

# THE PLACE OF WOMEN IN AFRICAN MYTHS: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE.

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## **Abstract**

*The overall focus of this study is on the examination of some African creation, first knowledge and invention myths, as well as myths on the origin of death and suffering. The study adopts these myths to demonstrate that in African theological formulation, in the beginning of creation, women were considered as important and valuable as their men counterparts. The analysis of these myths clearly shows that in the beginning of creation, there was a dual-sex system of power sharing which in some cases invariably places more power in the hands of women. Women were never consigned to the position of servility and their image was not that of impoverished, weak and helpless fellow who must depend on the menfolk for protection and support.*

## **Introduction**

All over Africa, women often are seen but not heard. Africa's largely patriarchal social structure provides a frame work upon which discrimination and 'de-womanization' of womanhood is based. Using the patriarchal social structure as a model for role distribution and as a tool for interpreting gender duties, African traditional societies created imbalance in both political and economic as well as social and religious spheres of life, which inexorably led to male domination of the female. As a result, women became subservient to men and are treated as inferior and not as good as men. This perceived female inferiority has gained much impetus in African folklores, fables, folktales, proverbs and wise sayings; some of whose formulations often cast women as weak, brainless, simple-minded and gullible and have generally continued to legitimized and consigned women to the position of servitude.

Scholars have attempted to account, through various theories, the subjugation of women. To validate and justify the thralldom of women Tiger and Fox propounded what they called the 'human biogrammer'. According to them, the different hormones produced by men and women were responsible for the different roles which they correspondingly play in the society. Their roles have been passed down from generation to generation, internalized and are responsible for sex-linked division of labour. In other words, the 'human biogrammer' is responsible for the differing responsibilities of men and women. They, therefore, summed it up as follows: "The differing roles are due partly to... inheritance from men's primate ancestors, partly to genetic adoption to a hunting way of life. Males hunt which is an aggressive activity. They are responsible for the protection of the band and for alliances or wars with other bands. On the other hand, the



mother is totally essential to the well being of the child. Unless this close emotional bond obtains, the child would be unable to establish a successful relationship later in life (Tiger and Fox, cited in M. Haralambos and R.M. Heald, 1980:370).

In agreement with Tiger and Fox, G.P. Murdock sees physical strength and biological differences between men and women as the basis of sexual division of labour in society. For as Murdock acknowledges: Man with his superior physical strength can better undertake the more strenuous task such as lumbering, mining, quarrying, land clearance and house building. Not handicapped as is woman by the physiological burdens of pregnancy and nursing, he can range further afield to hunt, fish... and to trade (G.P. Murdock in M. Haralambos and R.M. Heald, 1980: 371).

In a somewhat different line of thought Sherry B. Ortner posits that culture was the veritable instrument through which women were subjugated. It is through culture, according to her, that nature is subdued. Therefore, culture as she maintains, can conquer nature. Ortner, succinctly puts it thus: Culture is the means by which men control and regulate nature. By inventing weapons and hunting technologies man can capture and kill animals. By inventing religion and rituals, man can call upon supernatural forces to produce a successful hunt or a bountiful harvest. By the use of culture, man does not have to passively submit to nature, he can regulate and control it. Thus, man's ideas and technology, that is, his culture, have power over nature and, therefore, seen as superior to nature. Thus, Ortner posits that women are universally defined as closer to nature because their bodies and physiological functions are more concerned with the natural processes surrounding the reproduction of species. These natural processes include menstruation, pregnancy, child birth and lactation; processes for which the female body is naturally equipped. By inference, therefore, we can deduce that since women are closer to nature because of their natural processes, and culture is created by man, and man is superior to nature, therefore, men are superior to women (Sherry B. Ortner cited in Chidili Okachukwu, 2007:52).

