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Chapter Seven

AFRICAN MYTHS AND THE ENVIRONMENT: A LOOK AT SOME MYTHS AND TOTEMS AMONG THE TIV OF CENTRAL NIGERIA

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Executive Summary

Myths are specific accounts of gods or super-human beings involved in extraordinary events or circumstances in a time that is unspecified but which is understood as existing apart from ordinary human experience. Myths are also accounts of the origin of societies and institutions not necessarily subject to rationalization. A totem on the other hand is an animal, a plant or any other natural object believed to be ancestrally related to a tribe, clan, family or group of people as a tutelary spirit. The aim of this chapter is to critically examine the existence and significance of African myths/totems in their association with the environment in Tiv society. Emphasis is particularly on the Ikyalem (green snake) myth and totemic beliefs such as dog meat, Ibohough (Gardenia erubescens), Ivervese (Typlops punctatus) and several others - associated with the cultural history of the Tiv of Central Nigeria. The nature, types and reasons for the formulation of myths, and how the environment pave the way for a meaningful existence of myths in Tivland is also examined. This research is timely and most importantly problem solving, because of the fast disappearance of the knowledge of myths and totems in Tiv society. Data for this

research has been collected through In-Depth Interviews, key informants and Focus Group Discussion with elders, traditional heads and other people with good knowledge of myths and totemic beliefs in Tiv society. In addition to this, secondary data were also acquired from existing literatures to collaborate oral information.

Keywords: African myths, Environment, Culture, History, Tiv, Totem, Nigeria

Introduction

For us to meaningfully discuss the entanglement between myths and the environment in Tivland, it is paramount to first understand the meanings of myth and the environment. This will enable us to appreciate the influence these two terms exert on each other to produce a vibrant culture. There exist myths and totems in Tiv history and culture, particular the story of the *Ikyaren* (green snake). Many historical and philosophical writings about the Tiv usually make mention of the story of *Ikyaren,* stressing how it saved the early Tiv people from perishing (see Gbor, 1978; Makar, 1975; Gundu, 1999; Aboh, 2005; Ndera, 2009, 2013; Dzurgba, 2012; Nomishan, 2021). This story is given in a later part of this chapter.

What, therefore, is the meaning of myth and the environment? A myth is a story which is believed to be true and has its origin in the far distant past history of a people (Jaja, 2012; Kanu 2015a). Myths are specific accounts of gods or super-human beings involved in extraordinary events or circumstances in a time that is unspecified but which is understood as existing apart from ordinary human experience (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2014). Myths are also accounts of the origin of societies and institutions not necessarily subject to rationalization but often used by historians and philosophers in their quest to study African

history (Jaja, 2012; Kanu 2015b). The main characters in myths are usually non-humans, such as gods, demigods, and other supernatural figures (Jacqueline and Roud, 2003).

Human beings in their nature cannot live without myths because there are always certain unanswered questions that influence the formulation of myths in the society. These myths are then used to answer such questions, though not completely reflecting realities in such societies; they aid historians and philosophers amongst other intellectuals to reconstruct cultural histories of different groups.

The place of myths in various traditions and cultural environments differs from one another. This is because the environmental provisions that permit the formulation of myths in one society or the other are hardly the same. For example the formulation of *Ikyalem* myth and other totems of the Tiv people (which is the main focus of this chapter) were possible because of the presence of thing like the river, forest, animals and birds etc. in the environment of their formulation.

In the words of Jaja (2012) myths

> "generally contain three kinds of stories namely, stories of origin, explanatory stories and didactic stories. Each of these stories is meant to explain a particular phenomenon. Myth is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery but living chronicles in the minds of Africans. They contain and express the history, the culture and the inner experience of the African himself. Africans use myths to explain how things came to be through the efforts of a supernatural being. It is concrete and expresses life better than abstract thought can do".

There are basically 12 major types of myths. These include; Myths of origin, Myths of eschatology and destruction, Messianic and millenarian myths, Myths of culture heroes and soteriological myths, Myths of time and eternity, Myths of providence and destiny, Myths of rebirth and renewal, Myths of memory and forgetting, Myths of high beings and celestial gods, Myths concerning founders of religions and other religious figures, Myths of kings and ascetics, and Myths of transformation (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2014). The *Ikyalem* myth and other totems of the Tiv are closely related to many types of myths listed immediate above.

