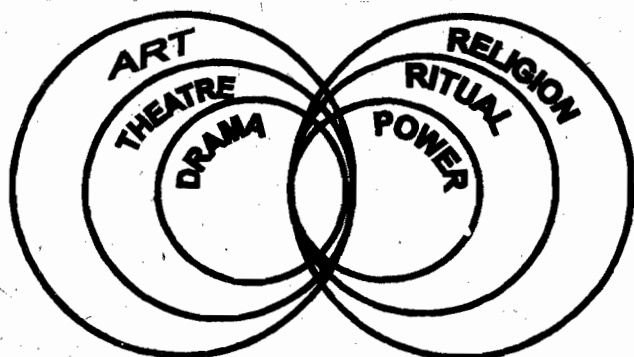


Fig. 1: Art and Religion in African thought

death and laughter are intertwined (Koech, 1979). Mythology is the first science to be learned since it records the reflections of major stages in the evolution of human societies (Vicó, 1948 and Gilson, 1972). And since too, cultures sustain and assert themselves through the myth (or media), it is imperative that media should reflect in concrete terms, the physical and psychological manifestations of the culture that gives it birth. Conversely, romance with African myth and culture is a requisite for scholars and critics who wished not just to flirt with African media, but also to intellectualize the continent's culture products.

At the risk of harping on the obvious, let it be noted that the placid essence of life and living for the African makes no provision for a two dimensional separation of being from doing. Like a good piece of sculpture, the African system of thought lies on an endless expanse of time and space, appreciated in the round cyclically from Deity to man, and back again. Besides, as Sieber points out:

It is difficult to apply definitions of religion or art developed in our society to traditional Africa because of the way we tend to view, codify and pigeonhole concepts... To assume that art must not or should not be at the service of religion or indeed, any shared social value system would impose a most inaccurate restriction on the examination of the relationship of art to religion in traditional African societies... Art in the service of religion, or the search for a more secure state, must then reinforce the particularized goals of a given society through the persuasive impact of symbolic or representative forms. Art in such a context is tradition oriented, reinforcing fixed, shared values, conservative to the core, as are the values it reinforces and the spiritual authority it symbolizes. (141 & 145).

Therefore then, if art or media criticism or interpretation is to be sound, it must be in an atmosphere free from the intrusion of our much more aggressive, evaluative and creative impulses, while setting aside pre-packaged views in the search for the premises and the logic that every society builds for itself (Gross 1974 and Seiber 1977). But, in radical departure from the foregoing, Haynes (1995) says of a Yoruba media genre:

The world view is the traditional Yoruba one, although one of shrunken dimensions. The film does not register any sense of historical change. The magical universe is simply there, as the traditional social world is; as if they were the most natural thing in the world to find on the screen at the end of the 20th century. (11)

Well, we concede that it is inevitable for the global to transfuse into and impact on the local. Be that as it may, the local must be emphasized as the most sustainable superstructure in wroughting global-enhanced changes to local culture. To insist on "humanist" and sanctimonious global (but western) creative parameters for conceiving non-western media and culture products is to rationalize acculturation. For the ultimate trajectories for culture production and consumption are contextual conjectures of individual societies.

This means that what becomes "natural" in artistic and media times and spaces is not only linked to indigenous mythology, but is also delimited by the subjective

apprehending indices peculiar to that culture. It is therefore inadequate to assume a purely western frame for adjudging art genres from Africa or elsewhere. What may be more prudent is to exhume primary essences of creative appreciation akin to the African thought system for use in apprehending such artworks. As Okpokam clearly states, contemporary Nigerian (African) dramatic expression "is an out-growth of our indigenous tradition...and need a basic knowledge of the Nigerian cosmic view and mythology for full appreciation" (60). For instance, it is veritably inadequate to use strictly western visual modes for perceiving African sculptures from any one of the continent's many arts-producing subcultures. It is even more ambitious to attempt this with a genre like performance - masquerading, festivals or dramatic performances - where the mythic, the historic and the contemporary merge; where the past, the present and the future are one neat transcendental whole. The apprehension of African arts is strictly the business, more of African comprehending modes than of western dialectic parameters.

In a moment of acculturated apathy, Ogundele (1997) lends his weight to the passing of traditional African pegs through traditional western holes. It should be clear that categories of creative impulses are defined by what people do and what they choose to call their doings (Gross 1974). Negative scholarly opinionating continues to label and victimize African arts and media genres as bad, extrinsic and mundane to modernity because they reflect African mythic reality. African artistic products are thus denied validity for not conforming to or reflecting the invading western myth. Like a child of arrested development behind its mother's skirt, African arts are thus veiled under an arrogant intellectualism that seeks to separate African myth and culture from African media representations.