Similarly, Shulasmith Firestone in her *Dialectic of Sex* argues that male subjugation of the female resulted from what she referred to as *power psychology*. According to Firestone, unlike economic class, sex class sprang directly from a biological reality; man and woman were created differently and not equally privileged. Because women bore children they were dependent on men for survival. This dependence on men for sustenance, especially during critical 'natural periods' have over time cemented and solidified a psychology in men which makes them wield power to dominate, control and subjugate the family to their whims. Gradually, this became an acceptable and unquestionable norm. For Firestone, therefore, the sexual class system provided the blue print and prototype of the economic class system. She argues that contrary to Marxist explanation that private property marked the genesis of women servitude, it was actually the reproductive functions of men and women. Firestone sums it up thus: The sexual class system is the model for all other exploitive systems and the tapeworm that must be



eliminated first by any true revolution (Shulasmith Firestone cited in M. Haralambos and R.M. Heald, 1980: 370).

Some scholars have vehemently disagreed that the biology of women brought about their subjugation and made it possible for the evolution of a division of labour. Ann Oakley, for instance, has argued that not only is the division of labour by sex not universal, but there is no reason why it should be. Human cultures, according to her, are diverse and endlessly variable. They owe their creation to human inventiveness rather than viable biological forces. Oakley concludes by asserting that evidence from different societies shows that there are no task (apart from child bearing) which are performed exclusively by females. Biological characteristics, she contends, do not bare women from particular occupations. The mother role is a cultural construct (Ann Oakley, cited in Terrence Ogboga, 2007:78).

For others, however, explanation for the subservient position of women must be sought not in 'human biogrammer', social structures or 'power psychology', but in theological constructs and formulations. For Christianity and Islam which have become very dominant, especially in Africa, the place of women is relegated, and they have been best portrayed as gullible and simple-minded. Moreover, the woman is seen as a rib, a mere appendage or an after thought to man, not his divine equal (Zulu Sofola, 1998:52). It is instructive to note that for both religions sin and chaos became the lot of man due mainly to the gullibility of the woman. For the Christian holy book, the Bible, the man is the true reflection of the image of God and the woman but a reflection of the man's glory. This subservient position of women is amplified in the conviction that man was not created for the sake of woman; woman was created for the sake of the man (see 1Timothy, 2: 8-15). Both gave impetus to the Christian practice of women covering their heads with a symbol of authority over out of respect for the angels. They are to remain quiet at meetings and keep in the background. But if out of necessity they have to ask questions such questions should be directed at their husbands at home.

### **Defining the Focus for the Present Study**

The primary aim of this study is to attempt to establish, using African myths, that in the beginning of creation, there was a dual-sex system of power sharing, which in some cases invariably places more power in the hands of women. Women were never consigned to servility, and their image was not that of an impoverished, weak and helpless fellow, who must depend on the male folk for protection, care and support. Most importantly, in African myths, as we shall see presently, women are not cast as lacking in moral rectitude or so spiritually debased as to block their channel of communication with the supersensible. Indeed, women like their male counterparts, had direct channel of communication with the supersensible and in some cases were considered as favourites of the gods. This dignifying and exalted place of women was gradually replaced "with unilinear, male-centered power systems that not only marginalized women but also set the stage for the intensification and eruption of gender conflicts"(Obioma Nnaemeka, 1998:14). If women are today perceived as inconsequential, feeble and simpleton, it is



essentially societal creation, borne out of the so called male chauvinism, and also an aggressive and unreasonable belief by men that women are inferior to men and not *fait accompli* thrust upon the woman by an irreversible divine decree.

In the remaining section of this essay, I want to demonstrate with various examples from African myths, that in the beginning of creation, there was dual-sex system of power sharing in which women were considered as important as men and even in some cases preferred over and above men.

### African Cosmogony Myths

The preferable point of entry into this discussion is with African cosmogony myths. Cosmogony and creation myths are used as synonyms. But in a very strict sense, cosmogony refers to the origin of the world in a neutral fashion, whereas, creation myth implies a creator and something created. In any case, both are used as alternative expressions to describe the beginning of things. African rich oral tradition is replete with myths of origin. Among the Igbo, who are largely patriarchal, and giving power and importance only to men, there abound two widely held myths of origin, namely the Nri and Nnewi accounts. Of the two, the more remarkable for our purpose is the Nnewi myth of origin.

