



## The Role of Myths in Indigenous Etche Society

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**Abstract.** In traditional Etche society, the curiosity to ascertain the abode of man and his place around his world; his nature of existence, however, form the basis of the role of myths in indigenous Etche society as a road map to the above scenario. The paper posits that myth intimates the people with the idea of the emergence of man into his very abode and the ontological relationship with the supersensible realities. The paper also contends that through myth the peoples' curiosity about the nature of their existence and interpretation and definition of their place in their environments satisfied their inner thoughts. Data for this study were collected from two major sources (oral interviews; report of the elders and handed down tradition from the repository of custom and traditions of Etche) and secondary sources (published materials). The study also adopts descriptive approach to interpret and analyze the role of myths. Finding reveals that myth has helped the indigenous Etche to interpret the world around them.

**Keywords:** Etche, myth, indigenous Etche society.

### 1. Introduction

Generally, it is believed that till date, no one can give a vivid account about the origin of myths. In other words, myths, here, can be regarded, or rather believed to be the first seat of wisdom ever existed in human history that offer explanations about how the world came into existence. That is why myth here is regarded as the road map that guides and provides appreciable answers for the purpose of man's existence and the nature of his immediate environments. Thus, it is myth that satisfies wisely man's inner-feelings, curiosity and his thoughts about the mysteries surrounding the universe, his outward experiences beyond his wildest imaginations.

Therefore, it could almost be said man here that the confidence and reassurance for man to engage as many exploits as possible within the ambit of his space can be attributed to myth. Therefore, what is more, here, is

that myth is real and not mere fantasies because it has been in existence especially at a time when modern science was completely lacking in human history.

### 1.1 Etche Background

Etche is one of the twenty-three Local Government Areas that make up Rivers State. It is located at the Northern part of Rivers State having boundaries with Ngor-Okpala Local Government Area of Imo State in the North, as well as Abia State in the East (Nwiji, 2012, p. 68). According to Etche socio – political organization, Etche is made up of five outstanding clans. The clans are Mba, Okehi, Ozuzu, Igbo Agwuruasa and Ulakwo Umuselem. The essence of this is for ease administration ( Amaele, 2000, p. 1). The people of Etche speak Etche language which is one of the languages spoken in Rivers State (Ndimele, 2003, p.11). The climate of the area follows as regular circular since it is located within the tropical rainforest of Nigeria. It rains more or less heavily from March to October and it is relatively sunny and dry from November to February. The topography is fairly uniform. It consists of a flat plain, threaded with fresh water rivers and streams. Their economic activities include farming, hunting, palm-wine tapping, distilling of local gin, etc (Amadi and Uwom, 2004, p. 58).

With regards to their religious life, there is unshaken believe in the existence of a Supreme Being to which the people refer to as Chineke (the God who created everything in the universe). Etche, like other traditional African societies do not approach Him directly rater He is approached and worshipped through the pantheon of divinities (Amadi and Uwom, 2004, p. 3).

### 1.2 Statement of the Problem

The place of myths in traditional Etche society over the years cannot be overemphasized. Myths has helped the indigenous Etche not only to recognize their place

within the ambit of their immediate world, but also to interpret that which is embedded in their cosmology through which the people conceived the world around them.

However, as important as myth seems to be in the socio-religio-economic life of the people, its importance appears to have continued to escape the attention of scholars, leading to a dearth of scholarship. In consequence of this, repositories of custom and traditions of Etche appears to be phasing out due to event of death. Therefore, this study will document for posterity the importance of myth in the religious life of the people for education and information. Two Factors motivated the researcher's interest in pursuing this study. First, as earlier stated, was to document for posterity the role of myths in indigenous Etche society especially in this era of rapid change and cultural globalization and the second was to explain the importance of myths in the religious life of the people.

## 2. Research Methodology

This study was carried out as interview-based research. Two types of oral investigation procedures were utilized viz:

Reports of repositories of custom and traditions of Etche about importance of myths in the religious life of the people.

Handed down tradition about meaning of myths relating to socio-religio-economic life of the people.

