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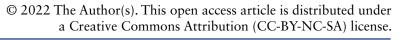To read the paper online, please scan this QR code:

## Interface between gender myths and history in Margaret Ogola's *The River and the Source* (1994) and Marjorie Macgoye's *Coming to Birth* (1986)

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**Abstract**
Culture is central to the understanding of gender relations. Yet, studies have not examined how history (as myth or its product) influences our perception of gender relations. This paper investigates how myth, as a function of language, constructs history. It specifically explains how myth is used to construct and determine gender through a close reading and textual analysis of Margaret Ogola's *The River and the Source* and Marjorie Macgoye's *Coming to Birth*. The discussion is guided by Roland Barthes' conceptualization of mythology and Judith Butler's ideas on definition and cultural construction of gender and power, as well as authority in performance of gender. Findings showed that Ogola and Macgoye situate their fiction within the history and culture of the Luo people, who have traditional myths and legends that explain their existence. They invent characters and events that correspond to history, despite not being historical in themselves. The authors thus portray Africa as a rich combination of myth and history, their major characters embodying the essence of history, or battling it, or somehow relating with it through fantasy. In so doing, the authors engage in gender discourses, challenging patriarchy while highlighting the milestones achieved by women in time.

**Keywords:** **culture,** gender, gender identity, history, myth

**Public Interest Statement**

Gender remains an important subject of contemporary literature. It is important to always go back to the very foundation of concepts when approaching the question of gender. Guided by theories on culture, myth, language and gender, this paper demonstrates that gender is a product of language, which in itself helps to construct and articulate mythological beliefs about culture. Gender roles are thus constructed from mythical beliefs. They are then normalized as cultural practices that cannot be questioned or changed. This paper argues that in order to realize fair gender representations in society, studies must go back to question the myths that originate and the cultural mores that sustain gender definitions.

## 1.0 Introduction

Every society has norms, values and belief that underlie its culture. Such beliefs are determined by social, cultural, religious, political factors, and physical environment. Literature reflects the nature of life in a society, depicting how human beings relate in the context of such factors that influence human relationships. Gender studies have aroused significant interest in the recent past, both in the literary and the social science fields. Lassiter (2000) acknowledges that many sub-Saharan African scholars in various disciplines have continued to identify, describe and make use of what they consider to be widespread African psychological characteristics and patterns of cultural adaptation. These include African cultural values and themes, and what the scholars believe are common African responses to the requirement of social life and external cultural influences.

Throughout history, myths have been created, established, adopted and interiorized in different societies. While they have been present through history, myths have in a way shaped history contributing to the creation and reinforcement of culture. The power of myth is displayed in different societies with regard to how they influence relationships in the course of history. Mythology is still evident today in different parts of the world, and relates to ethnicity, spirituality, specific creatures, and politics; often displayed through superstitions and other forms of folklore. Despite its persistent presence, mythology has undergone much transformation from majorly referring to religious deities or spirits to encompassing every kind of message communicated that forms various worldviews concerning a wide range of subjects in theory and practice. Lincoln (1989) describes myth as a mode of discourse that may be employed in the manner of ancestral invocations or, in revolutionary slogans. It can thus be argued that myth informs history, politics, societies, psychological understanding, and many other aspects of life.

This paper focuses on the interface between myth and history in Margaret Ogola's *The River and the Source* and Marjorie Macgoye's *Coming to Birth*. In an attempt to understand the nature of myth and the power therein, the paper analyses the language of myth used in (re)construction of history and gender identities. It explains how Ogola and Macgoye use language as a tool to construct a way of viewing/understanding the world's social realities, particularly gender discourses that are of concern to them. It evaluates how they use language persuasively to authenticate indigenous African concept of gender while at the same time discounting the permanence of these 'truths'. In so doing, we are then able to describe the nature of myths in Macgoye and Ogola's fiction that influence gender power relations.