According to the Nnewi, in the beginning, Chukwu, the Supreme Being, lived in heaven with some divinities, who were not only subordinate to him but were also his messengers. One of the most eminent and distinguished of the divinities was Edo, a female deity; who was also Chukwu's favourite. Edo was Chukwu's most beloved because she was hard-working, conscientious and very enterprising. Because of these commendable attributes of Edo, Chukwu gave her the rare privilege of the custodian of his staff of office, a scepter, made of *nzu* (white native chalk) and a clay pot of water.

With these materials, Edo was commissioned to go and survey the firmament. But unfortunately Edo's adventurous spirit carried her beyond the firmament. Lost beyond the firmament, Edo began to grind and spray the white native chalk all over the place. These sprays solidified and formed land. This according to J.O. Awolalu and P.A. Dopamu, was how Edo made land with Chukwu's white chalk. The rest of the white native chalk Edo broke into four pieces and put into the water pot.

Presently, Chukwu found Edo tired and lonely on the land she has formed with Chukwu's white native chalk. Chukwu took pity on Edo and promised to give her some companions to talk to, send on errands and do her services. So Chukwu took the water pot in which the broken pieces of white chalk were. He put his right hand into the pot and took out the first piece of white chalk and called it *Otolo*, meaning the first son. He took out the second lump and called it *Uruagwu*, the second son, the third, *Umudim* and the fourth, *Ichi*. Then Chukwu blew some breath out of his mouth on them and the force of the breath shook the four images and they began to move, talk and behave. Then Edo told them: "I am the mother of you all – Nnewi, and the land on which you are walking is Ana-Edo – that is, my prize from Chukwu, because the *nzu* with which you are made and with which the land is made is special gift and privilege from Chukwu".



So these four sons are the four villages which make up the Nnewi town, and Ana-Edo is their common heritage and mother of all Nnewi. So these four sons – Otolo, Uruagwu, Umudim and Ichi – grew into men and went to Arochukwu town and took four beautiful sisters and married them.

Today in Nnewi, as Awolalu and Dopamu have pointed out, Edo is the greatest divinity and her worship transcends all other foreign religious practices. The Edo cult is firmly rooted and observed by all Nnewi people. The Edo festival is also observed in two ways – one by the women every seven years; and another by the men every nine years. During this festival, all sons and daughters of Ana-Edo come home to celebrate the *Ikwu-Ana Edo*, meaning – rededication of body and soul to Edo. The venue of this great festival is at *Nkwo-Edo*, the square or spot where Edo first landed. The *Ikwu-Ana Edo* is a week long festival and during this period the whole town is in the gayest festive mood (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979:57-59).

In this Igbo myth of creation, a female deity is seen as responsible for the creation of the universe, and it is also through her instrumentality that Chukwu, the Supreme Being, created the first human beings. However, there are myths, which though do not place the creation of the universe and all that exist in it in the hands of a female but demonstrate that man and woman were created equally and none is the appendage of the other.

Thus the Ewe of South-eastern Ghana believe that Mawu, God, made the first man and woman out of clay and water. Later, clay became scarce so when men died Mawu took their bodies to make other people. This explains why children resemble their parents and the link between the living and the dead (Abanuka, B. 1999:72).

Similarly, the Kono of Eastern Sierra Leone believe that Yataa, the Supreme Being, is the creator of the world. Yataa created the first man and woman who had a male child. The three were told by Yataa that they would live forever and that when their bodies grow old Yataa would give them new skins, so that they will again look young. But due to the slackness of the dog that was sent to deliver the new skins to mankind, the skins unfortunately got into the hands of the snake, who shared it among his kin. Embittered by the snake's treachery, man refused to forgive it, and has always tried to kill the snake wherever he sees it.

In much the same vein, the Mende also of Sierra Leone, have it that in the beginning, Ngewo, the Supreme Being, created the earth and all things in it. The way it was done is not known. However, God crowned the work of creation by making a man and a woman (E.W. Smith (ed.), 1950:278).

Also, according to the Wolof of Northeastern Senegal, the source of all being, Buru Assaman, created the heavens, which is his abode and then he created the earth. After he had created the earth, he retreated to the heavens. It is believed that the sun is his right eye and the moon his left eye. He needed help for the administration of the heavens. For this reason, he brought forth the stars which are believed to be his children.