Away from the concept of myth, is that of the environment. The environment is refers to as the sum total of the conditions within which organisms live; it is the result of interaction between non-living and living parameters (Barrow, 1993). It connotes everything that surrounds or affects an organism during its life time such as people, place and things. This can either be natural or man-made. The environment can basically be classified into 3 broad types; biotic, abiotic and cultural environment.

The Biotic elements refer to the biological component of the ecosystem, consisting of population of plants, animals and micro-organisms in complex communities. While the 'Abiotic' which do not involve living organisms, include the flow of energy necessary to maintain any organism, the physical factor that affect it and the supply of molecules required for life to function. This is in addition to other physical factors like climate, temperature, precipitation (rain, snow, dew, etc.), soil type (sandy or clay, dry or wet, fertile or infertile). Lastly, Cultural environment represent stages of development that human beings have attained in the path towards progress which after all, models or determine what an established way of life becomes).

Following influences from religious understanding, economic pressures and fundamental knowledge of nature, humans turn to view their place in the society from different angles. Based on this diversity of backgrounds, different cultures turn to value the natural world in different ways.

Generally, the continued interaction between humans and their environments after a long passage of time - resulting to a conscious advancement of the society, humans turn to transformed the environment to function in their favour and serve their cultural, social, economic and political interests. These interactions enable humans to also formulate myths necessary to give answers to certain unanswered questions regarding their origins, histories and culture.

Myths amongst the Tiv People

The major mythological account associated with the history of the Tiv and their environment is the story of the *Ikyalem.*

The Ikyalem Myth

The *Ikyalem* myth amongst the Tiv is associated with the migratory history of the Tiv people. The oral traditions of the Tiv account that they "had many conflicts and wars with their neighbours in Congo (where they settled before their initial movement). As the Tiv were brave and difficult to be defeated, all their neighbours ganged up against them and planned to wipe out the Tiv through a surprise attack. Consequently, because the Tiv were a religious and prayerful family, some elements amongst their neighbours leaked the plan and the Tiv got to know of the planned attack" (Aboh, 2005, cited from Nomishan, 2020, p. 29).

This led to the beginning of movement by the Tiv from Congo. "This meant that they had to cross River Congo which was almost an impossible task. Thus, a mysterious snake called *Ikyalem* (green snake) formed a bridge across the River Congo to help all the members of The Tiv family cross the river" (Nomishan, 2020, p. 29). This mythological act has singlehandedly ensured that the Tiv do not intentionally kill the *Ikyalem*, and forbid anyone from carrying out the act in Tivland (Makar, 1975; Gundu, 1999; Aboh, 2005; Ndera, 2009, 2013; Dzurgba, 2012; Ndera, 2013; Nomishan, 2021).

The oral traditions of the Tiv account that this mysterious action of the *Ikyalem* enabled the Tiv people to proceed on their journey through many forests and later succeeded in reaching a place called "Swem". The Tiv people to this day regard the Swem as their ancestral homeland (Nomishan, 2020). However, according to Nomishan (2020, p.29-30);

> the exact location of Swem has been a matter of controversy amongst scholars. Akiga (1939) claimed that Swem is a hill in the Iyon area of Ikyurav-Ya in south-eastern Tivland and that he visited Swem in 1934. Bohannan and Bohannan (1954) also claimed Swem is actually the Ngol-Kedju hill located in the Bamenda highlands, south-western Cameroon. Makar (1975) concluded from the oral traditions he collected amongst the Tiv that, Swem is located in Nyiev-Ya in the present Kwande Local Government Area of Benue State. He noted that Swem is a mountain that is about 36 miles southwest of the compound of Mr Yaro Gusa the District Head of Nyiev-ya. Gbor (1978) and Orkar (1979) were not specific in their location of Swem, but saw Swem as a hill located on the Nigeria-Cameroon border, southeast of the present Tivland.

> For Dzurgba (2007:26) Swem is located at the source of Katsina-Ala River in North-western Cameroon". Dzurgba further stressed that "Swem is located in the Akwaya Subdivision or Local Government Area". It is in a range of mountains in the area which stands taller amongst all the others. The hill is also referred to as Swem by the Akwaya people who include the Iyon, Ugbe, and Utange amongst others. These Cameroonian groups also claim to be Tiv and their kith and kins reside in Nigeria in Moon District, Kwande Local Government Area of Benue State (see Akiga, 1939; Gbor, 1974; Makar, 1975, 1994; Gundu, 1999; Aboh, 2005; Dzurgba, 2007; and Ndera, 2009, 2013).

