

**Myth and Legend: A Retraditionalisation of The Cultural Episteme
in *Who Fears Death* and *Children of Blood and Bone***

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Abstract

The fact that universal civilisation has for a long time originated from the European centre has maintained the illusion that European culture was, in fact, and by right a universal culture. This study investigates myth and legend in Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* and Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* in order to reactivate the revival of some traditions or ancestral practices with the aim of sustaining the reimagining of an Africa whose identity is not conferred from outside but from within, bearing in mind that there are enabling influences from without. With the tools of Afrofuturism and magical realism, the study highlights the reawakening of African people who are taking an interest in their past. Through textual analysis, myth and legend are appraised and critiqued in terms of their spatio-temporal trajectory. The study recognizes that it is important for the African to reindigenise and reappropriate his own cultural consciousness and to identify more composite paradigms for his renaissance. The findings reveal that myth and legend in *Who Fears Death* and *Children of Blood and Bone* serve a didactic purpose, procure entertainment, critique social norms, shape the community identity, and form the African personality. The study concludes that Africans need to move towards renewed respect for indigenous ways and the conquest of cultural self-contempt in order to attain cultural relevance at global stage and a collective cultural consciousness.

Key words: Myth, Legend, Retraditionalisation, Culture, Episteme

Introduction

There is a distinctive African way of perceiving and reacting to the world. John S. Mbiti in *African Religions and Philosophy* avers that "The traditional African view of the cosmos is built on myths" (15). These myths involve the analysis of such fundamental concepts as substances, ancestors, change, causation, creation, time, space, deity, and existence. There is an urgent need for Africans to retrieve their lost culture, heritage,

identity, and personality, which have been mangled by centuries of misrepresentation and pillage. This is critical because this reclamation, reconquest, and regaining of control over how the African is defined can be traced to myth and legend. Afrofuturism is convinced that Africans may have a painful past, an agonizing present, but they look forward to a bright future. Since that future is in the past, folklore becomes an invaluable location for exploitation. This is because in folklore the African can build a new image, reestablish the self, reconquer his identity and personality, and move toward a self-determined, self-directed, and self-controlled future. Myth and Legend can therefore generate and enhance retraditionalisation, which, according to Mazrui and Tidy in *Nationalism and New States in Africa*, does not mean “returning Africa to what it was before the Europeans came ...But a move towards renewed respect for indigenous ways and the conquest of cultural self-contempt” (284).

Myth and Legend

Myth is a term that has a number of subtly interrelated meanings. At its most fundamental, a myth is a typically anonymous narrative about supernatural beings. The importance of myth lies in the way it encapsulates and expresses beliefs and values that are shared by, and definitive of, a particular cultural group. In his essay “A Critique of Transmodernity from Precolonial Bioethics: Wole Soyinka’s ‘Idanre’ and the Meaning of Modernity” Mbuu Tenu Mbuu explains that “Myth irrespective of whoever engages its definition, is the arduous assemblage of cultural data that is both visible and invisible, palpable and impalpable, and meshed into an imaginative aesthetics of meaning whose essence has restorative potential” (55). Thus, a myth may explain the origin of a group (or the world in general), the place of that group in the world, and its relationship to other groups, and it may also illustrate the moral values venerated by the group. Quoting Emile Durkheim, Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick in *Key Concepts in Cultural Theory* State that, “in Durkheimian sociology, mythology may be seen to be expressive of the

collective conscience, that is to say, the norms and beliefs into which individuals are socialized, and that serve as the cement that holds together both preindustrial and industrial societies” (165).

Also, a myth could be a narrative that, among other functions, connects individuals to their cultures and explains natural and supernatural phenomena, including the creation of the world and the origins of humankind. Mark Shorer defines myth as follows: “Myths are the instruments by which we continually struggle to make our experience intelligible to ourselves. A myth is a large, controlling image that gives philosophical meaning to the facts of ordinary life” (355).