The study specifically focuses on how Margaret Ogola's The *River and the Source*, and Marjorie Macgoye's *Coming to Birth* portray the nature of myth regarding gender power relations in the context of the Luo culture through their constructed stories. We interrogate how this fiction attempts to relate to the real world, invoking aspects of Luo culture, as well as religious and historical references. We take the assumption that myth attempts to construct these 'truths' about gender, so we seek to decipher how these 'constructed truths' are a reflection of facts of life which are fictionalized in Ogola and Macgoye's texts under study. The study therefore focuses on the mythic imagination of their major gender concerns, and how they are played out within their changing cultural and historical contexts.

*1.0 Statement of the problem*

Myth assigns gender traits, roles and identities. These in turn determine how each gender is constructed through performance. History plays a significant role in the conceptualization of gender roles that change over time. However, the consideration of myth as a tool for (re)constructing and reading history in the literary context is ambivalent. On the one hand, history may be considered as mythic/imaginary creation, while on the other, myth can be considered a tool/a way of understanding the past. The deployment of myth as a mode of representing gender relations is therefore complicated, since, on one hand, myth affirms the existing gender relations while, on the other, it debunks them. This fluid and ambivalent nature of myth makes it problematic as a basis for gender description. This study attempts to explore gender-power discourses that highlight the interface between the problematic presentation of what is regarded as natural and mythological in fiction. It scrutinizes how the selected authors engage with myth as an ideological category to (de)construct the problematic representation of gender relations in the course of history.

## 2.0 Literature review

Lincoln (1989) posits that myth is an ideologically weighted narrative about figures or events from a remote past that shapes contemporary ideologies. He acknowledges that, by nature, myths are both true and untrue; and that they are distinguished from other narratives by their peculiar effective quality or narrative potency that carries ideological matter in disguise. This is what elevates myth above ordinary speech and aligns it with the rhetoric matter of sacred narrative. As such, mythical narrative requires a collective investment from its author and audience that elevates speech and story to the status of a myth. This study will prefer to use the demarcated term "myth" in an attempt to accommodate the various accounts that can qualify under this loose assemblage, examining the nature of 'truth' or 'falsehood' in myth, and how in its very nature is employed in gender description.

Lincoln further suggests that myth is a form of speech that is 'false on the whole, but still having some truth in it'. He suggests that this shift in the conceptualization of myth occurs in conjunction with the shift from orature to literature. Thus when a myth is written, the immediacy of its effect diminishes as it becomes susceptible to analysis and interpretation at the intellectual level. The emphasis on oral transmission of myth not only applies to the mythical narratives, but also ideologies transmitted in discourse. This is because myth is believed to be true without question, even when the idea behind it seems uncertain. If it is written, it would provide an opportunity for further interrogation, challenging belief in myth. This paper appreciates this fluidity in myth, whether it is truthful, factual or fictitious. By analysing myth within gender discourses, it attempts to interrogate how myth has influenced gender roles and identity despite its uncertainty.

The uncertainty of cultural aspects conveyed through myth has been observed in gender description as a way of disadvantaging the female gender. While acknowledging lack of proper historical basis of myth, Bamberger (1974), in her article *The Myth of Matriarchy: Why Men Rule in Primitive Society,* explains:

> Rather than replicating a historical reality, myth more accurately recounts a fragment of collective experience that necessarily exists outside time and space. Composed of a vast and complex series of actions, myth may become through repeated recitation a moral history of action while not in itself a detailed chronology of recorded events. Myth may be part of culture history in providing justification for a present and perhaps permanent reality by giving an invented "historical" explanation of how this reality was created (p. 267).

From Bamberger's explanation, we get the suggestion that though myth does not necessarily present a historical reality, it can create a reality out of repetitive recitation in discourse, which in the end determines human relationships such as gender relate. This is a crucial part in the formation of cultures

as well as justification of aspects therein. In this case, this paper seeks to understand how myth creates culture, by examining its fluidity as portrayed through Macgoye and Ogola's fiction, which in a way debunk existing myths on gender, seemingly establishing new myths and by extension new cultures.