It is from the Swem area that the Tiv people later migrated into the Middle Benue Valley following trigger forces such persistent attacks from tribes like *Bafum* who were already occupying the Swem area before the arrival of the Tiv people, population explosion and the need for wider/suitable land for the production of sufficient food to keep the growing population. The Tiv have since been living in the Middle Benue Valley for over 500 to 600 years ago.

The myth of *Ikyalem* is told from generations to generations, ensuring that no Tiv son endangers the green snake intentionally. This snake is on the other hand harmless to the Tiv sons and daughters. It is the most common snake often seen in the Tivland. It can be seen in settlements, compounds and sometimes on the roof of thatched houses. And wherever the *Ikyakem* is identified, it is allowed to wilfully move away without any harm.

Totemic Beliefs

As noted earlier, a totem is an animal, a plant or any other natural object believed to be ancestrally related to a tribe, clan, family or group of people as a tutelary spirit (Mariko, 1981). In other words, a totem is a natural thing (animal or plant) believed by a particular society to have spiritual significance and adopted as an emblem. There are several totemic beliefs amongst the Tiv people. These totems include;

i. Dog Meat: the Tiv people have right from time immemorial forbidden the consumption of dog meat by all member of the Tiv society (Gurumyen *et al.*, 2020). This is because of a mystical believe that whenever a Tiv person eat dog meat (whether intentionally or unintentionally), he or she is bound to experience unfamiliar health conditions. Therefore, if it is eaten in error, at the instance of any knowledge about it, the person in question immediately approaches a commissioned traditionalist for cleansing to avert the calamities that are bound to befall him or her. If it is not cleansed, the person in question will suffer certain health challenges and cannot carry his or her child. If it is a man that eats dog meat, his wife will be having miscarriages until the family is cleansed. And if it is a woman that eats dog meat she will have difficulty conceiving, and when she eventually conceived, the fetus will be mysteriously expulsed from the womb. This will continue as many times as she conceives until she is cleansed.
ii. *Ibohough (Gardenia erubescens)*: this is a tree that is believed to have mystical powers to protect humans from being attacked by elephants (Dagba *et al.,* 2013). It is believed that whenever a human person hides under the *Ibohough* or is holding its branch, elephants become handicap in attacking him or her.

iii. *Kpikyegh (Psorospermum corymbiferum)*: there is an ancient believe amongst the Tiv people that whenever the *Kpikyegh* tree is used as fuel or firewood, it will mysteriously cause the death of all the fowls (chickens) in the house where it is used. The Tiv people therefore, deploy a good knowledge of their environment in the selection of wood for fuel to prevent any associated calamity.

iv. *Ikyor (Cricetomys gambianus)*: the Tiv people have a long existing believe that whenever the animal called *Ikyor* is seen walking in the daytime, particularly around settlements, it is a sign of bad omen. Some people believe that such action by the *Ikyor* is an indication that a member of the family may eventually die in the nearest future.

v. *Ivervese* **(***Typlops punctatus)*: this is a snake that usually has difficulty of seen in the day time except during the night. Thus, the Tiv people do not approve of the consumption of its meat by a pregnant woman. The Tiv believe that whenever a pregnant woman consumes the *Ivervese* meat, her new born baby will have sight defect especially during the day time. The child will only be able to see clearly at night.

vi. *Hur* **(***Annona senegalensis)*: *Hur* is a tree that is believed amongst the Tiv to have mystical powers of preventing snake bites. It is further believed that even when a person is bitten by a snake, the application of leaves obtain from *Hur* is capable of curing the poison from the bites.

vii. *Ivungu (Bubo poensis)*: The Tiv people believe that the *Ivungu* is a witch bird and do not approve of its consumption. The Tiv also believe that whoever throws stones at this bird may eventually die in the nearest future. Therefore, no one in Tivland throw stones at the *Ivungu.*

The above discussed totemic beliefs are a selected few amongst many others that are in existence in Tiv society.

Discussion and Conclusion

Historically, all societies developed ways of explaining past and the present issues of difficult understanding. As noted earlier, all African groups have a history and most of their historical traditions incorporate myths and totems that are used to provide answers to very difficult questions concerning their origin and identity. The formulation of these myths and totems is also made possible by the provisions of the natural environment in any given location. The Tiv society is not left out, as it is abundantly endowed with natural, cultural and human resources that combine together to form mystical and totemic beliefs.

