

# A Pragma – Semiotic Reading Of The Mythopoetic Symbols In Nigerian River-Ritual Chants

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## Abstract

*This research examines the chants used by the fishermen across the river Niger, in Nigeria during annual river ritual theatrical regatta; a phenomenon known by this occupational set of people as eniyanwo. The chants of the fishermen are realized to be of pragmatic and semiotic relevance to the context of their use. The chants are collectively rendered and dramatized during ritual proceedings in paddled canoe race on the river. No known research done on the river Niger geographical setting of Nigeria has realized that, the nature and mode of the people's myth, ideology and subsequent religious practices are represented in the people's folkloric poetry collated into chants.. This research observed that the people's worldview, philosophy and vision are signalized in their annual aesthetic practice mainly sustained by the poetic chants analyzed here. These chants reflect the mythological imaginations of the riverside setting and origin. The research methodology here is based on the archetypal theory which best accounts for the ways the fishermen chants are produced and transmitted to symbolize the people's historical and mythical basis. The ultimate comprehensibility of the traditional forms (chants) should be through archetypal placement of the socio-ritual poetic compositions. In addition to the archetypal theory, the writer has used an eyewitness approach during personal participation on the river theatre. All chants were recorded. And rather than rely on translations, coinages and code-switching methods used by foreign researchers on the area, the writer used the advantage of being a native speaker to get the most valuable interpretations. Part of the findings of this research is that a review of the chants helps to reconstruct aspects of the Niger people's oral traditional composition. As aesthetic poetic forms, the chants serve as the major ritual factor that unify the river Niger people's geographic and economic livelihoods. The focus of this article is on the use of chants as symbols of the people's mythological reference.*

## Introduction

It is observed that the river Niger people's theatrical folklore in Nigeria consists of chants used for ritual realization. The chants are rendered in prayer, praise, incantation and invocation forms. In terms of location, the people across the river Niger live in the heart of Nigeria, spread over the low basin spread by two major Nigerian rivers – Niger and Kaduna. They are distinct group of people who dwell mainly in the trans Niger area. The river Niger people, the Gwari, Borgu and especially the Nupe refer to these two rivers as Edu and Lavun respectively. The chants used during performance on river Edu is the one known as

eniyawo. Eniyawo is a generic ritual theatre involving functional mythical symbols and metaphors. The chants created consist of the myth of setting and the folkloric tradition of the people. The chants employ the use of native nuances, symbols, metaphors, and icons to reinforce their functional application. For clarity sake, the terms myth, chants, symbols, pragmatics and semiotics are explained briefly as follows:

The term pragma in the title of this article is a shortened form of pragmatics. And pragmatics here is the use of verbal language and non-verbal signals for ritual-cultural requests and demands, for reestablishment and fulfillment. The river chanter communicates socially with both supernatural and natural forces, i.e. speak in tongue with them. This explains the relevance of pragmatics to this data analysis. The context of the fishermen chants is crucial to their interpretation. There is interconnection between poetry and ecology. Also, as it is known worldwide, all human communication is made up of signs. For this fact, the theory of semiotics in language analysis also has a part to play in the analyses of these occupational chants. Signs, symbols and signals made by the river Niger chanters add to the meaningful communication of the fishermen. Thus, semiotics becomes a tool for dramaturgical analysis such as this. It is important for this analysis because it can help us to see reality of the chants performance and value it as a purely objective phenomenon.

Myth is a complicated term divisible into legends, epic and fables. It is a long story having a factual coverage of man's creation and origin. It is therefore more often on gods, demigods, heroes glorified in the past age. It forms the basic structures for the people's existence. The myth of the Niger – river fishermen evolved much like a biological system. Its bits are elaborated upon through time and represented in preservation. The mythical figures among the Niger riverine people are symbolized and metaphorised Tsode the Nupe ancestor is for a major instance referred to as an archetypal figure. Tsode's character stands for his people's ideas. He has become an image that evokes objectivity into the reality of existence. The symbols in the chants are said to be direct representations of archetypal elements, ideas and objects. The chants symbolize the culture of the Niger people. Through the chants the circumstances that led to the existence of the people is recounted for the purpose of unity.

