

ARCHETYPES AND FUNCTIONALITY: EXAMPLES OF SELECTED MOTIFS IN YORUBA FOLKTALES

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Citation: Kazeem H. Fola & Kalejaiye Oluwakemi Abiola (2024). Archetypes and functionality: Examples of selected motifs in Yoruba folktales. *KIU Interdisciplinary Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 5(2), 44-50.

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the theory of archetype in an attempt to investigate both the breath as well as the depth of Yoruba philosophy. This is meant to, apart from locating a universal framework around which the Yoruba mind works, also validate the claim that the 'non-tangible' thought of man could be transformed, as it were, to assume a material form. When this is done, it would erect lasting structures in the form of motifs in the human mind. Indeed, one of the sundry manifestations of the exercise of the imagination among Yoruba people is the folktale. It involves a pot-pourri of forms as songs, mimicry, narration and so on; this is apart from its central essence of being able to capture the totality of 'man in society'. This paper concludes that in every situation where there is contact between the concept archetype and any elements of the Yoruba cosmology, there are some logics involved. One of such logical consistencies which could be found in every culture that makes use of archetypes is that there is one relationship or another between every motif drawn upon in the folktale of the people and their thinking. Both the motif and the people's philosophy are often found to corroborate certain residual thoughts in the mind of the user society/people.

Keywords: Archetype, Yoruba, Culture, "Ijapa", Folktales

INTRODUCTION

There have been increased reports of violent weather occurrences occasioned by climate change. Every human society, primitive or civilized, ancient or modern, has its own mind. The mind of every society is what is referred to as the culture of the people. The culture determines the perception of both the tangible and intangible surroundings of the society. An unambiguous description of the concept of culture by W. B. Andah, cited in Ogunbameru Kunle and Wale Rotimi (1998), as comprising,

... all the material and non-material expression of the people as well as the processes with which the expressions are communicated. It has to do with all the social, ethical, intellectual, scientific, artistic and technological

expressions and processes of a people usually ethnically and, or nationally or supra-nationally related and usually living in a geographically contiguous area; what they pass on to their successors and how they are passed on. (52)

Given the clarity of this definition, coupled with its profundity, we may only need to add that the behavioural patterns of any people or how the people behave are all conditioned by the nature of the mind of the society. In culture, therefore, are found such elements that are peculiar to the people and which in turn distinguish them one from another.

Indeed, Africans and of course Yoruba people, oftentimes have their culture reflected in their folktales. In these folktales, the attitudes of the people to issues bordering on life, life after death, retribution, fate and destiny, the relationship between God and man; man and man, man and other elements, etc are reflected. Any of those highlighted concerns is a reflection of the profoundness of thought emanating from the mind of the society.

Society and Archetypes

The archetypal theory provides the basis for universalizing the arts. This is because archetypal motifs and formations give to creative pieces of any age and society such relevance that is timeless and boundless. There is a way in which the 'original image' of a specific archetype assumes a universal importance, and by implication, also craves for universal concern. This then means that certain motifs have the potential to be trans-cultural in nature because the feelings and the aspirations which they represent or anticipate are naturally inheritable to man. The affirmation made above could also apply to literature, work of art and/or any of their elements which seems to reflect, share or preoccupy with such universal concerns which may include life, death, evil, virtue, wickedness, generosity, love, joy, hatred, and so forth

In the process of human development, the human mind is repeatedly pre-occupied with certain issues and phenomena which continue to repeat themselves in his imagination. These issues and phenomena remain 'stubbornly' so because they constitute the central cultural, physical, psychological and natural structures which man, has himself either by accident or design, developed. Their origin is largely unknown because they are found to have remained with humankind from creation. The formations, the image and the representation which they create in the mind and behind which they masquerade or camouflage are what is called archetype.

To Maud Bodkin, archetypes, as quoted in Rahman Selden (1998:) are:

Narrative designs, character types, or images which can be identified with varieties of literature, myths, dreams and ritualized modes of social behavior (331).

In the perception of Carl C. Jung, an archetype, quoted in Ogunjimi Bayo and Abd Rasheed Na'Allah (1994) is:

...the primordial image of a figure, whether demon, man, or process that repeats itself in the course of history, where creative fantasy is freely manifested (121)

In both instances of the description of archetypes above, they appear as emanations or products of psychological residues which manifest where creative freedom is at play or where it seeks to be freely exercised. They also form one of the bases for the “mythic imagination” as spoken of by Seamus Heaney, in his address at the Memorial Service for Ted Hughes in 1999. Heaney had likened mythic imagination to components of ‘human genetics’ because they are ingrained in human memories, and they also determine most of his actions. Beyond examining archetypes as reflected in one of the so many imaginative/creative aspects of Yoruba culture (the folktale), this study will also be preoccupied with the functionality archetypal motifs and images in every instance where one is found.