Later the great being moulded replicas of his children from the residual stuff which he fashioned with earth. He formed both men and women simultaneously and led them down by a rope to live on earth. He did this so that his eyes, the sun and the moon, would have somebody for whom to shine from above (Abanuka, B. 1999:73).

In these African myths of origin, we see women in African theological formulations on the same pedestal and standing with their men counterparts. The woman in Africa is not seen as a protuberance of the man. She was not created from the left over or residue used in creating man or from an insignificant body part of the man as his rib. The man and woman were created from the same substance and share equal relationship with the Supreme Being. African creation myths, therefore, point to a theology of equality in which man and woman are co-heir to a universe in which God has placed them in charge to tend and populate.

### **Invention and First Knowledge Myths**

In addition to creation myths are invention and first knowledge myths which speak of women not in disparaging terms but eulogize and extol their ingenuity and resourcefulness. The Lolobi, a sub group of the Ewe speaking people of Ghana, have a myth about the origin of agriculture. According to the myth, after creating man and his wife, the Supreme Being, Onah, lived closely with them. The man and his wife were eating together with Onah and the gods.

It happened, however, that the wife of the man suddenly decided to till the land and grow crops for the family. Gradually, the man found that the food provided by his wife was more delicious than that provided by Onah. The man, therefore, began to absent himself from the table of Onah and the gods, until he choose not to eat with the Supreme Being and the gods. Instead, he ate from the produce of their tilling. Hence agriculture is the first thing mankind discovered after creation (Abanuka, B. 1999:85).

Similarly, according to a Mende myth, after Ngewo, the Supreme Being, had withdrawn to the skies, he used to come occasionally to settle disputes for people on earth. The people went about their duties happily. They used their hands for every kind of work including carrying water, firewood and loads of every kind. They carried load by hand because they feared that the head would burst if anything heavy was put on it. One day during those dry days of a wet season, a woman went out with her children to collect some firewood to replenish her supply which was running out. Unfortunately, it rained so heavily that they could hardly get enough firewood. That night, in her disappointment, the woman sat to ponder what would happen if the rain did not stop for sometime. As she pondered, she fell asleep and dreamt. She saw Ngewo in a farm with her children collecting firewood. She observed, however, instead of carrying the woods with their hands, Ngewo tied them into bundles and made 'something' which he placed on their heads before placing the bundles of wood on it. The next day she went out to fetch firewood and this time she did exactly what she had seen in her dream. The 'thing' which she made was called *fu kwi* that is pad (Smith, E.W. (ed.) 1950).



Also, according to the Bodo of Southern Nigeria, the knowledge of building canoe was first revealed to a man called Gberedeela by a female goddess and queen of the coast. According to the myth, Gberedeela was clever and strong but was warlike and delighted in making trouble and making himself disagreeable with people. He had great knowledge of herbal medicine of all kinds. On the account of the unpleasant aspects of his character, he was driven out of his town.

Gberedeela left the town and continued to trek until he got to the coast of a very big sea. He could not continue his journey because of the sea. However, he was very tired on account of his long journey; he laid himself on a big piece of wood and slept.

When he woke up from sleep, he walked straight to the edge of the water in order to ease himself and then caught sight of net filled with fishes lying underneath the water a few steps from where he stood. He was so enticed by this net packed with fish that he drew near it, caught hold of it and drew it to himself in order to bring it ashore. He could not pull the net ashore; on the contrary, the small piece of net pulled him inside the water and continued to draw him into the depths of the sea, notwithstanding his resistance, until he found himself in a premises where he was confronted by a man and a woman, who asked what was his business.

Gberedeela told them that he came to fish but that he could not cross the sea. The man was very angry with him and walked away. But the woman was very interested in Gberedeela. It was she who drew him down into the waters. The woman told Gberedeela that she was a goddess and queen of the coast. Having realized the anger of the man who had walked away and foreseeing his plans, she quickly addressed Gberedeela, after offering him a hand-axe, a net, a lump of firewood and a flat piece of wood.

