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Tenets of Myths of Origin in the Tigania Community of Kenya: A Cultural Exploration

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Introduction

Myths of origin display certain salient features that set them apart from other genres of oral literature. This paper, however, lays emphasis on the major tenets of myths of origins from the Tigania community. Sigmund Freud and Karl Jung believe that myths and legends symbolically enact deep truths about human nature. Throughout history, myths have accompanied religious doctrines and rituals, helping sanction or recall. The reasons for religious observances can also help sanction customs and institutions. Writers and speakers often turn to myths when they try to tell stories of deep significance because mythic structures touch a powerful and primal part of the human imagination. They help to concisely allude to stories familiar to their audiences by drawing on a powerful association with just a few words. Emile Dukheim"s developments in functionalism were later modified and referred to as functionalism by Haralambos and Holborn (2007) as, "the various parts of society…seen to be integrated and taken together as a complete system. To understand any part of society, the part must be seen in relation to society as a whole" (2007, p. 856). In this way, a functionalist examines part of society in terms of its contribution to the maintenance of the whole system. This means that the relationships between members of society are organized in terms of rules and social norms which stipulate how people are expected to behave. This will entail an example of how myths of origin from the Tigania community are structured and what effect they have on other parts of this community's social, political and economic structure. Many stories fall into familiar mythic patterns and they display certain salient features that set them apart from other genres of oral literature.

Myths are Cultural

Knowing the oral arts of a society is a major step in understanding our own cultural values. Experience in other parts of the world with a living tradition of oral literature indicates that people well-grounded in their culture are likely to do well and to find a full satisfactory life-style than those who do not. Oral literature in all its forms and content is found in the village and cannot be studied in isolation of real life. The greatness of oral literature lies in its ability to embody, in forms of oral literature, a wide range of creative materials such as speech as well as religious and social concepts. Soyinka (1976) avers that in a sense the history of a people's culture is the history of its attitudes to myths because myths themselves carry fragmentary overtones of the past. This, combined with the poetic side of the dramatic vision as well as with the direct application of mythical situations to contemporary problems, produces a very remarkable effect; a kind of new mythology. Myths confirm and maintain the memory of, and provide authority for, tribal customs and institutions. (18).

Myths essentially have societal importance and the social function of storing and transmitting the values of a given society since they occur only in social content, as part of a cultural milieu. Myths are culturally inspired with certain social milieus. This sociological function of myth relays the social issues assailing humanity while pacifying man's curiosity about origins. Kinuthia et.al (1996) states that the "the main difference between man and other apes is his mental capacity for intelligence. Indeed, curiosity in relation to one"s origin is one of the main characteristics which distinguish man from the rest of creation" (16). Therefore, studying oral literature is not enough without the realization that we are searching for the essence of man"s culture. Wellek and Warren (1942) in Theory and Literature posits that "…large questions raised by literary studies are at least ultimately or by implication social questions of tradition and convention, norms and genres, symbols and myths." (1942, p. 85). In Red-Thigh Woman (Ngirani) MT 2, young men are very careful when selecting a life partner. They would seek the advice of the people, secretly, about the background of the girl they hoped to marry. In Red-Thigh Woman (Ngirani) MT 2, the elders concluded:

> All daughters from this illegitimate union shall never secure marriage by young men but would always be married as second wives or by old men who had divorced or lost their first wives.

This advice from older members of the society was necessary in order to avoid getting married to Ngirani (Red Thigh Woman) which syndrome among the Tigania people is such an emotive topic even to date. This trend was maintained since the custodians of the morals in the society wanted to discourage some anti-social behaviour in the

community such as sleeping with a close relative, for instance a daughter, son, sister or brother. To date, this ideal is upheld not only because it is an ancient story but because it was a form of retributive justice to the wrong doer and his posterity. Douglas (2000) maintains that "prophetic myths for our time, are an attempt to make our collective experiences intelligible". This he says is through a narrative that is representative of truths or values that are sanctioned by the general belief of a people (2000, p. 121). Myths of origin are as old as culture itself. It is clear that the kind of accounts that any particular society created are a reflection of that society"s way of life. Tigania people from a very early time were hunters and relied on wild animals for food, which they supplemented with agricultural activities. It was therefore natural for a man to desire to domesticate wild animals to save him the agony and danger of going out to hunt every time he needed food. This is according to the MT 5, How Animals Were Domesticated.