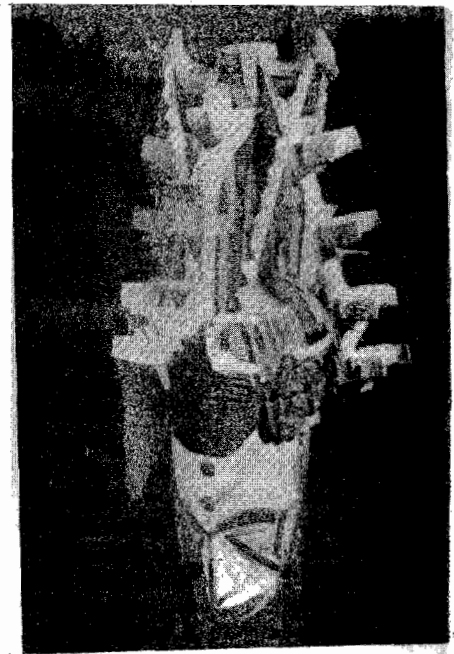


Plate 1: A painted wooden mask called *agboho umuo* by the Igbo of Nigeria. It portrays a maiden with an elaborate hairdo - the cultural ideals of feminine beauty. The traditional fertility mythology is the only basis for its understanding.



Plate 2: Dea mask used by the *Poro* society of the Dan people of Ivory Coast and Liberia. There are local African contexts for producing and using this mask. Such contexts are vital to the understanding of both the mask and the artistic enactments /celebrations in which this mask is employed. To stress western parameters for apprehending the true meaning of the mask is to deny its Africanness.

It is conceivable that the visual quality of say Nigerian video films is poor. Surely, poor visual quality in film offshoots directly from inadequate technology, rather than from the "shrunkness" of the African worldview. The solution to this is not the re-authoring of African mythology, but the appropriation and application of adequate technical machinery for producing these films. Whereas there is a move towards globality and towards the "international" in terms of the quality of intercultural production and consumption, we must recognize that what is global is also local to a specific locale. It is technology and capital that spells the critical impetus for transfusing local culture production to the realms of global consumption. For mythic or magical inevitabilities evident in the arts are not the exclusive malaises of Africa. Western arts and media forms - Roman, Greek and Italian sculptures and paintings including contemporary expressions - are historical evidences to this (see plates 3-6). Hollywood's films like *The Wizard of Oz*, *Splash*, *Angels in the Outplay*, *Ghost Dad*, *Clash of the Titans*, and a host of others that represent the magical and the mythical worlds are "natural" things we find on the global screen. African traditional and mythical worlds should, therefore, be no less natural on the global and local media spaces.

Articulating or recommending the contrary to the foregoing is to attempt to legislate for contemporary cultural repression. Aside from the fact that Islam has been repressive to African art (Umukoro 1994 and Wangboje 1982), media arts repression commenced with the advent of missionary colonizers in Africa. They physically and verbally persecuted genres - of dance, song, festival drumming, and arts and crafts - in the name of God's own religion. Earlier in recorded history, European economic needs saw the carting away of millions of

Africans into slavery, where their world view found expression in spirituality, music, dance etc, which helped them to bear their common suffering.

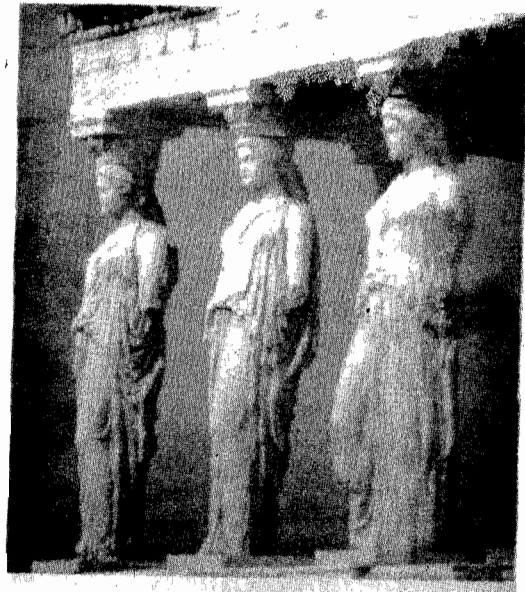


Plate 3: Porch of Maidens, Erechtheum. It is named for Erechtheus, a mythical Athenian hero. The Erechtheum was built in the late 5th century bc on the Athenian Acropolis.

Source: Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 2002.



Plate 4: Hermes Holding the Infant Dionysus. Sculpted about 340 bc, it is attributed to Praxiteles, a Greek sculptor of the Late Classical period. The piece is marble and stands approximately 2 m (7 ft) high. It was originally made for the Temple of Hera at Olympia.

Source: Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 2002.