Halpe (2010) observes that reading myth in post-colonial fiction calls for critical recalibrations that negotiate and expose ideological foundations while remaining conscious of the function of myth as a vehicle for collective and individual belief systems. Criticisms against the use of superstition in African literature, for instance, emanate from the colonial/western/European ideology that was different from the African philosophy. It is notable that the colonial experience in Kenya introduced new gender perspectives and subtly broke powers of inferiority and superiority between male and female that were traditionally held. This experience resulted in what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) refer to as the rhizome – mutation of culture in different directions, characterized by "ceaselessly established connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences and social struggles" (p. 7). Deleuze and Guattari describe the rhizome representing history and culture as "a map or wide array of attractions and influence without specific origin or genesis, for a rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things. It resists chronology and organization, instead favouring a nomadic system of growth propagation." This implies that what has been and what is to be is not fixed. In this sense, the resulting culture is dynamic and the fluid nature of gender perceptions calls for understanding the cultural structures and histories that lead to its construction. Ogola and Macgoye's fiction has illustrated this kind of cultural dynamism. It is notable that besides all these changes, certain aspects of African culture are persistently recognizable. The survival of African philosophy can only be attributed to the power of African mythology, which continues to sustain and influence cultural ideology.

Halpe (2010) acknowledges that the idea of myth as a false speech is often set in counterpoint to the notion of myth as elevated sacred narrative by post-colonial authors. He further observes that the post-colonial reader is caught in the tension between the construction of myth as an oracle or riddle, and the accompanying suggestion that mythical pronouncements are also nothing more than fiction. Since literature (fiction) is a reflection of reality, there seems to be a contention whether myth is fact or fiction, whether myth tells the truth or as an ideological creation, is an end in itself. The nature of truth in fiction is a question of belief that is characteristic of myth, and that kind of truth is created in fiction. As Mboya (1997) observes:

> The reality imitated by literature is neither stable nor commonly accessible. It is a highly subjective, sometimes culture-bound concept. What one person or culture perceives as actual and true may be unrealistic to another person or culture, or even the same person or culture at a different time.

Mboya rightly acknowledges that one's perception of reality is influenced by culture – in this case, myth acts as a lens through which we interpret and create culture – largely. The analysis of how literature can then be read and interpreted using myths, and the reliability of such approach is deemed very essential in deciphering the relationship between myth and historical reality; often considered as truth.. This is because literary authors use fiction to assert realities or truths in the universe. In this regard, the paper examines how the authors highlight these truths, and how their fiction affirms them or interrogates their validity.

Halpe (2010) further describes myth as functioning by invoking a kind of articulation that is akin to sacred, oracular speech, but which must be uttered in "local" tongue. The specificity of language in myth is significant since it carries a cultural mark, which is embedded in the actual language of the culture within which it is created, and how it is communicated in context. This is in line with Barthes (1972) argument that myth is created by the manner of communication, which ultimately creates an

ideology. As vehicles of collective communal narratives, myths represent the culturally formed narratives on archetypal processes. As such, they are always readily ideologically coded and invoke the power of archetype in service of collective socio-cultural practice and belief systems. Ideological concepts such as gender can thus be understood better within the spectrum of myth and in the context that actually formulates it. By comparing Ogola and Macgoye's presentation of gender archetypes, it is then possible to understand the ideologies underlying gender construction, thus describing the nature of myths within the Luo community, which form the background of their fiction.

Different cultures have myths through which they achieve or acquire their desired identity over time. These myths are often used to ascribe power to one gender at the expense of another. Kuria (2001), for instance, observes that customary traditions among the Luo seem to be unfavourable to the woman. He points out that, among the Luo of Kenya, one of the issues that keep recurring is the phenomenon of wife inheritance. He acknowledges that some argue that it is for the purpose of ensuring that the children left behind had someone to take care of them. Another argument is that, without it, women would lose property previously owned by the husband, since inheritance laws would not allow a woman to inherit her husband's property. This ideology is however challenged by Margaret Ogola and Marjorie Macgoye in the construction of their heroine characters. The assumption that women are always victims of male dominance was interrogated in the study, providing an opportunity to view the woman as independent of the gender ideology grip.