There were certain issues that were taken into account in selecting the interviewee's and some of the considerations are: the position of the informant in the society; the cultural organization he/she belongs to and the position or title he/she holds; the level of the interviewee's cultural affinity. Those who were culturally rooted in the practices of the local community were found to be better versed in the tradition and cultural practices of the people.

## 3. Conceptual Clarification

### 3.1 Myth

Myth has come to mean different thing to different scholars. That is why the term 'myth' has been given various definitions by different scholars. Added to this is that it is difficult to give a vivid account of how the world myth originated, as earlier stated. In any case, the examination of some definitions proffered by scholars will enable us have a glimpse of what myth is all about.

The word 'myth' comes from two Greek words "mythos" which is translated to mean "fable", tale;

speech' or 'talk; and'meeth' which equally meant stories, that were false and was already obsolete in use before sixteenth century (Hagg, 1957, p. 71).

By definition, therefore, myths according to Ugwu (1996) are traditional stories of unknown origin handed down from earliest times". (p. 34). In much the same vein, myths are regarded as common traditional stories involving the Supreme Beings, divinities, ancestors, heroes and they offer explanation of some mysterious occurrence or phenomena (Hornby, 2000, p. 485).

Similarly, Adesina (2005) defines myth as a story, handed over from earlier generation to the later generation especially beliefs about early histories of race, explanation of natural events such as the season (p.15). Wudrock (1963) sees myth as fanciful and imaginative stories that operates on natural phenomena in terms of anthropomorphic beings (p. 226).

Technically, for Tasie (2012), it means a tale imaginatively describing or accounting for natural phenomenon or it is a means of explaining some actual or imaginary reality which is not adequately understood and so cannot be explained through normal description (p. 5). For Abanuka (1999), myth is a simple human attempt to explain in symbolic language the origin of the world, human discoveries and inventions, suffering and death, which the community accepts as belonging to it (p. 5).

### 3.2 Characteristics of Myth

To give a definition which covers the understanding of myth in general seems difficult. The reason for this difficulty seems obvious. First, the origin of myth is obscure. In addition to this is that myth is not usually dated nor has it any given author or number of authors who are definitely acknowledged. In addition to this is that myth is narrated anonymously. Its message is dogmatically formulated and is characteristically so forcefully and acceptance. In addition, myth is open to various interpretations; is not narrated in logical or coherent terms (Abanuka, 2005, p.1).

Consequently, myth generally is concerned with extraordinary things and events; one of the richest sources of inspiration for literature, drama and art throughout the world. Myth lacks scientific or empirical evidence (Adesin, 1997, p. 115). Explaining further, Weneka (1997) noted:

*Myth is everything and nothing at the same time. It is the true story or false one, revelation or deception, sacred or vulgar; real or fictional, symbol or tool,*

*archetype or stereo-type. It is either strongly structured and logical or emotional and pre-logical, traditional and primitive or part of contemporary ideology (p. 91).*

### 3.3 Types of Myths

Since myths are modes through which man explains the origins and functions of his universe, they are bound to be as many types of myths as there are different situations affecting man. Among the most important types of myths, the following are most common.

#### 3.3.1 Cosmological myths

This type of myth is concerned with the creation of the cosmos (universe). Such can as well be referred to as creation myths. Essentially, they serve etiological purpose by explaining the coming into being of man then sun, moon, stars and other created orders. They are very common in both primal and advanced cultures. Frequently, they speak of the act of creation as of fashioning out of the earth out of raw materials that was already present. In most African cosmogonies, the earth and water are regarded as pre-existent, out of which other creatures emerged. It was after the creation of the world that gods and men appeared. Another important type of cosmological myth is that which describes the end of the world. For example, **Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian and Islamic myth** all picture the present world ending in a final battle between good and evil, after which, judgement consigns man to either the paradise or hell for perpetual enjoyment or suffering respectively. Some of such creation myths talk of how the primordial relationship between man the creator's behest. The end result and relevance of this myth is found in its aetiological purpose of explaining how sin came into the world (Weneka 1997, p. 95). Following this is the **Mossianic and Millenarian myths**.