> One day, the dog, while at the edge of the forest next to man"s homestead, observed how man would make a trap and kill many animals for food.

In addition, the mythmaker had reason to explain the origin of rain from which the peoples" livelihood depended on. This is aptly captured in Rain and Thunderstorms, MT 6. Once a religion or a mythology is established and endorsed in society, a new cultural element is introduced and certain end results introduced to ensure that people adhere to those new elements; that is why culture is dynamic and keeps swelling and with each new challenge comes new ways of infusing it into the community. If the father had not impregnated his own biological daughter in MT 2, Red-Thigh Women (Ngirani), the Tigania culture would not have such a scenario. This scenario is aptly illustrated in MT 2 Red Thigh Woman (Ngirani) thus:

> All daughters from from this illegitimate union shall never secure marriage by young men but would always be married as second wives or by old men who had divorced or lost their first wives. Such a girl would be referred to as „Ngirani" or K iero Gitune" However, the intoduction of this myth was all in an effort to solve a problem in the society, which would otherwise consume the social set up of the entire community. In the Tigania community family life and relations was very important because this hwas and is the institution at the core of survival and perpetuation of life. Indeed, five of the myths of origin under discussion touch on family, their aspirations, challenges and solutions. In the same

> myth we have:" Should a young man fall in love with a red-thigh woman,
> she would escort him at night and on parting she was expected to throw
> a "Kinyinga" in front of the man on his way home. This Symbolic act was
> a saving ceremony to save the life of the young Man.

The functionalist perspective to this particular myth is that there was a solution that was arrived at by the elders. It was meant to cater for the social and cultural needs of the society. It provided marriage even for the „red-thigh woman" and the young men who would insist on marrying such a woman would be saved by the saving ceremony prescribed. Oral traditions have influenced the creative writing from Africa and have been integrated into the different genres of literature. Okpewho (1983), Lindfors (1973) and Odaga (1982) observe that contemporary writers have continued to employ myths in their writing in various ways. Odaga further notes that, "the traditions and experiences are rich" (xxiv), while Wainaina (1998) notes that, "orature is a vast reservoir of the artistic material" (5). Thus, oral traditions have been referred to as rich resources of material for the contemporary writer. Myths have a cultural origin which is part of its history revealing the trends of an era and are revelatory to the degree of possessing intimate involvement with space and time. Thus myths hold a profound significance for philosophy, offering insight on embodiment. MT 5, Family and Clan Naming Patterns among the Tigania community captures the entire history of the Tigania people right from Mbwaa (Coast) to their present day habitation. They use family and clan names that they acquired during the Mbwaa experience thus:

> As they grew up, the two siblings began to be in constant conflict with
> each other. As a result of this the father supported the first born,
> Meneng"a While the mother was allied to the second born, Mutabui.
> This brought About „Cioithe" and „Ciong"gina" meaning of the father"
> and „of the Mother" respectively.

Atwood (2003) says that "Myths have established a communal code that is radically different from the ideology governing the old world" (13). This is to mean that though these myths belong to the ancient times, the principles thereof are applicable today. The cultural names such as Mutabui and Muriiru, Ciethe and Ciong"ina, Njeru, Njiru and Ntune from which the Tigania community traces their ancestral naming is a pattern that is alive even today among the Tigania people. This shows that myths cannot exist independent of the history of the particular community represented. Myths justify a culture"s activities and social systems and account for customs and

rituals. In Family and Clan Naming Patterns MT 5, when children are born, they are named according to this story.

Similarly, in the Tigania community, family and clan names trace their ancestry from the story of migration, and no clan can dissociate itself from this arrangement. Although some clans are despised because of the negativity connected with the time they escaped, the rationale behind this is necessary for the purpose of inculcating warriorship among the youth. They help validate certain sociological systems such as rites of passage, institutions, sets of rights and wrongs, proprieties and improprieties, codifying behavior and enforcing morality.