The two selected authors engage in an exposition of the Luo cultural activities that affect women. The practice of paying and receiving dowry, for instance, is widely practiced and affects women negatively. It reduces women to mere commodities to be haggled about, with prices agreed without their consent. Kuria (2001), making an observation from an interview with Grace Ogot, concludes that marriage, among the Luo, qualifies a woman for leadership position. He however fails to attach similar significance of marriage to a man, probably because leadership is presumed natural to men. He correctly observes that the reduction of women's issues in Africa, as some feminist readings of African literature seem to do, into oppositional binaries, for instance male/female, agent/victim, traditional/modern, speech/silence and many others, is grossly simplistic and inconsistent with the reality on the ground. It would readily appear as though men are the villains while women are victims – thus the need to look into 'women's issues' in order to advocate for their liberty from patriarchy, as well as interrogate 'men's privileges' in the patriarchal set up. This paper does not consider 'women's issues' in isolation; rather it attempts to interrogate gender relations (with regard to both men and women) in the light of the existing myths reflected in the literary texts under study, in order to establish whether the authors either affirm or debunk them.

In his study, Kuria (2001) further notes that one of the most frustrating aspect of the nature and position of women is that though they are constructed by society as inherently inclined to adhere to social rules and regulations, the society nevertheless designed structures and means of coercing them to accept their lot. This assertion implies that more often than not, women's performance of gender is predetermined by already existing structures, which seem fixed. The study appreciates that though gender description and identity is a cultural construct, myths about gender are temporal since the culture that determines it is also dynamic. In this case, expectations of gender performance by male and female gender are not fixed and are bound to change with time, leading to significant shift in gender identities. Kuria comments that although Marjorie was not a Kenyan, she serves as a good beginning point to debunk myth of African women as submissive, silently suffering, apolitical and bearers of a false consciousness. Though submissiveness is required from women in patriarchal systems, Kuria rightfully observes that a number of women in Marjorie's fiction are more assertive and begin to occupy the public space. This is consistent with Kolawole's (1997) argument that the myth that African women are free and need not struggle for self-esteem is as dangerous as the myth of African women's total effacement and invisibility (p. 51).

Apostel (1981) also views myths as part of a way of life that state precedence and models for human actions, but they do not seek to explain them on a rational basis. Myths use images, philosophy, and concepts that embody beliefs and are generally accepted without question. Apostel associates myth with the mysterious and illogical. It is interesting that in spite of the mystery in myth, they are widely believed and revered in everyday lives of many societies. The acceptance of these beliefs determines the appropriation of power of men over women, and suppresses the power of women's bodies; or possibly vice versa. The paper interrogates the use of myth as a tool of dominance or oppression, by examining how characters – who as subjects are willing, or rather helpless yet ironically endowed with the power to change their predicament. By focusing on the role of history in the construction of gender identities, it also examines how history reinvents gender.

## 3.0 Materials and methods

This study took a qualitative approach; hence, a textual analysis was done on the primary texts to generate data. The methodology involved a close reading of the selected primary texts alongside other supporting materials to provide relevant information on the contexts of the texts under study. Martin (2003) calls for methodological pluralism in the study of women (in this case gender in general), which promotes the use of new modes of inquiries such as focus groups, content analysis, observation techniques, participant observation and field research. This particular study, however, focused mainly on content analysis through a critical and close reading of the selected primary texts. The research was largely based on library resources, as well as a wide reading of other materials from journals, newspapers, and the internet. It was centred on the study of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye's *Coming to Birth* and Margaret Ogola's *The River and the Source*. The two authors under study were selected purposely and compared with regard to their presentation of myth in terms of character construction and the literary strategies employed to foreground the concept of myth.

The study also employed a contextual approach in the study of myths to examine gender and power. As such, the relationships between characters of different gender, their position of social influence and the beliefs that motivated such relationships were studied within their cultural contexts. The perspective this study was dictated by the cultural set-up of the Luo community, which is paramount in the construction of myths, while being cognizant of the fact that such myths are continually constructed and keep shifting with time. Culture was viewed as a positive dynamic process that may be expressed through myth. The study therefore approached the understanding of myth from the point of fiction and fact. It tried to unravel the points of intersection between the two, particularly as far as the construction of gender and power relations is concerned.