Furthermore, Myths potentially carry a sacred dimension. Mircea Eliade distinguishes between the realms of the sacred and the profane, which he suggests are two different realms of being. The profane involves the world of science, of rationality, of empiricism. The sacred involves matters of religious feeling, the irrational and unnatural aspects of life, a realm that is numinous (revealing the existence of divine power) and involves both time and space, which are existentially sacred. Eliade discusses the relationship that exists between the sacred and the myth as follows:

The myth relates a sacred history, that is, a primordial event that took place at the beginning of time, *ab initio*. But to relate a sacred history is equivalent to revealing a mystery. For the persons of the myth are not human beings; they are gods or culture heroes, and for this reason, their gesta constitute mysteries; man could not know their acts if they were not revealed to him. The myth, then, is what took place in *illo tempore*, the recitation of what the gods or the semi-divine beings did at the beginning of time. To tell a myth is to proclaim what happened *ab origine*. Once told, that is, revealed, the myth becomes apodictic truth; it establishes a truth that is absolute (95).

Eliade’s analysis points to the fact that myths can be revelatory of mysteries that members of a community might be absolutely unaware. Myths, then, explain how things got started and also function as models for future action, because by describing the gods’ actions in the world,

they imply that we should follow the gods' examples. These myths Eliade adds become "the paradigmatic model for all human activities" (97/98).

A legend is a story often passed down through generations that is believed to be true or based on real events but may also contain fantastical or supernatural elements. Legends often feature extraordinary people, places, or events and are usually rooted in the culture, folklore, or history of a particular region or community. A legend could also feature an extremely famous or notorious person, especially in a particular field. Such a person becomes a living legend or superstar. Mythological heroes and heroines could also become legends. That is why we could have different types of legends, which include: mythological, historical, folkloric, and urban legends

Myths and legends have the function of entertainment, education, critique, preservation, and identity formation. With their stories, songs, and dance, they entertain. From the cultural values and moral lessons they teach. By their social commentary, they critique societal norms and issues. Through cultural preservation, they maintain tradition and heritage. On identity formation, they shape the community's identity. It is from this wealth of knowledge that myth and legend remain a great source of our intangible heritage, informing and revealing our own perspectives on the traditional beliefs, customs, stories, and sayings of a community passed down through generations by word of mouth. Magical realism and Afrofuturism both use folklore as a source and muse to express their content.

Theoretical Framework

This research work is grounded in cultural criticism as a theoretical framework and employs magical realism and Afrofuturism as key concepts. Cultural studies can be practically defined as the study of culture with the intention of understanding a society and its politics. One of the proponents of this theory, Raymond Williams, in *Culture and*

Society, whose work may be characterized as cultural materialism, thinks that an approach to culture is to recognize that it is intertwined with the economic and political structures and the experiences of life. At the heart of this is an exploration of the history, uses, and political complexity of language, manifest elegantly in key words (227). Magical realism, as a cultural concept, taps into the irreducible element of magic present in myth and legend. Afrofuturism is a tool that can be used to affirm black identity and protect it against damaging forms of misrepresentation. One of its greatest weapons is that it exhumes and reclaims lost cultures and histories while reviving their vestiges. This ties in with Ytasha Womack's point expressed in *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, that:

The mythology and beliefs that shaped African societies in antiquity are the greatest mystery of them all. Much of the records of these societies were purposely destroyed by invading societies ...Many ancient societies that thrived in the past are lost to us forever. If they were lucky, the arts survived the perils of time. How many other wisdom traditions vanished in the rubble of history? And what, if anything, could such tales from cultures past inform us of today about our humanity, our origins, and the purpose of life? How could this distant wisdom enrich our lives today?

I sometimes feel that Afrofuturism is the subconscious way of knocking at the door of present awareness, infusing those who are receptive with ideas and stories from worlds and times forever lost. Perhaps the mythmaking of today is the legacy and the subconscious, just the goddess's way of sharing a vision (95/96).

