

## MYTHOLOGY AND RITUAL PERFORMANCE IN THE *IGBASOLO RITE OF PASSAGE OF IGBEDI*

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### **Abstract**

Izon oral literature is replete with sacred stories about myth, creation and supernatural traditional beliefs down the generation. Stories of ancient historical traditions of origin of peoples and issues of life and death have provided source materials for writers in different climes but the Igbedi *Igbasolo* myth have suffered neglect over time. This study therefore examines the literary aesthetics of ritual performance in one of the greatest cultural phenomena in Izon oral literature, Igbedi *Igbasolo* myth which is a cultural signification that shapes the perception of identity and relationships, not only with the living but also with the supernatural worlds. The objective of this study is to explore the ritualistic performances surrounding the Igbedi *Igbasolo* myth. The study is analytical, and the myth is subjected to critical evaluation. The theoretical framework of the study hinges on Edmund Husserl's strand of Phenomenological theory and it is a philosophical enquiry into thought system on issues of cosmic forces in nature's order. The study is not only the revival of interest in Izon oral literature but the documentation and preservation of Izon cultural heritage from extinction

**Keywords:** Oral literature, Izon mythology, ritual performance, Igbasolo, Igbedi,

### **Introduction**

Though African myths are unique, Izon myths are distinctive in the thought pattern to show the cultural identity of the land and people. IZONS are one of the world's most ancient riverine dwellers and their occupations of fishing, farming and trading influenced their literature to revolve around nature and the extraterrestrial world. For instance, among the Izon speaking ethnic nationality, there are several myths such as the creation myth Woyengi, Temearau, Ogina-arau, Ogboinbau, Oweifa and others but the Igbasolo is one of the most intriguing myths in the Niger Delta region of Bayelsa State. The Igbedi *Igbasolo* myth narrates the nature of the rite of passage from the world of the living to the

world of the spirits or ancestors. Igbedi is one of the communities situated on the historic Wilberforce Island. This study spans beyond recounting of the Igbasolo myth to explore the aesthetics of rituals, incantations, chants, recitations and performances of Izon oral literature.

This myth deviates from the conventional rite of passage; it defines the different dimension of Izon cultural belief in issues of life and death. The Igbedi *Igbasolo* myth somehow aligns with the Biblical account of Enoch, who did not experience or see death because God translated him by faith (Heb. 11: 5) but the myth breaks the protocol of life and death. The story of Igbasolo is the mystical circumvention of the rite of passage experienced in Igbedi community which reveals the people's belief in life beyond the physical world. The myth narrates the system of transition of the elderly via a chain that drops from the sky, the abode of Woyengi, the creator. The kernel of the myth is that Woyengi (God) did not allow elderly people of a particular compound named Balibou in Igbedi community to experience physical death but called them home via a chain.

### **Theoretical Framework- Phenomenological Theory**

The study is hinged on Edmund Husserl's strand of Phenomenological theory which addresses issues of the spatio-temporal world. Edmund Husserl is a German philosopher who believes that "the proper object of philosophical enquiry is not the objects in the world that are perceivable through the senses but, rather, the *a priori* contents of the consciousness." Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan states that Edmund Husserl's strand of Phenomenological theory is significant because of its natural standpoint on issues of consciousness (137). Terry Eagleton argues that though the phenomenological theory emanates from the idea of rebuilding the ruins arising from the devastations caused by the European war of 1918, the principles of the theory consider issues of enquiry "about the conditions which made any sort of knowledge possible in the first place" (49).

M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham argue that Phenomenological criticism as a term is associated with the Geneva School of critics such as Marcel Raymond, Albert Beguin, Jean Rousset, Jean-Pierre Richard and Georges Poulet J. Hillis Miller, and they view literary works as fiction originating from the "*Lebenswelt* of its author which embodies the author's unique mode of

consciousness” (290). This is in opposition to the formalist approach of objectivity because the *Lebenswelt* (lived world) reveals aspects of the personality of the author in each work of literature. It shows interrogation of the historical, socio-political, cultural and belief system of the people. Stanley Fish argues that the “formal properties of literacy works exist only as they are activated by such communities of readers (217). It brings to bare the creative and utilitarian functions of literature to society at large.