It therefore becomes normal for man to become attached to the environment where he finds himself and has developed both intuitively and psychologically over time. He establishes religious and economic relationship with that environment, by way of protecting it and at the same time utilizing it to suit his environment. This is achieved through a protection of the available resources and at the same time, utilizing it to suit his purpose. It is not out of place therefore, to have dwellers on the river Niger of Nigeria utilize and ritualize their river land for agricultural sustenance. Hence, the river becomes their ritual object for forestalling continuity of existence.

## **Review of Literature**

This article reaffirms the existence of yet another otherwise unpublicized riverine setting. It also advances further by relating these aspects of river settlement to the mythical and religious worldview of the river –Niger people. S.F. Nadel (1968) is therefore right, to have observed that: "The geographical features of the environment, such as the nature of the soil, the rivers, the climatic conditions and vegetation are the major determinants of the people's practices".

This river Niger serves as the basis for the ritual-mythical regatta, an organized cult remised canoe race. The content of the chants, indicate the fishing activities of the fishermen. As the fishermen move their canoes, the tempo of the poetic rendition is made synonymous with the type of occupation at hand i.e. with a kind of fast paddling movement dance, in line with the tempo of the chants. The aim and function of the work of poetry becomes primarily to unite the fishermen, ease their work and also promote the fishing occupation itself. The chants are meant to ordinarily motivate the workers. Hence, the fishermen are part of each canoe's ensemble and their chants help to aid intense concentration in the crew. The canoes are well decorated with colourful banners, buntings and mascots to make gracious the ritual occasion.

'A ritual is a culturally patterned symbolic action created by man to explain the problems and mysteries of the bewildering complexities of existence. The peoples chants incorporate a larger corpus of ideology, religion, myth and philosophy and other cultural materials. The impact of this oral literary poetry on the land can be seen in the scope of the existing natural poetic compositions and their subsequent use for ritual processes. Every oral aspect of the river Niger chants contains the ritual form and structure of the people's religious ideology, belief and philosophy transmitted to the audience. The oral performer formulates and regulates his performance in the process of delivery, to suit the people's present existence. This indicates cultural adaptation and assimilation. It also accentuates the theory of archetypal theory applied here. The chants act as philosophical records of the society. This is why scholars like Benison Gray (1975) in The Phenomenon of Literature, Northrop Frye (1957) in Anatomy of Criticism, Maud Bodkin (1934) in Archetypal Patterns in Poetry, Carl Jung (1967) in Four Essays, Sir James George Frazer (1922) in The Golden Bough, among others see the approach as the basis of new criticism. Northrop Frye in his archetypal theory for example, recognizes the inevitability of historical factor in oral literary analysis. He argues that the existence of man in time and space is determined by the happenings around him in which the metaphysical forces play a prominent role. Thus, archetypes are prototypes of the past occurrences of any present society. Archetypal criticism can therefore be premised on historical, ideological, philosophical and cultural formations. In the river community, which is the focus of this write up, these ideological beliefs and philosophical thoughts serve as the basis for the people's co-existence and ritual practices, using chants as resource materials.

### **The Chants as Archetypal Symbols**

Chants are formulated oral poetic rendition believed to be a source of magical and physical powers. They are said to be melodious, monotonous, rhythmical shorts meant for ritual realization. They are integral parts of the river Niger fishermen annual canoe performance race on the river. Hence, for easy comprehension, the eniyanwo chants are categorized here according to their functional themes and values. The ritual itself involves the performance of rites in worship forms for the purpose of ensuring some control over the elements that determine and affect their existence. In ritual performance, Victor Turner (1968), asserts that performance is not only multi vocal but also non-vocal (using ritual symbols understood by the producer and the consumer).