Womack's perspective makes Afrofuturism highly relevant to this study because it shows how folklore informs us today about our humanity, origins, and the purpose of life. Magical realism and Afrofuturism both use folklore as a source and muse to express their content. Because creation myths are supernatural in content, magical realism easily aligns itself with it. Since Afrofuturism seeks to reclaim lost knowledge about our culture, folklore serves as fertile ground for recovering its lost vestiges. The imperative to indigenize knowledge makes folklore an invaluable resource. Through folklore, lost and buried knowledge can be

excavated for present and future use. Since our future resides in our past, the exploration of folklore becomes pertinent in the quest to affirm the African perspective in the global world.

Methodology

The corpus for this study comprises Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* and Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone*, seminal works of African magical realism. These novels were selected due to their rich integration of myth and legend that reflect African cultural practices and beliefs, making it an ideal subject for analyzing folklore within the framework of cultural criticism. The choice of these texts is supported by the existing literature, which acknowledges their significance in contemporary African literature. Data collection involved a qualitative analysis of key passages within *Who Fears Death and Children of Blood and Bone* that illustrate the use of myth and legend. A purposive sampling method was employed to select specific chapters and scenes that prominently feature these elements. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of how Okorafor and Adeyemi employ myth and legend as a narrative device to convey cultural identity and societal issues. The analysis was conducted through close reading, focusing on the language, imagery, and narrative structure of the selected passages. Additionally, secondary sources, including scholarly articles and critical essays on myth and legend, and African literature, were consulted to provide context and support for the analysis. This dual approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of both the text itself and its broader implications within literary discourse.

Analysis

In *Children of Blood and Bone*, the creation myth is narrated by Olamilekan at Chandombale to Zelig, Amari, and Tzain. He recounts that,

In the beginning, our sky mother created the heavens and the earth, bringing life to the vast darkness. On earth, Sky Mother created humans, her children of blood and bone. In the heavens,

she gave birth to the gods and goddesses. Each would come to embody a different fragment of her soul. Sky mother loved all her children, each created in her image. To connect us all, she shared her gifts with the gods, and the first maji were born. Each deity took a part of her soul, a magic they were meant to gift to the humans below. Yemoja took the tears from Sky Mother's eyes and became the Goddess of the Sea. (130)

This myth of creation recounted by Lekan is a counterdiscourse to the monopolistic tendency of the Biblical story of creation. It shows that the Biblical story of creation is just a version among other creation myths. Through this myth, the maji rediscover the thread that connects them to their most remote ancestral past. This provides them with a historical consciousness, a cultural cement that unites them and gives them a sense of historical continuity. From the myth, it becomes clear that magical realism has a feminist inclination, especially when the supreme God is depicted as a woman called Sky Mother. Those who worship Yemoja gain mastery over the sea. Lekan explains the origin of god after god. Sango, who takes fire from sky mother's breath, has the gift to make winders. Of the ten gods recounted, nine take their gift from Sky Mother, but Oya chooses not to imitate her siblings and instead asks her mother to give hers. For Oya's patience and wisdom, Sky Mother rewards her with mastery over life. When Oya shares this power with her worshippers, the ability transforms into power over death. This narrative by Lekan is demonstrated by motion pictures on the wall. The power Zelig wields throughout the novel is especially that of life over death, which explains why she is a reaper. She can transform trapped spirits into soldiers.

The scenario Amilekan presents triggers a flashback in Zelig, taking her back to her days in Ibadan, where she watches the newly elected reapers display their lethal abilities and prowess for the Reaper clan. When her mother is elected, the black shadows of death that swirl around her are quite magnificent. She becomes selective in sharing her power with only those who show patience and wisdom. That is why Oya realises that not all her children could handle such great power. What Zelig observes in

the flashback is terrifying yet stunning. That is why she is apprehensive about allowing all the diviners reawaken their magic in Zulhaika's camp because she is not sure if they can demonstrate patience and wisdom with their gifts. Even such gifts need discipline, she seems to say. This is why the number of Maji from the Reaper clan keeps dwindling. Sky mother also graces the maji with coiled white hair, which is an homage to her image. Since myth and legend can nurture and educate, this creation myth teaches the importance of cultural values such as patience, discipline, and wisdom, which, when practiced, benefit the individual and community.