### **The Dialectics of the Mythic Genre**

Mythical stories are a global phenomenon and the stories are as old as mankind. In Africa, myths existed even before colonial intervention and the advent of christianity. This means that the transmission of cultural heritage exceeds ethnic and national boundaries because it cuts across the globe and has lasted from generations. Enajite E. Ojaruega posits that:

Orality can be regarded as the study of oral traditions which are integral aspects of a people’s culture. The mores, customs, lore, ethics, values and belief systems form a group’s culture. In non-literate and pre-literate societies, the oral traditions reflect the people’s way of life and a veritable too for transmitting by word of mouth the temperament, character, and pre-occupation of a people from generation to generation. The same oral means of transmission ensures the preservation of folklore, proverbs, myths, riddles, tongue-twisters, fables, and legends are all parts of repertoire of African oral literature. (35)

Oral tradition also comprises songs, rhymes and other oral renditions and most contemporary African writers adopt to show various historical legendary accounts of heroes that struggle for the freedom of the people especially during the colonial regime.

M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham identify the twentieth century as the period, the term myth gain more prominence and attention in literary discourse and myth critics such as Francis Ferguson, Robert Graves, Richard Chase, Maud Bodkin and Northrop Frye consider “the genres and individual plot patterns of many literature” (231). Psalms Chinaka argues that myth is the traditional stories of heroic personalities or supernatural events for cultural preservation and to explain behavioural patterns of persons within particular

geo-political locations (250). Maikudi Karaye provides a more technical view to the understanding of myth:

The scientific analysis of myth recognizes, first, that myth belongs to the superstructural level of society, that is, the ideological level which those who listen to or recount the story are generally unconscious of. Consequently, myth is defined neither in terms of native classification nor of any textual or contextual properties but in terms of its logic. Secondly, the plot of a story or its component part (s) has no meaning in itself nor should it be interpreted relative to an isolated object outside it but in terms of the totality of life necessary for its production and maintenance. This totality comprises the whole world of mythology, that is, series of myths which logically belongs to the same type of real world which provides the experiential basis for the production and reproduction of the mythology world itself. (27)

Myths are essential parts of African tradition due to the utilitarian function and the stories not only entertain but educate as well as inform the people on moral issues in their daily lives.

Myths make meaning on their own besides the individual perceived or assigned interpretation due to certain universal rules governing the nature of communication. Musa I. Okparachi argues that myths are critical means of transmission of stories through the use of language “that particularly construct and peculiarly reconfigure the participants and events” (245). William Blazek states that the ideology of the myth is complex and the meaning “stem from the various ways myth has been applied to different fields of study” (525). For instance, discourses on mythology also involve disciplines such as history, religion, philosophy and anthropology due to the scientific focus on human societies and cultures, often associated with certain magical reality of imitation.

Claude Levi-Strauss, a French Structural Anthropologist argues that mythology makes demands primarily on the neuromental aspects in relation to the length of the narration, the recurrence of certain themes, and the other forms of back references and parallels of the story (17). Eagleton argues that Levi-Strauss view myths from the various perspectives to show binary opposites in meaning using language and that “myths have a quasi-objective collective existence, unfold their own ‘concrete logic’ (90). Binary opposites in the

contexts represent the order of events and it shows the structured use of different disciplines and group of people had their own forms of interpretation of myths, folktales, legends and fables depending on the culture. F.B.O. Akarobaro states that:

Mythical narratives originate around some form of historical or memorable event, incident or personage. In this event or personage is amplified and glorified into some extraordinary form. History and fantasy and nationalist agendas or the poetic become blurred. In fact the imaginative, the invented becomes more significant than the actual historical fact. But from the literary, poetical and imaginative uses of the resources of language, the myth becomes a cultural significant creation having a great value for people and their religious and cultural beliefs. (218)

It means that culture can be harnessed in profitable and ultimately socially conservative ways to represent alternative imagination of reality or the possibility of historical events.

### **Ritual Performances in the Igbasolo myth**

Rituals are certain recurrent behavioral patterns of some sacred origin that involves the use of symbols to represent or perform the action and the Izon people have their own ritual system. Adebayo Williams argues that rituals in the pre-historic period were the avenue for the reestablishment of “symbolic contact with the ontological essence” (90). Chinaka states that rituals are planned religious or other revered activities performed by a person or group of persons (262). Angaye and Kwokwo posit that African literature is filled with literary elements such as rituals, incantations, recitations, chants and performance because it reflects the people’s belief system (88). Such literary aesthetics are deeply rooted in the tradition of the people due to the pattern words are used to express and give meaning to spiritual matters.