The rational explanation for the existence of this myth is the natural inclination among human beings to hope for a new better world in most civilizations. Many messianic and millenarian religious movements which flourished in Mela-nesia, Africa, South America and the Caribbean as from the twentieth century were all preceded by such myths. That is why the movements centre on prophetic leaders, often emphasizing the return of the dead at the renewal to come, (Like the Rastafarian movement of Jamaica which believes in a future repatriation of members to Africa, the believed home of all black race (Weneka, 1997, pp. 95 – 96). Following closely is the founders of Religion's myth. Although the founders of great religions (Jesus,

Mohammed, Confucius, Siddharta Gaudama, Moses, etc) are generally said to have had actual existence, there is no denying the fact that information regarding their birth and early childhood are often couched in legendary terms that have mythological features. Their accounts state categorically realities that could not be known in any ordinary fashion or which raise the founders above ordinary historical conditions. Also, couched in the same mythological narrative is the religious experience (the call) they encountered with the object of worship through which the doctrine of the new religion was formulated. The same is true of many other religious figures, prophets, saints and gurus. Best example here is the narrative about Jesus' virgin birth (p. 96).

In addition to this is the **life-crisis myth**. Certain stages in the life of man are regarded as periods of life crisis because generally, they are crucial events in human life as the mark the passage of an individual from one stage of existence to the next. The stages are birth, puberty, marriage and death. Each stage is marked with symbolic rituals. And so, myths are created to explain their origin and purpose. For example, there are myths to explain how and why death became the lot of mankind. In some ancient religions, like those of Egypt and Greece, each of the life stages is said to have a god behind it. The transitory stages are symbolized in the ancient Mediterranean mystery religion of Egypt and Greece by the myth of the death and resurrection of Osiris and Persephone (pp. 96 – 97).

Following closely is the **Hunting and Agricultural myths**. Hunting and gathering no doubt remain the earliest occupation of man, far earlier than the practice of rudimentary agriculture by man. Myths associated with hunting and gathering revolve around animals and the hunt. For example, the animal is regarded as both a symbol of violence the human break-away from the world of nature and a symbol of intimacy – the human desire to be integrated into the world of nature. The myths also reflects the common beliefs that each specie of animals has a guardian spirit which must be placated before the animal is hunted and that certain animals are totemic ancestors of certain tribes or clans. In agricultural societies mythical forms take on the character of seasonal rites, celebrating planting and harvesting. Female symbolism is prominent in such myths because of an analogy often drawn between the fertility of grains and that of women. That accounts for the many female goddesses such as corn and yam goddesses. Best examples include the Egyptian (Sis), the Greek Demeter and the Roman Ares as well as so many African female and Agricultural goddesses (p. 97).

In addition to this are the **time, and Eternity myths** of no less important are the time and Eternity myths. As the name implies, these are myths and mythologies which concerned themselves with the relationship between time and Eternity on earth. It appears apparent regularity of the heavenly bodies (sun, moon and stars) long impressed man in every society. And some man from the primordial times evolved myth explaining their origin, operations and purpose or positions in creation. Usually, some figures of symbolic importance such as '4', '7] and '10' are used to delineated their location courses, essence, size and age (pp. 97 – 98).

### 3.4 Theories of Myths

#### 3.4.1 Euhemerus Theory

An early philosopher called Euhemerus propounded this theory which was named after him. He maintained that myths are based on historical facts. In addition, scholars have to remove supernatural elements in myth to meet the fact. That is why some scholars called this theory historical eliminative theory (i.e to remove supernatural elements from myth). However, the modern scholars have considered this theory to be weak because there is no enough historical evidence to determine whether a mythical figure ever existed.

Following this is the **Tylor's theory**. Sir Edward B. Tylor, an anthropologist established that myths were the product of earlier people's belief in soul and spirit generated by dream. Interpretation of myth from the dream experience raises questions of the universality of certain mythical elements. Hence the first idea of man about supernatural was his belief that he has a soul which abodes in the body while the body sleeps, the soul can travel freely near and far. Man believes that the soul controls natural events like earthquakes, destructive flood, etc, and can accept his prayer for protection or special favours. Tylor considered animism as the first step in the development of human thought and thus the beginning of myth.

In addition to this is **Rudolf Otto's theory**. He was a historian of religion and he considered religious element as the source of myth. He went further by saying that myth and symbols-non-expressions of religion – derived from a specific religious sense which is called *Numinous* which he established is present in all human existence.