She asked Gberedeela to go back and chop off the top of the wood he slept on. She also asked him to set the inside part of the wood on fire and allow it to burn for two days so as to create a hollow space. When the tide flows back to the bank, he should roll the unburnt part of the wood with a hollow in it into the water, then enter into the hollow part and cross to whatever part of the sea he wished. In addition, Gberedeela should use the flat piece of wood he chopped off to turn the hollow piece of wood for direction.

On arrival at the bank, Gberedeela's first reaction was to doubt the advice of the woman. But later, he considered that a woman who could suppress all his powers must be very strong and powerful indeed. As a result he concluded that he must follow the woman's advice. Thus he carried out the instruction as was given by the woman. This, according to the Bodo, is how the first canoe was built (Abanuka, B. 1999:91-93).

Among the Igala of North central Nigeria, the credit of discovery of very important concerns like procreation and cultivation of plants is often attributed to the woman. The Igala believe that in the beginning, before anything was created, Ojo, the Supreme Being, lived alone. Then he created the heavens and the world below simultaneously. For this reason the worlds form a single whole. However, the world below was the opposite of the world above. The world below lacked the beauty and the splendor of the realm of the sky. It was characterized by misery, suffering and strife. In the heavens Ojo created all species of plants, trees and animals, and last of all mankind. Man lived in the sky close to Ojo and enjoyed the fruits of Ojo's creation without labour. Sickness and death were not known.



Then there was a couple who were barren. The woman, Orinya, made a desperate appeal, with offerings, to Ojo to have a child. Ojo was moved by her appeal and gave her a son, but on condition she would not reveal the origin of the child. Orinya had two other children, a boy, Ejura, and a girl, Agbese.

Orinya's sister was also childless. She brought pressure to bear on Orinya to reveal the origin of her children. As a result of Orinya's revelation, the floor of the sky opened up and the children fell to the world below. As they roamed around the world they ate fruits from the trees and dropped the seeds. At a time, they came to realize that the seeds which they dropped had begun to germinate fastening themselves to the soil. Consequently, they realized that the trees would be firmer if the seeds were buried in the earth. In this way the Igala acquired the knowledge of agriculture (Jacob Abam, 2003:74).

### **Myths on Suffering and Death**

Finally, let us turn attention to myths about suffering and death. The blame on how mankind lost paradise and subsequently begun to experience pain, suffering and death is often placed at the door-step of the womenfolk. However, African myths are replete with stories on the origin of suffering and lost of paradise which exonerate the womenfolk but rather squarely put the blame on the menfolk. The example of a myth from Malagasy will suffice.

According to this Malagasy myth, one day a man was fishing when he felt a strong pull on his line. He drew it in quite carefully, for he thought that it was a big fish. He was very frightened to see a woman emerged from the water. He threw everything down to run away when the woman called out that he should not be afraid. She said that she would marry him, provided he promises that he must never look at what was underneath her arm. The man agreed; they were married, and had a son and a daughter. But when the children were growing up the husband could no longer resist the temptation to look in his wife's armpit. He did this while she seems to be asleep. The woman saw him and said nothing, but the next day she suggested that they should go for a bathe. The man went into the water first, while his wife looked after the children on the bank. Then it was her turn, and as she disappeared into the waters she called out that she was leaving him, because he had broken the promise he had made her. Another version says that she had forbidden her husband never to look at her while she was naked; he did this while she was undressed, and she gave a great cry and disappeared (Abanuka, B. 1999:100).

### **Conclusion**

Thus far, our examination of various African myths has demonstrated very clearly, that in the beginning of creation, African women were never portrayed as inconsequential or insignificant to their male counterparts. There was no power fragmentation and polarization; there was no gender quarrel to breed distrust and alienation. In African theological formulation, both male and female operated jointly to maintain cosmological balance. Unfortunately, however, with the invasion of the male-centered and male-dominated Western and Arab cultures, the African woman has been divested completely of all that made her focal and significant in the traditional religio-



cultural life. This study has shown, therefore, that the African woman was not seen as a rib or an appendage, or an after-thought to man but as his divine equal (Zulu Sofola, 1998:52). The present status of women in Africa were they are seen but not heard, is merely a societal creation evinced out of the unreasonable and unfounded conviction by men that women are inferior.

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