The Igbasolo myth, commences with the performance of rituals; the individual who is to ascend gets the intuitive knowledge of the period to transit, a situation Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan describe as “the spontaneity of consciousness (138)” and the moment presents the consciousness of departure. At the period of impulsiveness, members of the community chant are invited to

participate in the rite of passage: they sing praises of the person and also reverence the creator for the life here and hereafter. The audience chants praises of the person's pedigree like *Iri kpoirikorogha* (even when it dries, it does not dry up), *Igbegbe* (velvet clothes which signifies royalty), and so on depending on the individual. Without response from the individual who is about to ascend to eternity, the praises continue, accompanied by solemn drum beats reflecting the solemn mood of the occasion. This signifies the relationship between the real world and the celestial bodies.

The process of ascension also requires lots of purification to wade off unforeseen circumstances or untoward occurrences such as premature death of family members, plaques, accidents, famine, and attack by strange diseases. One of the most significant rituals requires the first son of the man who is about to transit from the world of the living to the world of the ancestors to bring seven fishes (not more or less than seven fishes) from a lake called *boutoru* for the father to eat before his exit. Disobedience to this requirement spelt great consequence for the individual and the community because his ascension could be delayed and this result in outbreak of plaques. In fact, it was as a result of such default, according to Mr Mbolu, stopped the chain from coming to Balibou and the people suffered the consequences of death, and up to date, Balibou is the only compound in Igbedi without a cemetery.

A version of the myth by Mr. Taxi Mbolu, has it that, depending on the personality involved, the community plays significant role in the process. It was a communal process because it involves all the elders of the community. TanureOjaide argues that African lifestyle is centred on collective and communal participation of traditional activities (xvii). In fact, there is community involvement and participation in the ritual process. There is collective community performance in most of the preparations for the rituals such as donations of sundry items such as plantain and oil, firewood, mud, garri, yam and other necessary items for the ceremony from others.

In the preparation, the process is that the plantain is strategically dissected, not straight on (*abalipele*) into seven pieces. The garri is shared into two equal parts, one part is mixed with oil and the other left plain, that without oil. Sometimes, the *obubu* (pounded yam and plantain one set mixed with oil and the other without) is also prepared for the ceremony. The mud is use to renovate the house of the person, if necessary and also used to prepare

*okobatoru*, that is monies to spend in the world beyond. The *okobatoru* is a round shape of the mud and it is prepared in form of coins, which was legal tender then. These sacrificial items are gathered, including the fetched firewoods, at the compound of the person awaiting translation and it shows the utilitarian function of information on spiritual matters. As for the firewood, it is also gathered at the venue awaiting the arrival of the son to prepare the last meal.

The Igbasolo transition also involves ritual performances. These ritual performances include incantations, recitations and chants. In the Igbasolo myth, as soon as the evolutionary intuition dawns on the mind of the affected individual, the process commences. He invites the first born of the family to make the necessary ceremony for the peaceful transition to the world beyond. According to the tradition, the first born goes to a designated lake named *Boutoru* to kill fishes, not more or less than seven (7) to carry out the ceremony of the rite of passage and receive the accompanying blessings before the ascension. The figure seven is significant in Izon numerology because it represents perfection and completion of the union of the masculine, three (*Oweitaru*) and feminine four (*Ere noi*) totaling seven. This is also another literary element in Izon oral literature and *Boutoru* as the motif or controlling metaphor standing between fishes and the ritual process because it eventually results to issues of resistance.

After the ritual, which is accompanied with chants, recitations of the deed of the person, a visible chain appears from above and the aged holds onto it and fades away gradually with time. This is not in any way insinuating that the tradition cuts across the entire Igbedi community, actually this phenomenon is exclusive to a particular compound named *Balibou*. It shows that in a typical African setting, people live communal lives, that is each family circle cluster around one another to provide support in times of needs or otherwise. The families are allied to each other in that each member of the family is closely associated and familiar with the rules governing that unit within the family.

### **Conclusion**

By way of conclusion, this study demonstrates the attempted to recreate the Igbasolo transition myth of Igbedi as part of Izon mythology and oral literature. The performance involved in the myth constitutes significantly to Izon cultural heritage. The study therefore is a revelation and demonstration of

one of the significant cultural legacies of Izon oral traditions not only to show the culture of the people but the beauty of Izon rituals, recitations, incantations and performance. The uniqueness of the myth makes brings to the fore abnormal mythical method by which the aged transited from the world of the living to the world of the spirits.

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