Besides the ten gods and goddesses that Sky Mother creates in the sky, she also creates the Sentaros, whose role is to protect the gods' will on Earth. The Sentaros are led by the Mamalawo, and they act as spiritual guardians, tasked with connecting the sky mother's spirit to the Maji below. As the painting of the Mamalawo rises above the other, Olamilekan explains that what she is holding in her hand is the ivory dagger, a sacred relic carved from the skeleton of the first Sentaro. Whoever wields it draws strength from the life force of all those who have wielded it before. On her right hand, the Mamalawo holds the sunstone, which is a living fragment of Sky Mother's soul. By holding sky mother's spirit, the stone tethers her to this world, keeping magic alive. Every century, the Mamalawo carries the stone, the dagger, and the scroll to a sacred temple to perform the binding ritual. By drawing her blood with the dagger and using the power imbued in the stone, the Mamalawo seal the gods' spiritual connection into the Sentaro blood. As long as their bloodline survives, magic also does. This section highlights the significance of sacred artifacts such as the bone dagger and the sunstone within the people's culture. Such relics are sacred and possess supernatural powers. The importance of relics in African culture cannot be overstated, as they, like the bone dagger and the sunstone, ensure historical continuity.

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Since they can see History in the motion pictures on the wall, they are surprised that the Mamalawo does not perform the ritual, which leaves her defenseless because the act of not performing it kills magic. King Saran learns of the disappearance of magic and orders the raid in which all the maji are killed, and he follows up by going to Chandomble and killing the Mamalawo and other Sentaros. By killing the Sentaros, he completely severs magic from Orisha. If the Mamalawo and the Sentaros do not act against King Saran's attack, it is because the Sentaros are tasked with protecting human life. They are not allowed to take it away. The sacredness of life is a core value of African culture. The fact that the mamalawo refuses to fight King Saran when attacked is simply because their duty is to protect life, not to take it. By making herself vulnerable and not defending herself during the attack, she aligns with the supernatural will of Sky Mother to create a new generation of maji.

It is perhaps the time for Sky Mother to effect change in Orisha. This myth explains the past in order to foreshadow the future through Zelig. Since Sky Mother brings the scroll to Zelig, it is her will that Zelig assume the role of the Mamalawo and perform the ritual. This ritual has to be performed once every hundred years when a sacred Island appears off the Northern Coast of the Orinon Sea. It is the home of the temple to the gods. The sunstone, the scroll, and the bone dagger must be taken there, and what the Mamalawo used to do must be replicated by Zelig. This ritual must be performed before the centennial solstice. If this day is missed, Orisha will never know magic again. This will signal the ultimate defeat of the maji and the destruction of the health sector in Orisha, since magic is used in healing.

The myth of the gods' creation and the Maji reveals the benevolence of Sky Mother in showering her children with numerous gifts, especially magic. It shows that the world of Orisha does not just exist; It was created by Sky mother. Oya's reluctance to share her gift with all the Reapers is significant because she chooses only those who exercise patience and

wisdom. This means that to wield magic, a certain level of discipline is needed. The myth shows that Orishas have a supreme being who creates other beings, demonstrating the hierarchy of gods. This is counterfactual to the narrative of Africans believing in many gods and not having one supreme being, because Sky Mother is the supreme being.

Who Fears Death records the myth of the creation of the Seven Rivers Kingdom. The myth is related by a woman at the village square. She introduces herself as a poor woman. That is why she solicits assistance from the audience: “I don’t care for wealth, but please, when you leave, put what you can here, gold, iron, silver, salt chips, as long as it is worth more than sand” (97). When the audience responds in the affirmative, she informs them that she is telling them a piece of the past, present, and future. She expects the story will be shared with friends and family members. It is the first story from the Great Book, and it is retold time and time again when the world does not make sense:

Thousands of years ago, when this land was still made of sand and dry trees, Ani looked over her lands. She rubbed her dry throat. Then she made the seven Rivers and had them all meet, making a deep lake. And from this lake she took a deep drink. One day, she said, ‘I’ll produce sunshine. Right now, I’m not in the mood. She turned over and slept. Behind her back, as she rested, the Okeke sprang from the sweet rivers. They were aggressive, like rushing rivers, forever wanting to move forward. As centuries passed, they spread over Ani’s lands and created and used and changed and altered and spread and consumed and multiplied.