Following closely is **Raffaello Pettazzoni's theory**. He was also a historian of religion. Thinking faculty is considered by him as a mode of myth. He went further

to say that mystical thinking is logical and illogical surrounding the totality of mode of human awareness. Having combined historical facts and psychological insight that are neither Freudian nor Jungian, Pettazzoni explained that myth arose from the human situation in a particular cultural historical context.

Following this is **Bronislaw's Theory**. Bronislaw Malinowski was an earlier 1900s psychologist who believed that psychological conditions led man to create myths. According to him, man recognizes that frontier exist between what man can and what he cannot explain logically. Thus, myths are created to explain the frontier that cannot be known. Consequently, myth strengthens tradition by basing it on the reality of initial primordial events. Malinowski's theory disagreed with Tylor's claims that myths began as pre-scientific attempt to explain dreams and natural occurrences.

### 3.5 Examples of Some Myths of Creation in West Africa

#### 3.5.1 Yoruba Myths of Creation

In their myth of creation, they have it that in the primordial times or timeless pre-history, the Supreme Being "Olodumare" with his numerous divinities lived in the far-removed heaven. These divinities include Orisa-nla (also called Obatala), the arch-divinity and deputy of Olo-dumare in the ordering of things, Orunmila (also called Ifa) the deputy of Olodumare in matters of knowledge, and Esu, the inspector of rituals.

According to this myth, the world this time was null and void and of course a very watery, mastery waste an endless stretch of water and wild marshes. During this period, the divinities on delegation by God usually come down from heaven on the wild marshes to perform their hunting activities. They descended on it with the aid of spider's web. On a more serious thought on how to remedy the situation. Olodumare summoned Orisa-nla and commissioned him to create, equip and mould the physical form of man. To get this done, He gave Orisa-nla a leaf packet of loose earth (or snail shell full of sand), and for his tools he was given a white hen and a pigeon to spread the earth (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979, p. 55). Acting on the instruction of Olodumare, Orisa-nla descended upon the watery waste. On getting to a particular spot on the watery marshy void, he poured out the loose earth, and dropped the birds where he had thrown the sand. The birds began immediately to scratch at the sand and scatter it on the marshy waste. And wherever the earth was scattered became dry land. However, the loose earth was scattered unevenly, and there emerged hills,

valleys and mountains. When this first phase of creation was completed, Olodumare instructed His bailiff, also known as His inspector of works, the Chameleon, to go and inspect the work which Orisa-nla had earlier reported to Olodumare was completed. After two visits to the spot, the Chameleon reported back that Orisa-nla's work was perfectly done. Orisa-nla was again commissioned to equip the earth. The birds were to be increased and multiply and serve as food while certain trees were to be planted to supply drinks.

Furthermore, a man called Oreluere was created to head the beings who should inhabit the earth. This was of course the genesis of human habitation of the earth. People began to increase and multiply, but they did not have enough water for use. Orisa-nla, therefore, appealed for more water, and Olodumare sent rain. Orisa-nla was further commissioned to mould man's physical parts from the dust of the earth. He could, however, do this accordingly as he liked it. That is to say that he could make human figures perfect or defective, white or black, shapely or deformed. But it was Olodumare's prerogative absolute concern, to make the physical form of a living being by putting in it the essence of being or life. On one occasion, Orisa-nla tried to spy Olodumare at work, to know how the lifeless forms became living beings. Olodumare saw this conspiracy and forestalled him by making him fall into a deep sleep only to wake and find all forms in the stock become human beings.

### 3.6 Myths of the Coming of Death

A version of this myth which is found in many African societies with some variations in detail, stresses that at the beginning, there was no death in the world. At a time when men began to die, they were very worried and decided to send a dog to tell God that when men die they should be restored to life. Meanwhile, a toad who had overheard the message, and driven by jealousy because he was not chosen to carry the message because of his slow movement, also set out for God's place with the intent to frustrate in man's plans. On the way, the dog fell asleep. Although, some versions would say that he stopped to lick palm oil, still other versions say that he waited to get some food from a woman he found cooking for her child.

However, the toad overtook him and reached God first and told him that men desire that when they die they have no desire to return to the world again (Metuh, 1987, pp. 43-44).