Myths and totemic beliefs are a common part of the Tiv society. While some of this myths and totems still have some levels of relevance in Tivland, others are largely losing relevance, especially in the contemporary Tiv society. It is believed that several people continue to suffer from mysterious diseases and situations in Tivland without solution. This is because most of the people who suffer diseases purported to have been caused by mystical animals, plants or sites in the environment refuses to follow the traditional means of getting remedy and prefer to seek remedy from medical centres. This also interprets the influence of Christianity and modernization on the Tiv society.

Further, all the myths and totemic beliefs discussed above are either animal-based or plant-based. The *Ikyalem* is a snake (animal-based), dog meat (animal-based), *Ibohough* (plant-based), *Kpikyegh* (plant-based), *Kpikyegh* (animal-based), *Iverνese* (animal-based), *Hur* (plant-based). This means that all the myths and totems discussed above have everything to do with the environment of their formulation. The environment is generally their enabler, and what guarantees their existence. Aniamls live and feed on others animal and plants found in the environment. And the plants exist with support from the environmental

resources like the sun, soil, moisture, nutrients, and dead organisms etc.

Therefore, this chapter reveal how the interaction or entanglement between the environment and organisms that live in it pave the way for cultural formation and development of identity. In this case, their entanglement ensures the formulation of myths and totemic beliefs that assist the Tiv people to give answers to difficult questions regarding their origin, migration, identity and development. The existence of myths and totemic beliefs in Tiv society also ensured that consciousness exist in the ways of living. This also helps the Tiv society to maintain high cultural morals amongst Tiv people especially the youths.

Knowledge of these myths and totems is given to the young generations by their elders (particular grandparents). In the historical days, grandparents used gather their young ones in the evening to share with them stories about these myths and totems before going to bed especially in weekends. As a kid, I was told the story of God and of the origin of life. The history of the Patriarch of all the Tiv people was also told to me by my grandparents on several occasions. The evening interaction with my grandparents ensured that I had good knowledge of the importance of the *Ikyalem* in the cultural history and identity of all the Tiv people. This teaching ensures that the young ones gained a good knowledge of their origin, identity and cultural history. The teaching also guarantees the young ones knowledge about their environment and its provisions, and how to relate with it or manipulate it.

This also ensures that the environment as well as the myths and totems are well protected by the people around them (Cox, 2000; Venkataraman, 2000). People in all locations of the Tivland take

possession of their environment and jealously protect it to prevent unwarranted trespassing and harm. All lands in Tiv society have a cultural attachment from one group or the other. This explains how the Tiv people interact very well with their environment to guarantee continues survival.

However, modernization has greatly affected this traditional way of teaching the young generations about their origin, identity, history, culture and traditions; which also help to inculcate moral values into the young ones. Nowadays, parents disregard this all-important culture of influencing the young ones to learn good African values. This is done especially by parents living in towns and cities. Most parents in this category neglect the importance of teaching their children cultural history, African values and moral upbringing; replacing this all-important part of African life style with those of foreign societies. There is therefore, a growing believe that this recent attitude of most parents is what is causing many young people to be wayward and indulging in social vices.

Thus, this chapter calls for attitudinal change amongst parents to allow the young generations benefit from sound African values and proper upbringing. In addition to this, the government and all other stakeholders in African studies should consider the obvious option of introducing archaeology or heritage studies in primary and secondary schools in order to avail the young generations with the opportunity to gain sound African teachings (norms, values, good morals, proper upbringing and respect for elders, amongst others).

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List of Oral Informants

S/No	Name	Age	Sex	Occupation	Date	Type of Information
1	Msean Ibyunde	58	M	District Head	07/01/2019	Tradition of origin
2	Apolo Jiki	76	M	Farmer/hunter	07/01/2019	General information
3	Mbazan Num	74	F	Farmer	07/01/2019	Settlement history
4	Atsembee Aswe	62	M	Farmer	11/01/2019	Settlement history
5	Verashe Tsegba	56	F	Farmer	11/01/2019	General information
6	Ijor Tyozaa	88	M	Elder	11/01/2019	Myths/Totems
7	Geoffrey Nomishan	54	M	Teacher	12/01/2019	Myths/Totems
8	Terfa Ibyunde	74	M	Farmer	12/01/2019	Myths/Totems
9	Iorundu Agashua	89	M	Farmer	27/03/2019	Tradition of origin
10	Elizabeth Aondohemba	42	F	Farmer	27/03/2019	General information
11	Ahungwa Ijande	96	M	Farmer	27/03/2019	Tradition of origin
12	Abraham Kavga	48	M	Village Head	28/03/2019	Myths/Totems