There is usually three (3) days preparation preceding this river ritual performance day. The three days are used by the river priest to find out at midnight when the river

goddess will come to the surface of the river to access the community sacrificial offerings. Acceptance of this offer gives the priest a great relief. That very night, the priest heralds the acceptance of the offer by blowing a special trumpet known as the kakati. This priest is welcome back to the midst of his people by drumming, feasting and dancing. The collective communion with the river follows this, the following day, which marks the beginning of a new traditional calendar year. It becomes almost sure too that fish, the major source of livelihood of the people will flow in abundance, close to the white sundry surface of the river, to be caught even by children with bare hands. As the chant lines are rhymed, the river rushes forward to cover the sandy area as if in response to the jubilation. Suddenly in a quivering voice, the chanter echos the following endless search tone.

Bayade mukoteo  
Mukote sai mukote ikan  
Para danbo  
para!  
Where shall we get shear butter?  
Shearbutterm fish  
From the flat surface  
Flat surface!

The canoes are decorated with coloured flags while the chanters hold on tightly to their river paddles, which they use at the same time with speed to push the river backwards in a way that enables a forward movement of the canoe. It is a skill understood by them through continual practice. The movement of this fish artifact is in alignment with the tone of the lines chanted at each procedural moment. The paddle could be fasted in and out of the river if the chant rhythm becomes heightened when the rhythm becomes slow, the paddles are put in sleepy momentary positions in the river. Both happy hailing and slow wailing lines are composed according to the social or ceremonial needs of the community. The content of the chants are the traditional materials and forms. The chanter uses this to depict historical and social circumstances. And he does this through a deliberate in plantation of appropriate symbols. G. Hunter (1999) defines a symbol in the following terms:

A single item, even something as traditionally fraught with meaning as a smoke or a rose, symbolic meaning is confirmed by something else in the story, just as a point needs a second point to define a line. Reading for symbols then becomes a matter of connecting the dots, so to speak to form patterns through repetition and explicit statement. Symbols can be in signs, speech and writing.<sup>12</sup>

In the identification and interpretation of the symbols in the river Niger chants, it is discovered that each word of the lines of the chants are neatly connected to stand for something more than the word the itself. This is perhaps why the chants accommodate other themes ranging from individual conflicts to public issues of politics, age group moral societal beliefs, sorcery, witchcraft, greed and social justice. Didactic constructs in the chants orientate the young ones toward societal norms and practices. At the point of warnings, the head fisherman complicates the scenes and episodes by transforming himself from one moving canoe to the other in speedy actions. The general public applauds him. The

assumption is that the sea goodness transmits this quality to the river priest. The created dialogue mode is rhetorical. The multi-purpose essence of the river is further made evident in the chants. Let us listen to this part:

Atabi egba na ba nuwon nan  
A man tabi nuwon na yin egba min nan  
There is no axe that can cut water into two  
And no water can damage the axe's mouth

Two elements of necessity are juxtaposed in the above lines – the axe and water, since water is also a source of livelihood for the fishermen. The Niger people are essentially fishermen and farmers. Water is life. It is symbolic of a renewal of hope. The river space generally provides the symbolic movement for the chanter to extrapolate the principle of good and evil:

Emi maa, ka gbo jin yele  
Soko bagura ikan nchie yayan a  
Kinin gi ge gan wundu  
Elu ya min nyelo zuman  
Tan kpolo e lele para a

Quarrelsome household, power demands for  
Marital consent God does not cut fish sack  
Before generosity  
Good standing, better than insult.  
Bird, allows one to look backwards  
Frog does not sleep flat

The image of a united house is insinuated in line I, this is enhanced by the gura/fish storage sack. The resources of fish bag, bird as in elu and frog as in tanpolo are depictions of the riverside scenery. These animals are the greatest adaptors of man. The chanter decisively takes permission from the versatile 'bird'/elu. This visual and very imaginative river picturesque conceptualizes the river Niger environment in a nutshell. The diction used in the chants is therefore purely local. Other lines before will this:

The cover that covers the fish net  
It covers the inside of the net  
Is it the same cover that covers you?