### 3.7 Functions of Myths

For the pre-Literate culture, myth fulfills indispensable functions that is, it expresses, enhances and codifies their belief systems. It also safeguards and enforces as well as vouches for the efficiency of rituals, in addition to containing practical rules for the guidance of man. And so myth to them is a vital ingredient of human civilization. The stories contained in myths are to them statements of primeval greater and more relevant reality by which the present life and activities of mankind are determined. The knowledge of myth supplies man with the motif for ritual and moral actions as well as indications as to how to perform them (Weneka, 1997, p. 98)

Essentially, therefore, myth serves aetiological purpose. That is, myth explains or tells how something came into existence, not only the world, plants and animals, but also how a pattern of behaviour, an institution, a manner of working was established. Also, myths help man to manipulate and control events and phenomena. This is because by knowing the myth, one manipulates them at will. Through myths the history of the acts and deeds of the supernatural is transmitted to us, and it is myth that legitimizes and sanctifies such stories. In other words, such stories are considered to be absolutely true because they are concerned with realities, and sacred because they are the work of the supernatural (Weneka, 1997, p. 98).

### 3.8 An Analysis of the Role of Myths

One major role of myth in traditional Etche society is that the origin of the people, their believed area of migration, example, from ancient Benin kingdom and all the places they sojourned were explained out in myths. Thus it is myth that explain how Igbodo Etche became the first Etche settlement upon migration from the ancient Benin Kingdom. Another remarkable role of myth here is that it explains the sacred nature of *Uzo-Ubi* (the access road to farmlands) and how and why certain sacrifices and rituals are performed at such sacred spot. For example, it is where *Alu-Ubi* (deity in charge of farmland) receives sacrifices before sharing the follow land for cultivation (Amadi Livinus, 05/02/2026, oral; interview). Thus, it is myth that explain what the *Uzo-Ubi* signify in the religious life of the people. For example, it symbolizes the meeting points of the spirits and other patron gods of land (Amadi and Uwom, 2004, p. 160).

In addition to this is the gender role. In traditional Etche society, it is myth that define gender roles for men and women. For example, it is myth that explain how and why men should till the land for planting of yam; stake the yams on the *ekwe* (Yam barns); and as to how and why cassava should be planted and

harvested by women (Amadi, John, 10/02/2026, oral Interview).

Another important role of myth in traditional Etche is that it explains why certain days such as *Eke*, *Orie Afor* and *Nkwo* are sacred; and why such days are set aside for the worship of divinities. For example, *Nkwo* (the first day in Akpoku traditional week) is earmarked for the worship of *Ushi* deity of Akpolu Etche while *Afor* (the first day in Umuoye traditional week) is the sacred day of *Afor-Ukwu* deity of Umuoye Etche. Thus, it is myth that explain how and why certain activities and occurrences such as farming, fighting or death are considered to be taboo in such days. For example, in Etche, death on *Eke* is regarded as bad death as no one is buried either (Njoku Alfred, 10/02/2026, oral interview).

In addition, it is myth that explain why a man should not discard or thrown out his wife(s) properties or belongings such as *ekigwe* (tri – pod), *igbeb – akwa* (box wrapper) no matter the level of provocation, misunderstanding or quarrel; and what such act signifies. For example, in Etche such act signifies divorce. Another important role of myth in traditional Etche that it explains the sacred nature of the *Ofo* (tree). Generally, *Ofo* as Ejizu (1986), explains is a sacred piece of stick believed to be imbued with spiritual or ancestral power (p.16). in Etche, *Ofo* is not only believed to be ritual object but also feature prominently in Etche ritual. Here, how and why such material. object is not used as firewood and building is made explicit in myths (Nweke Friday, 10/02/2026, oral interview).

#### 4. Conclusion

This essay examined the role of myth in traditional Etche Society. In traditional Etche , myth is believed to be the first indigenous Etche seat of wisdom which had been in existence at a time when the art of reading and writing were absolutely lacking in history. Here, worthy of note, in analyzing the role of myth in traditional Etche is that it revolves round the people’s beliefs which are deeply embedded in their cosmology through which the conceived the world around them.

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