## 4.0 Results and discussion

### 4.1 Interface between myth and history

The common understanding of myth is that it is a sacred narrative, believed to express a society's origin as well as its religious and cultural practices. The description of myth in this paper is drawn majorly from Barthes' conceptualization of myth as a form of language, a message, generally language in discourse. This however does not discount the idea of myth as historical narrative since history is a linguistic construction. Our reading of the texts explains the relationship between myth and history: whether myth is history or history is mythic. Ogola and Macgoye invent characters and events that correspond to history, though the events and characters are not history in themselves. In *The River and the Source* and *Coming to Birth,* they creatively explore the interconnectedness between myth and history, reworking myths that expose the ideological foundations from which mythical narratives emerge as socio-cultural responses to historical moments. This creativity indicates that myth, as a language in discourse, is able to construct admissible facts that are not necessarily history. Their linguistic imaginary alludes to the traditionally held mythic narratives, which they explore insofar as it determines gender relations.

Margaret Ogola and Marjorie Macgoye in *The River and the Source* and *Coming to Birth,* respectively, portray the image of Africa as a rich combination of myth and history, with their major characters embodying the essence of the history, or battling it, or somehow having a relationship with it by means of the fantasy mythic character. The main characters, Akoko and Paulina (in *The River and the Source* and *Coming to Birth*, respectively), are located in a patriarchal context where there is gender discrimination entrenched within the Luo culture. Their experiences are eventually akin to emancipation narrative, with the authors tracing the stages of growth with various aspects of social change and leading to the empowerment of women.

Ogola constructs an exceptional woman in Akoko, who is ideal and adorable in almost all aspects, and situates her within a rigid Luo culture that disadvantages the female gender. *The River and the Source*, epic in its gesturing and posturing, confers upon Akoko potentially mythic characterization and character. Consequently, Akoko's character reveals the nature and the role of myth in foregrounding the gender agenda way back from the pre-colonial history. The woman is bestowed with so much potential, but is limited by cultural regulations based on her gender. Akoko's legendary character, however, does not correspond to any known historical figure, but her experiences represent many women who participated in the struggle against patriarchy. Ogola's mention of historical moments such as the period of the First World War during which Akoko's son is killed, situates these events in a known historical past that validates the gender considerations as at that period. The various standpoints from which these events are narrated also make this fictionalization of history mythic, thus proving the thin line between myth and history. The knowledge of this relationship also appreciates the role of literary discourse in the construction of myth and history.

Although Mboya (1997) describes *Coming to Birth* as a historical novel, our argument is that while Marjorie constructs history in fiction, she also interweaves history with myth. One acknowledges that there is a connection between the two. However, myth cannot be history; neither can history be myth. Both exist in a kind of symbiotic relationship: history may as well be speculation just as myth is, since it is based on unwritten material as a source. While Marjorie recounts actual documented historical events through her narrative, the language she uses is bound to give different possibilities making it appear mythic. *Coming to Birth* either convinces us about the historical facts by taking us closer to the events through portrayal of actual day-to-day experiences of characters in the milieu, or gives us a sneak peek to the author's own ideology through her creativity. The juxtaposition of Martin and Paulina's experiences as a couple with the story of the Kenyan nation at the brink of independence gives us a way of understanding the world from a different perspective. Through this, the author creatively diverts from the grand narrative of independence history and political ideologies in Kenya, and shifts our focus towards her gender concerns located within the same historical and political discourses.

We argue that myth, on the other hand, can construct history since it has a way of working out situations, connecting events to construct a plausible story as if it were reality. Our interest in the relationship between myth and history has to do with the role myth or history plays in gender construction and performance. Myth has its basis on history, and/or becomes the actual history of a people that helps them understand themselves. The common understanding of myth as a religious kind of narrative stems from the fact that the traditional African society has mythic narratives that explain their existence and belief, traceable to the past. Besides the history of the society expressed in the novels, the authors also express the history of the struggle for gender equality as a struggle against rigid structures entrenched in myth. Akoko's narration of the Luo myth of origin expresses the value attached to such myths. They are believed to be true and form the basis for the society's religious beliefs, social organization, gender relations among other societal aspects.

Ogola and Macgoye situate their fiction within the history and culture of the Luo people, who have traditional myths and legends that explain their existence. We are convinced that studying their gender concerns requires a holistic approach and we agree with Filomina Steady's (2005) proposal that:

> Gender analysis should aim to incorporate a historical perspective, a holistic perspective, multidimensionality, multiple timeframes, multiple levels of analysis, multiple identities and realities, relational and dynamic contexts, comparative methods, oral history, life history and so forth (p. 321).