Relevant to the discussion here on poetry as means of acculturation is. Benjamin Ray's (1976) reference to archetypal symbols thus:

Sacred images whether they be gods ancestors, sacred actions or things make up the traditional universe. Such images, enshrined and communicated in myth and ritual, provide a network of symbolic forms, uniting social, ecological and conceptual elements into locally bounded cultural system.<sup>13</sup>

Ray's assumption here identifies the sacredness and divine power in a communion between two parties, one being powerful and the other subordinate. Other universal

definitions of symbols can also be of relevance to the observation made here. The Niger – river eniyanwo chants are evocative communication devices used for the control of the people's terrestrial and celestial forces. The fishermen chants, linguistic and non-linguistic parts are interwoven in the dramatic content of the entire practical output of riverine eniyanwo.

Apart from the ritual essence of eniyanwo – river ritual a canoe race is also staged to promote peace and good relationship that exists among the people. The river serves as a forum for meetings. The attempt is to promote this major occupation of fishing of the natives. One of the findings of the data interpreted is that the river chants serve as resource empowerment devices used for reinforcing the fish production, native fish industry annually. Fish becomes the people's focus in chant rendition. Their livelihood depends on the river, the fish and the chants.

### **The Function of the River Chants**

Chants among this set of fishermen have diverse usage. This verbal occupational form is part of the aesthetic of the fishermen performance on the river. The chants can be categorized into invocations, appellations of ancestors of the rivers, incantations, metaphors, icons of the land, prayers etc. The chants have types and purposes. Fishermen chants among this set of people involve a record of the people's belief, history, ideology, emotion and practice. The categories of the songs have high poetic qualities. They are cultural needs device from the material culture and religion of the people. This multi-dimensional essence of the fishermen chants is evident in the glamorous expression on the faces of the men on the canoe river when these chants are being rendered. Contanze Welse (2002) observes ritual performance of a group in this setting and states that:

Ritual performance helps to strengthen and safeguard the values and religious ethnic of a set of people. This is perhaps why the poetic renditions used to accomplish ritual actions are quite metaphorical and symbolic. The importance of rites in Nupeland is heavily connected to the Tsoede legend, the mythical ancestor of the people. Nupe ideology is still rooted in the religious complex practice of the people. The geographical lay out, economic advantage and social political activities of the people are given imprints earmarks and clear insights by the ritual chants.<sup>14</sup>

Other utterances in river ritual chants are references, to heroic persons and objects involving signs with special meanings known to the people. And this is what makes them symbolic. Some chants have transferred usage. The chants are closely related to, the mythical figures of the area and to the riverine geographical settlement in which the people find themselves. The poetic chants on the river are strongly coded with the image of the ancestral figures. The ancestors are customarily represented by symbolic costume of leadership described in other poetic lines used of the chants aiding the message of the chants are other aesthetics in language use such as aphorisms, appellations, hyperboles, rhetoric e.t.c, all acting as symbolic pointers to cultural nuances.

The belief according to an oral source is that fishermen can stand all magical and spiritual feats. The display during performance is evidence in this case. For instance, the

chanter fisherman pays homage to the powers that be on the vast land using the following invocations:

Ikere da be elu lo a  
Zandoro ga danbo danbo  
Wan abe danbobea  
Despite dry season, birds remain  
Surely people die and return

Long existence predicts long non-existence

The invocation lines are signifiers to the cyclical nature of man's existence. We should note that birds are riverine and agricultural avid. Man is likened to a bird in the song to indicate that both man and the bird have temporary settlements on Niger Rivers and farmlands. The notion of the divine is very much accentuated, and contrasted with what is human.

There is an extensive fluctuation of vital rhythms, common and spiritual images as the chants progress. This enables the observer to see the poet fisherman as a thoughtful remitter, who successfully brings experience into poetic imagination. Let us listen further to this:

Bachabache  
Kara tia gan yengban  
Manza gban  
Manza zo yinjin

Throwing, throwing  
The head load is heavier than the shoulder load  
Cold is wise  
Old is difficult  
Trial brings tiredness

Stratified age groups within the setting emphasized in the line where the head is said to be heavier than the shoulder. Other chants also involve the rope image to indicate the orderliness in the extended lineage, tradition and societal expectations. Metaphoric diction observed in the lines of the chants can be further realized below:

Egungi a de wun be elangi  
Dzia kan a o?  
Spiking fish has a quarrel with the tumbling one  
Who settles them?