The manner in which every human society responds to a primordial thought determines the kind of pattern(s), which it formulates. This will in turn condition the characteristic(s) or quality(ies), which the image of the specific archetype is imbued with. The pattern could also go by the name ‘motif’ in literature.

Every motif agrees with the world view and, of course, the thought process of the user community. Therefore, no matter the level of fineness and ingenuity a writer has, his use of motif would be found to have drawn largely from a central source, which is that of his ancestors. This, in part, is the crux of the argument of T.S. Eliot’s *Tradition and the Individual Talents* (1921). This very last remark becomes the more so in an oral situation because of the fundamental communal nature of oral pieces. In the final analysis too, the constraints of ‘tradition’ as an overwhelming influence that radiates through and across all imaginative works, be they oral or written, is also an essential factor that helps to validate the above claim.

Archetypes in Folktales:

Folktales happen to be one among the structures through which the imaginative/creative potentials of Africans, and by extension, the Yoruba people could be appreciated. Folktales include all narratives told to children, especially by the elderly ones, at periods of leisure, preferably in the evening after all domestic chores had been done, and sometimes, when the evening meals had been eaten. The period included in its description notwithstanding, folktales could be told anytime provided; they do not disturb people from carrying out duties expected from them.

Among the Yoruba people, as in any other society in Africa, folktales are of unqualified importance as they could be used to introduce children to the cultural practices of their society such as the custom, institutions, mores, beliefs, philosophy of life, the worldview, etc. They develop in children power of repertoire and rhetoric, sense of communal responsibility and

healthy psychological cum physical traits. They help to expose children to the voice of the landscape, flora and fauna of their environment, thereby preparing them for future profession such as fishing, farming, carving, etc. They also help in the provision of comic relief and entertainment after the day's hard work. The above itemized importance and many others, make folktales tools or objects through which archetypes are easily deployed.

In folktales among Yoruba, the entire existence of the people: their development, history, worldview, philosophy, vision, individually, etc is implicated. Indeed, every folktale puts forth a miniature world of its own. Because folktales capture the totality of man in society, there is hardly any human trait not underscored by them. All human traits (universal) have therefore been remodeled along ethical variables, for example, virtue, honesty, greed, larceny, obstinacy, deceit, etc are as old as humanity. They determine human relations, and humans themselves are pre-occupied by them. Because the human mentality cannot 'free' itself from them, they are broadly categorized into good and bad traits depending on their desirability or otherwise in the society. They are, indeed, either encouraged or discouraged in human relations.

Among the Yoruba, there are several tales which capture the varied aspects of human existence. Essentially, these tales constitute communal pronouncements on human behaviour. They are oftentimes without any sense of vagueness in their judgement on issues. Every activity leading to such judgement provides opportunity for the presentation of one, two or more archetypal character(s) who embody those traits meant for condemnation or commendation.

The most well-known among archetypal characters of Yoruba folktales is the tortoise known ordinarily as "Ijapa" or "Alabawun". But when his name becomes inflected as 'Ijapa t'iroko oko Yannibo', he assumes a folktale character and the cord stricken in the sub-conscious mind of the average Yoruba person, either young or old, would include that of tricks, greed, treachery, amusement, etc. This name, when used to qualify a person, is suggestive of the above-drawn parallels. For example, in one of his exploits, Ijapa was pitched against Okere (the squirrel) who in the height of famine has cultivated a large farmland to which there leads no road. As soon as Ijapa discovered the farm, he called labourers and friends to help him construct a road to his own farm. Everyone who got to the farm was amazed that Ijapa who was remarkably known for his laziness could cultivate such a large farm. He gave everybody that came to help in making the road food to take home for his or her family. Days later, Okere visited his farm through the normal tree-to-tree route and surprisingly discovered that a road had been made to it. While on a sight-seeing through the road, he met Ijapa and members of his family carrying on their heads baskets with which they intended to bring home farm produce. He challenged them and later brought them before the elders of the community. In the process of investigation, the elders asked Okere how he usually got to the farm, and he explained the tree-to-tree route method. They also asked to know how many people were aware that he had a farm and he could not name

a single witness. As for Ijapa, he accessed his farm through the road on which Okere saw him and he had also, a large number of labourers and friends who helped to make the road to his farm as witnesses.