They were everywhere. They built towers that they hoped will be high enough to prick Ani and get her attention. They built juju working machines. They fought and invented among themselves...When Ani was rested enough to produce sunshine, she turned over... she was horrified by what she saw.

She reared up, tall and impossible, furious. Then she reached into the stars and pulled a sun to the land. The Okeke people cowered. From the sun, Ani plucked the Nuru. She set them on her land. The same day, flowers realized they could bloom. Trees understood

they could grow and Ani laid a curse on the Okeke. ‘slaves’ Ani said (97/98).

Even though there could be versions of the same myth, the creation myth related by Najeeba corroborates what the storyteller says. According to her, the Okeke have “skin the colour of the night” because they were created before the day.” (15) They are created first, and later the Nuru arrive. The Nuru come from the stars, and that is why their “Skin is the colour of the sun” (15). Najeeba’s version also contains the fact that the Okeke are born to be slaves to the Nuru. She goes further to explain that the reason for the curse is their ambition, which makes Ani curse them. In the version of the storyteller Ani destroys what the Okeke built: “Under the new sun, most of what the Okeke built crumbled. We still have some of it, the computers, gadgets, items, objects in the sky that sometimes speak to us” (98) One fundamental point of concord between Najeeba and the storyteller’s myth is that the Okeke are created first and are cursed by Ani to be slaves.

The fact that the Nuru are light-skinned Arabs and the Okeke are dark-skinned is explained by the Nuru coming from the light, that is, the sun, and the Okeke being dark because they are born before daybreak. This makes sense when one understands that the Nuru represent the Arabs in Sudan and the Okeke the dark Africans in Darfur. The fact that creation is done by Ani, the one God of the seven Rivers Kingdom, is counterfactual to the polytheism that is thrust on African worship. Just like the people of Shinar built the tower of Babel, which could reach the heavens (Genesis: II), and God confuses their language, thereby stopping the project for the construction of the city, so does Ani when the Okeke “built towers that they hoped would be enough to prick Ani and get her attention. (98) Ani destroys all that the Okeke have constructed with the sun. The parallel here is that both the people of Babel and Okeke build the tower, and it does not please their God.

As a result of the creation story she narrates, she then explains why there is an attack by the Nuru from where she is, namely the town of Gadi. The Nuru are raping the Okeke in order to make Ewu children. The storyteller's mother is raped and even taken away. The killing continues because of what is written in the Great Book: "As we were doomed in the past and are doomed in the present, we will be saved in the future" (99). She declares. This optimism about the future is because "There is a prophecy by a Nuru Seer living on a tiny Island in the Unnamed Lake. He says a Nuru man will come and force the rewriting of the Great Book. He'll be very tall with a long beard. His mannerisms will be gentle, but he will be cunning and full of vigor and fury" (100). This story explains why there is the killing of men who fit the description. But it turns out most of them are healers, not rebels. It should be made clear that the prophecy actually talks of a tall Nuru girl, but since Rana does not think a girl can be the saviour of the Seven Rivers Kingdom, he changes the prophecy and says a tall Nuru man will come. The hope of Okeke rests on the shoulders of a child who listens to the storyteller but would not imagine she is the liberator because the prophecy rather mentions a man. Therefore, the myth reveals some of the cultural values of the people of the seven Kingdom. Women are not highly rated, but paradoxically, it will be an "ewu" woman who will rewrite the Great Book and save her people.

The folktale in *Who Fears Death* that has a legend is Tia's fable with a boy destined to be Sun Town's greatest chief. The two are born at the exact same time. If Zoubeir is destined to be chief, it is because "there was a rule that decreed that the first son born out of wedlock to the chief must succeed him" (253). When Tia and Zoubeir meet, "there was an odd chemistry, not love at first sight, I wouldn't even call it love. Just chemistry" (254). Zoubeir's mother knows there will be trouble because "people liked to gossip and speculate when a potential power shift was involved." (254). The soldiers come before Zoubeir's mother can warn him. When they shoot to kill him. Tia defends him, throwing herself over him.