Myths of origin are socially formative, unifying and solidifying and sustaining capacities. They set up some precedent as cultural ideals and a guarantee for the continuance of that ideal. They address problems of cultural conflict among African communities by validating values and customs that may be a cause for optimism about humanity‟s future, even in the shadow of threatening developments. Considering Perceived Relatives (Gichiaro), MT 4, we learn that a community whose cohesion and survival is on the brink of collapse can find remedy in the lessons acquired through etiological tales.

In the same myth, the punishment of the young men in the Gaaru, (traditional Tigania house for young men and old men) had far reaching consequences in the survival of its unity. This spells optimism and hope to the preceding generations. Mythology, though a very ancient discourse, instructs the community in the modern age, although human beings are tied to their past in certain ways. By retelling the myths of origin and the lessons learnt, succeeding generations can face the future with renewed vigor in the hope that past mistakes can be corrected. The scenario of Red Thigh Women (Ngirani) MT 2, clearly shows that certain things may take very long to outgrow culture. Among the Ibo of Nigeria, the redthigh woman, popularly known as Osu has been well discussed by Elechi Amadi in the novel The Concubine (1966). Here, Ihuoma the main character, is an extraordinarily beautiful young woman who attracts several suitors, causing untold suffering and death to all of them. She could not secure a good marriage and had to remain a concubine. According to the Tigania culture, it was unacceptable to have sexual relationships with close relatives because incest was considered a taboo. The story has the same dimension as science and Christianity. In the traditional Tigania culture, the punishment for having sex with a very close relative, for instance a daughter or mother, was severe and it exposed the culprits to social stigma if not death.

The punishment seems too severe, and the community may have to contemplate a shift from it, although these days such occurrences just go unreported. Myths are believed to be true accounts by the society from where they are drawn.

They are represented in a logical model that is capable of overcoming contradictions. The Red-Thigh Women (Ngirani) phenomenon aptly demonstrates the argument that the African man is by nature polygamous. This argument provides a legal ground for the Tigania man to get another wife without seeming to hurt the society. The Tigania people believed in myths especially because of the artistic application of the power of words and on the omnipresence and versatility of myths in their cultural mindset, and on the inevitable pull of narrative in our desire to understand ourselves and our world. However, Wamahiu (1993, p. 6) suggests:

> Culture-defined roles and relationships should best be seen as a human contract. In other words, these roles and relationships are not immutable and unchangeable. Where there is a felt and justified need, then there is no reason why these roles and relationships cannot be revised. One does not have to continue oppressive practices if they have outlived their use.

This assertion by Wamahiu is very instrumental in instituting a change for the better. Some of the cultural practices contained in myths of origin need to be discarded if their relevance to the present day demands are futile. Language as a cultural constituent is the collective meaning and bank of peoples" experiences in history. Culture and language are almost indispensable because it is through language that the genesis, growth, articulation and transmission of culture is realized. This language is developed within the traditional setting of a people where experiences, attitudes, and beliefs are tailored in a way that is peculiar to the cultural audience. Carol Osborne in Mythmaking in Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake (2003) contends that "myths offer an additional commentary on the power of words, on the omnipresence of myth in our cultural mindset and on the in veritable pull of narrative in our desire to understand ourselves and our world" (Atwood, 2).

In the six myths of origin, it was and still is difficult to find English words which could adequately fit the Tigania words due to the rich cultural thrust. Most of the native words can only be elaborated superfluously and could not be directly translated since there are no English equivalents. Myths of origin, being stories that explain origins, use words which are older than the English vocabulary because western education had not yet brought the meaning, or the objects denoting those words were not available. Examples of such words are, Gaaru (house of old men and young men), Nkanatha (cowshed), Kinyinga (burning piece of wood), Ngirani (Red-thigh woman), Gichiaro (Perceived relative) etc. All these words are Kimeru words and have been

used in the six myths of origin from the Tigania community. This study used language and cultural references that can be understood by the Kimeru speakers consistently. In myth rendition the manipulation of linguistic and cultural elements is vital in order to enrich the understanding of the audience, and it calls for ingenuity and a rich repertoire of lore. This is because words have cultural overtones that only the native speaker may fully draw from the „kernels of knowledge" that may be contained in such a work of art. The relation of narrative style to mythic quality is a difficult business and a delicate balance. The audience-visual machine that the researcher used was able to capture the contextual nuances and paralinguistic elements that add flavor to the narrative work. The nuances of both sight and sound at the fervid scene were not lost. It was therefore possible to perceive the tricks that the voice of the narrator could play, all to the success of the quality of the myth narration. The non-verbal cues in MT 4 Perceived Relatives (Gichiaro) aptly brings out this:

> The husband did not inquire much about the matter because it was evident especially with the child who was roughly wrapped up in the hands of one of the young men. The woman, unwilling to give details in the open called the husband inside the house and in low tone narrated what had happened…

Myths expand the cultural vocabulary as the audience learns to be more proficient communicators especially because the telling language is culturally foregrounded. A very important aspect of mythology is the sense of community that results from the ritual telling of these stories, for it sets a precedent for how stories may function, with embellishment of images, symbols and mythic allusions. MT 5, Origin of Family and Clan Naming has a lot of local vocabulary that English has not been able to fully explain while others are culturally coded. In this particular myth, the audio-visual equipment were necessary in order to capture them all. This, especially eliminated the pain of trying to keep pace with the narrator's speed of delivery. This together with note-taking did away with the awkwardness of having the narrator to go back on his details so as to get the clan and family names correctly.

Within an African ritual context, spoken words are considered to be in fact more effective than the actions. Kamare and Mpesha in Journal of Asian and African Studies; No.41 1991 145-6) explain thus "one reason why each word must be weighted before it is uttered is because of the finality of the spoken word." It is also one way in which society silences its members because of the conviction. For these stories to be alive as they are today, having survived the ravages of retelling by different narrators, it means that much of the cultural references are alive and so important as to be retained. The

myths of origin from the Tigania community are awash with symbolism. Characters, objects and language has been used symbolically for various reasons.

Names for example have been used symbolically both for family and clan identification. MT 5 Family and Clan Naming Patterns, we have the following symbolic names; Cioithe, Ciong"ina, Gaita, Mwithe, Nguu Ntune, Njeru, Njiru, Ntune, Koome Njue etc. All these names have cultural meanings. This oral sharing of the mythmakers" love for words, kernels of wisdom from their vast knowledge of cultural texts and their visions have the capacity to help their audience to understand themselves. This noble assignment of communicating societal expectations to the young was obligated to female parents and these expectations were shaped by the society in which the story teller is a part of. The narration, storytelling and a valorization of the multiplicity of language and words constitute much hope for the persistence of creativity. It is important to note that the female parents were the story tellers because it was their cultural duty to ensure that children wait for food to cook and so they had to engage the children's young mind in stories as they prepared the evening meal. Atwood (2003) notes "that myths of origin have set the stage … to reverence language since words created expand a community's vocabularies, making them better communicators" (2003:32). What seems to be the most important aspect of mythology, however is the sense of community that results from the ritual retelling of stories.

Solution Oriented

Most of the needs that were met by the selected myths of origin may not necessarily be recurrent in the society today but at that point in time they were meant to satisfy certain needs in the Tigania community. MT 1, The Origin of Death was necessary because among the Tigania people, one of the qualities of a deity was immortality. Indeed, the god that was worshipped in this community would never die because he was not human. When Thaai (God) saw that man was not dying but living forever, he decided that it was not in order for man to live eternally like him. MT 1 The Origin of Death it is noted:

> Long time ago, people never used to die. They used to live forever God (Thaai) thought to himself. This is not good since if man does not die he will be like me who is immortal. So he decided that mankind ought to die but resurrect.

As noted earlier, issues that were beyond human comprehension were referred to the realm of the spirits and offerings and sacrifices would be made so that the religious leaders could approach the gods for clarity. The place of Thaai in the six myths of origin

is clearly set out and is irreplaceable. When the Meru people grew tired of mistreatment in Mbwaa, in Family and Clan Naming Patterns, MT 5, they consulted Thaai on how they could be set free and through a series of consultations, prayers and offerings, they were set free. „a Mukuri (savior) would be born" These were not mere words but a promise from Thaai and indeed the „Mukuri" saved them from slavery in Mbwaa. Though seers, mediums and other special people in the community were highly venerated, they were only close to Thaai but could not carry out his assignments. That is why in his infinite knowledge and wisdom, he decided to send the Mole to man to inform him that henceforth he (man) would be dying but after dying he would resurrect. To Thaai that was needful.