Consequently, upon strong evidence(s), Ijapa was awarded the ownership of the farm. The lessons learnt here include that one should not be unduly secretive. For Okere, he kept the secret of the farm to himself in order to selfishly prevent people (friends and relatives) from enjoying some of the proceeds of the farm. While Ijapa stands for the archetypal trickster, Okere assumes that which is smart but tactless. The hero here is Ijapa and the villain Okere. Ijapa through simple tricks has made it clear that selfishness cannot promote healthy co-existence in human society. This is another variable in the image of Ijapa. He switches between the positive and negative categories.

Below are few among other archetypes frequently deployed in folktales among Yoruba and the connotations they could have.

Archetype	Meaning	
Good naturedness	Omoluwabi	Man / animal
Virtue	Iwapele	Man / animal/dove
Obstinacy	Alaigboran	Obuko (animal) / man
Avarice	Okanjuwa	Ijapa/akuko/man
Deceit	Arekereke	Ijapa/Aja/man
Trickster	Eletan	Ijapa/man
Beauty	Egbin	Man/animal/spirit
Treachery	Odale	Man/animal
Accuser	Esu-beleke	Man/animal/spirit
Messiah	Apena	Man/animal
Maternal	Iya Osoronga	Man/animal/spirit
Phallus	Baba	Man/animal/spirit

This list of archetypes and meanings drawn here is by no means exhaustive. The quickest suggestion arising from it is that borders on the attempt to derive possible interpretation, and/or manifestation for specific archetypes, all of which however remain open-ended. The configurations here are simply parallels in which certain ideas can manifest.

For space constraints, only one of the items on the list above will be explored. The maternal-archetype is represented by the ‘earth-mother’, which combines, at once, the qualities of benevolence and malevolence. This can be likened to the saying among Yoruba: ‘Owo ti iya fi n ba omo wi ni o fi n faa mo ra’ (it is the same hands that the mother chastises the child that is used to pamper him). The maternal-archetype has a dual image: the first connotes transcendental affection, love and care. This is reflected in the expression, ‘Eyin iya mi ... Osoronga Afinju eye abiye ti ele’ (you my earth-mothers ...Osoronga... immaculate birds with

lush-feathers). The second connotes terror and hostility. It is that of the 'Aphrodite'; the archetypal 'traitress' with her destructive powers. The expression, 'Aye with which the second image is associated is shrouded in fear. This 'infantile fear' that resides permanently within the psyche of the 'child' sometimes dictates the relationship with the 'mother' who like humans, animals and spirits are capable of positive and negative traits.

Archetypes and Functionality

The development of archetypes in imaginative/creative works has been found to be of great advantage. Apart from the fact that it points to the literary ingenuity of the user society, its most obvious advantage is seen in the manner in which it helps in the economy of characters in a given folktale. Economy of characters could be seen to be served here because once a character has been archetypally defined, a shade of behavioural patterns would be expected of him. Consequently, he is situated among several possibilities, and of course, impossibilities. In other words, by virtue of a definite archetypal categorization, certain behaviours become alienable and/ or inalienable to him.

Apart from the functions stated just above, archetypes are also useful in terms of their ability to help the artist in directing and or remodeling his sense of creativity. Archetypes also imbue a creative/imaginative work with some sense of timelessness and universality. This is made possible because of the universal appeal enjoyed by archetypal traits. Above all, archetypes afford the artist uninhibited choices of experience from which he is free to draw and translate any choice so made into something concrete through the choice of literary types.

Finally, there is also a way in which archetypal deployment helps to make concrete those things meant to be learnt by the young ones; because the children are very impressionable, learning for them needs concrete objects upon which they could build knowledge and recollection.

Conclusion

So far, it has come to be seen that drawing upon archetypes is a universal practice. It cuts across cultures, races, literary genres, etc. There exist, however, dissenting views over the development of archetypes, especially in oral literature. It is described in some quarters as a 'facile approach to criticism' because it is 'lacking in originality' and capable of 'leading to accumulation of types. Consequently, written literature is adjudged a stronger and better form compared to its oral counterpart.

In response to the derogation of the theory of archetype as seen above, it must be noted that both the practice of creativity and its criticism need to begin somewhere. Archetypal theory provides one of such avenues through which the sources of orality could be effectively assessed

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