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The bullets, of course, catch Tia, and her life is “snuffed out by five more bullets as Zoubeir hid behind her body” (255). He successfully pushes off her body and runs, as swiftly as his long-legged mother seven years before.

It is the end of this story that immortalizes Tia in the Seven Rivers Kingdom. Zoubeir escapes to become the greatest chief that Sun Town has ever had. But his actions make one question why he has been called Sun Town’s greatest chief. This is because he never built a shrine, a temple, or even a shack in Tia's name. In the Great Book, her name is never mentioned again. He never missed her or asked where she was buried. Besides that, “Tia was a virgin. She was beautiful. She was poor. And she was a girl. It was her duty to sacrifice her life for him,” (255) the people say. The cruel treatment the memory of Tia receives at the hands of the ungrateful, unappreciative, and unkind chief elevates Tia to a legend. She does everything to protect the chief and makes the ultimate sacrifice for him, yet he never remembers her, even though he is considered the greatest chief of Sun Town. The selflessness and self-sacrifice of Tia, even when Zoubeir does not see them, are evident to the community. Zoubeir’s hypocrisy, greed, and self-centeredness are decried by the narrator, especially when Onye says, “I’ve always disliked this story” (255). Her dislike of the story stems from Zoubeir, whom she sees as a veritable monster. Tia’s love for Zoubeir is true and deep, but Zoubeir’s love for her is negligent, deceitful, and unfaithful. In trying to destroy Tia’s memory, he paradoxically elevates her to a legend in the community's eyes.

Magical realism, as Maggie Ann Bowers puts it in *Magical Realism: The New Critical Idiom*, “has been associated with fiction that tells the tales of those in the margins of political power and influential society (03). Since it is fiction written from the perspective of the politically and culturally disempowered, it more often than not emancipates the oppressed and marginalized. That is why, in relating the creation myth about Sky Mother

in *Children of Blood and Bone*, the maji who are oppressed by the monarchy are empowered with the bone dagger, a sacred relic, and their leader, Zelig, is given the authority to perform the ritual at the magical island in order to bring back magic to their community. The Okeke in *Who Fears Death*, who are pronounced and cursed as slaves by Ani and oppressed by the Nuru, are liberated by Onyesonwu when she defeats Daib and rewrites the Great Book. Tia, who is neglected, forgotten, and badly treated by the one she saves, becomes a legend because of the sacrifice she makes. Since Afrofuturist novels are generally considered allegorical stories of liberation, which establish the plasticity of speculative fiction, resonates with the myths in the novels under study because they recount diverse stories of liberation: The Okeke are liberated from oppression, the magic of the oppressed Maji is restored which gives them the power to fight the monarchy and Tia's memory is restored after neglect from the king of Sun Town.

As Cheikh Anta Diop states in *Civilisation or Barbarism*, myth becomes "the historical conscience, through the feeling of cohesion that it creates, constitutes the safest and most solid shield of cultural security for a people. That is why every people seek only to know and to live their true history well, to transmit its memory to its descendants" (212). Without transmission, there is no historical conscience, which is essential for people to rediscover the thread that connects them to their remote ancestral past. In the face of cultural aggression of all sorts, in the face of disintegrating forces in the outside world, the most efficient cultural weapon with which a people can arm itself is this feeling of historical conscience and historical continuity that it gains from myth and legend.

Conclusion

The traditional African view of the cosmos, it must be emphasized, is built on myths. These myths and legends are sacred and constitute a historical conscience which enhances a community's continuity. Myth and legend, as analyzed above, construct the values and beliefs of a community. They

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equally serve as allegories of liberation as explained above. This has been demonstrated through the use of cultural criticism as a theoretical framework and magical realism and Afrofuturism as key concepts. Therefore, myth and legend, when retraditionalized, have the potential to educate, liberate, entertain, differentiate, critique, and cement the foundations of societies that permit the building of a new image, a reconquest of the self, and a reestablishment of a self-directed and self-controlled continent.

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