Hence, fishermen chants range from warnings, laments, prayers, invocations, divinity tones and sarcasm in order to aid the fishing profession and also use the chants as medium of communication with the people. The chants have high poetic qualities. What is traditional, remains domineering and remarkably persistent, in the rhythm that comes from the chants. Certain iconic materials are the weapons used by the chanter to depict ancestral symbols. One of the above categories of river ritual chants for instance epitomizes patterns of rebirth. The function of the ancestor is re-appraised in the tradition as the representative of the unseen on earth. This ancestral appraisal is followed by some rhetorical question.

The river chants are reflections of the totality of the people's ideological, mythical and philosophical experiences. They reflect the people world. Images portrayed by the ritual

rhymes such as hill, fish, fish net, river, flood and verbal materials exhibited in the fishermen performance are symbols of cultural and religious practices. The people's belief, religion, ideology and philosophy are regenerated through the use of idiophones, music, dance, chants, story telling techniques, proverbs, repetitions, dialogue forms all of which are incorporated in the annual ritual theatre. The ritual reaffirms constituents and monuments of myths, social norms, cultural values, political institutions, economic organization and moral attitudes. This is to reaffirm the generally view that art and society are inseparable. And all arts are influenced by the social circumstances within which they are created. Hence, ritual theatre sustains communal experience and collective consciousness.

The need for peace, stability, orderliness and progress are the watchwords that call for the establishment of common beliefs expressed in ritual proceedings in this society of focus. There is an important religious philosophical concept, which the society renews through ritual practice. This research makes prominent the archetypal re-occurrence and patterns of ritual practice according to laid down ideology, philosophy and worldview. In this society of focus functional use of the songs of the fishermen on the canoe is beneficiary to the re-generating society. Collective solidarity of the people is enhanced through this forum of festivity. Chants generally in the river – Niger setting, like most other Nigerian settings are believed to be magically effective in the manipulation of things and to be magically effective in the manipulation of things and people, the supernatural and unseen inclusive. The river-Niger people use chants to control objects or circumstances beyond the natural realm. Chants can be viewed therefore as being medicinal to this set of people in Nigeria. The people strongly believe in the power of words. Hence, the chanted words are carefully selected since the belief is “say and it will be”.

The chants are reflections of the totality of the people's collective experiences. The image of fish net, flood, solid canoe, and hilly river are ecological reflections of the people's word view. Cultural and religious practices are symbolized in the river chants, musical instrumentation and body movements that accomplish the chants. The river chants serve as a premise for deducing the Niger Nigeria people's myth, social norms and age-stratified groups. The river chants sustain communal consciousness and revives the individual psyche and commitment to a common source. There is why peace, stability, orderliness and progress are part of the thematic watchwords reinforced in the chants. Besides, there is an important religious philosophical concept which the society renews using the river chants medium. The articulation of the river goddess as a spirit as well as a human being who disguises amongst the people becomes another crucial result of this aesthetic and functional object of worship.

The major roles of the river goddess as expressed in the chants is a dual one the goddess serves as a religious worshipping agent meant for and renewal in the flow of history for the attainment of continuity and survival of the people in this region of Nigeria. The rhythmical chants therefore serve dialectal essence for the people. And people's myth, ideology, history, work view; serve as the resources for the production of river chants. The chants contain aesthetic elements, which are basically peculiar to the riverside, and agricultural formations used to reflect the people's setting. It is hoped that further researches related to this field of oral literary studies would use the laid out pragma – semiotic aesthetics of the river chants as paradigms for similar analysis. Language (signs and symbols in this case study) has been conceived here as a social entity. This research becomes a viable contribution to the research field in which the ideological and philosophical belief and practice of a people is reflected in their oral forms; in this case, the poetic aesthetic contents.

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