MT 2, the story of Red-thigh Woman (Ngirani) was useful because there was a problem of incest within the family set up. The decision arrived at after the mediation was to discourage this ill-mannered behavior and to maintain the sanctity of the family institution. The Tigania community holds the institution of marriage in high esteem. Before one gets married, investigations are carried out to find out the integrity of the family where he or she is getting married. Vices such as witchcraft, sorcery, thieving and other abnormalities were discouraged. Together with these, families that had a history of Ngirani were also avoided. This myths asserts;

> Even today, „Ngirani" are believed to exist in thi community. They are described as extra ordinarily beautiful and are normally married as second wives by old men. Young men who intend to marry are always warned, "Beware of the beauty of the red-thigh woman.

MT 3, How Animals Were Domesticated, came about because of the need for material wealth. Muriiru needed to own animals for food and prestige as a man within the Tigania community where wealth was a measure of social status. In tandem with answering the question of how animals were domesticated, the need for recognition especially for men in a male dominated society was strong. Muriiru, in an attempt to own animals that were already in the forest, had to seek the assistance of a well-known medicine man in order to lure them to his homestead. The need for material wealth was also important because the main livelihood for the Tigania community was farming and animal husbandry. The provision of food and other basic necessities for the family was a man"s duty. There was also need to instruct the young people on the duties and responsibilities of different people in the community. For instance, MT 5, How Animals Were Domesticated, we are informed that a man"s duty was to herd animals, hunt for game and provide for the family while women were housekeepers, which included cooking, fetching water farming and babysitting. All this was in

consistent with the Tigania traditions and that is why Muriiru wondered, "How can I tame the animals in the forest to be mine?"

Muriiru wanted to conform to the traditions of the Tigania community by owning animals. Kinship relations were the strings that held the community together, and their unity was their strength. MT 4, Perceived Relatives (Gichiaro) ensured that there was this much needed unity in the different clans that make up the entire Meru community because they perceive each other as „brother" and none can do anything bad to the other without courting the wrath of Thaai. When Kaumi, the pregnant woman went to seek for a manual job in order to feed her children during famine, she went to a neighboring clan because she knew she would be treated well.

However, when her helpers were killed and the revenge by Thaai carried out, it was in an endeavor to restore these kinship ties. In relation to the new born baby, the father announced: "This is your brother. None should ever do anything evil to the other." This is in MT 4, Perceived Relatives (Gichiaro). The Meru people were enslaved and mistreated in Mbwaa by Nguu Ntune. They suffered for a long time and so they sought ways and means of buying their freedom. In MT 5, Family and Clan Naming Patterns, freedom for the Meru community was a priority as well as settling the disquiet about how children and clans should be named for purposes of social and cultural identity. The Meru people knew that while in bondage, they could not develop themselves in any way. That possibly explains why they tried all they could to loosen themselves from their slave drivers, the Nguu Ntune. This need for struggle for freed is a lesson retold to date among the Tigania people while articulating the need for unity and selflessness in the service of humanity. The history of the migration of the Tigania people is still retold in the annals of history besides other lessons that we learn from this myth. The explanations contained in Rain and Thunderstorms, MT 6 settled the issue of territorial dominion. When the two brothers could not co-exist peacefully they parted ways and each established his area of operation independent of the other, and there was harmony. This is explained in MT 6. "Moon is normally seen at night with Stars because the two brothers are friendly, while Sun is normally seen alone during the day because this elder brother is not friendly to his siblings". However, the same myth brings to the fore the need to be patient and tolerant to one another in order to maintain co-existence between siblings.

Conclusion

This article has explored the various tenets of myths that are inherent in the six myths of origin from the Tigania community in Meru County. The six myths of origin from the Tigania Community of Meru County are cultural and are solution oriented in nature. We have delved into the six myths of origin and this research shows that they are

cultural. In this sense we mean that the whole notion of myth is deeply rooted in the culture of the Tigania community from where they have been drawn. Secondly, the myths of origin from this community embody all that which the community cherishes and admires and what they hate and detest. For example, they detest disobedience, hatred, disharmony and mistreatment, and they however cherish courage, responsibility, freedom, and unity. In the same vein we have realized that the six myths of origin address certain needs in the community.

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