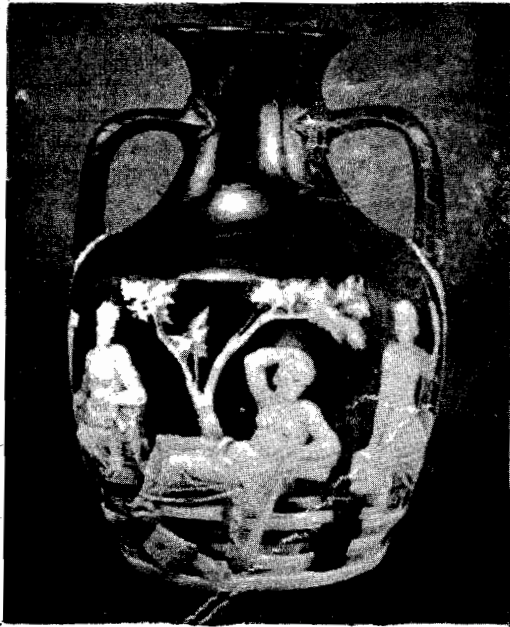


Plate 5: Portland Vase. This is an example of Roman cameo glass from the 1st century ad portraying scenes from the myth of Peleus and Thetis.

Source: Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 2002.

Through violence-tinted mythical and artistic enactments the forbearers of today's Afro-Americans resisted every inch of cultural repression. For the commencement of resistance by a repressed people is linked to their media, manifested in various forms (Soyinka 1982). In actual fact a bloc of Caribbean scholars believe that the abolition of slavery was not due to western altruism, but to the debilitating effect of the slave resistance and rebellions (Barret 1977). According to Barret, what the missionaries wanted was:

...nothing short of de-Africanizing the Blacks, making them into carbon copies of themselves. All of the emotional expressions that are part and parcel of the African soul were to be held down. At first, the African saw the church as their only hope and, in fact some of the churchmen did fight for emancipation. But their introduction to missionary Christianity appeared to them to be another form of slavery; slavery of the mind and soul (197)

For these African slaves in Diaspora, salvation was not in the magnanimity of arrogant Popish and Protestant Christianity, but in the decoding and expressing of their fluid myth. This fluidity of the African myth enables art forms to change into other forms, and thereby ensure racial survival in the face of annihilating forces. Thus in Apartheid South Africa, drama would change to song or dance under the watchful eyes of the oppressor.

The African worldview is dynamic and depends upon the maintenance of a harmonious blend between man, God, and nature. The universe maintains a ritual equilibrium so long as the vital force emanating from the Creative Essence is operative in proper proportion through out the system. In the religion of the Africans, they live and move and have their being (Acts 17:28). Though certain western writings have

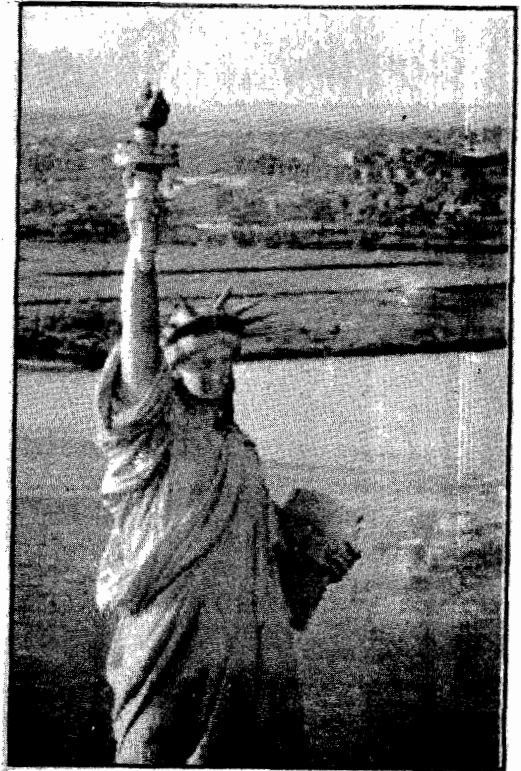


Plate 6: The Statue of Liberty. A western mythical symbol of freedom for many, it was one of the first sights to welcome immigrants arriving in the United States. The statue stands 93 m (306 ft) tall on Liberty Island in New York Harbor. It was designed by French sculptor Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi, and is a gift from France commemorating the first centennial of U.S.

Source: Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 2002.

declared Africa savage and uncivilized, history has proven the west to be no less savage. Aside from the humorous inhumanity of slavery and imperialism, there is no difference between local African trado- religion and the global Popish Christianity for example. Both have a pantheon of saints who perform fragmented duties of the Supreme Deity in cyclic rituals, incantations and chants, including the use of sacred souvenir props. Besides, an 8000-year-old boat was excavated in the dry northern Nigerian town of Dufuna in 1994. The boat dates back to a time when modern science maintains that such skills were possible only in Europe. This discovery proves that "developments in Africa were not merely copies of European-Middle Eastern developments, but independent cultural and historical contributions" (Deutschland 33). There is therefore no point now and in the future for anyone to dichotomize cultural or media representations on the stringencies of forcing one inferior culture's products into the extrinsic frame of a superior other. Media contemporalises myth, and since myth is evolved by culture, which is spontaneously independent, culture then becomes the infallible navigator of whatever a people might call their media. Such artistic representations however scientific or mythical would continue to be most natural in local/global media spaces, so long as humanity endures.

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