This approach gives more insight into complex local knowledge and normative systems that constitute gender and power relations.

Akoko and Paulina (in *The River and the Source* and *Coming to Birth*, respectively) are brought up in a cultural context with well-defined gender roles passed through generations as myth. As Lyotard (1984) points out, these roles narrated and observed by all, have an inner connection between events related to one another. It is a way of making sense of history through consideration of a succession of social systems rather than isolated historical events. Through this continuity, myth gives women a place in history. Although their experiences may not be documented in history, we appreciate their role from sources believed as true. Barthes' (1972) argument that myth is a type of speech chosen by history can be interrogated in light of the discourses within the Kenyan independence period that have been registered in the two novels.

Akoko, in *The River and the Source*, and Paulina, in *Coming to Birth*, are constructed as characters growing and changing with history. Their portrayal resonates with what Halpe (2010) describes as "a pseudo-scholarly exploration of the permeable boundaries between history and fiction" (p. 78). In this case, the authors elaborate the relation between historical narrative and the origin of what is considered as truth without proof. Reference to documented historical figures, such as Jean-Marie Seroney and Chelagat Mutai in *Coming to Birth*, and events such as the First World War in *The River and the Source* endears readers to their literary presentation of historical material. By allowing fictional characters engage in historical events and interact with historical figures in the text, the authors provide a connection between myth and history, thus providing alternative and critical point of view to their issues of concern. The mention of Chelagat Mutai's engagement in politics places the Kenyan woman in politics, which indicates the entrance of women to the male dominated political space.

The novels demonstrate the way myth becomes a frame for historical material, a structuring principle that attaches elevated significance to certain kinds of narrative. Ogola's reference to the Luo myth of origin exposes the internal ideological projects at work in mythical frame. Rather than the archetypal nature of myth, Ogola exposes its mundane genesis and evolution into a discourse of power that is charged with socio-cultural and political potency (Halpe, 2010). The instability of myth shifts focus from the archetype to other characters that attain mythical status in turn as they respond to emerging circumstances. The Luo myth of origin explains the position of men and women in society. It is partly narrated as follows:

> … Were is a great spirit. He saw that the world needed more than spirit forms. So he created Ramogi and his brothers who were men. Man has a form which is spiritual. Were sent the men he had created to various parts of the world to settle in it… of the children of Ramogi many great brave men have arisen. They are called thoundi the brave ones. These men of renown include Lwanda Magere… (p. 81-82)

The main discourse in this excerpt is the interpellation of patriarchal ideology, which is entrenched in the historical myth and religious beliefs of the society. This validates the unbalanced gender-power relations that elevate the men who are celebrated as heroes in this myth. Women mentioned such as Nyar Nam are also powerful but they are mentioned only with regard to the children they bear.

The interconnectedness between myth and history thus assigns a significant function to myth:

the construction and maintenance of the traditional society's history. Myth, as Barthes points out, is propagated orally and is believed to express the truth. Macgoye and Ogola's work illustrate how myth is the major source of the history in existence today. Ogola, for instance, describes the function and significance of narrating myth as follows:

> … Akoko started to recite the history of the people of Ramogi. This was not just a pastime but a bounden duty – for the history of the tribe could only be transmitted by mouth from generation to generation, else how can you know where you are going unless you know where you are coming from? Therefore whenever an elder was alone with a young person, he or she always recited the history of the tribe or clan (p. 81).

Such a story is regarded as myth since there is no evidence concerning the events therein. Nevertheless, the 'truth' expressed in this myth permeates through generations and gains acceptance as the truth concerning the unknown past. While Lincoln (1989) associates myth with beliefs that are demonstrably false, one cannot downplay the role myth plays in shaping our understanding of culture and experiences within it. This then becomes the construction of history through myth. As Ogola points out, narrating myth in the traditional Luo society was so significant with regard to its function of understanding one's past in order to know where one was going. This statement illustrates the kind of truth that myth is believed to convey, such that there is a huge possibility for such concerns expressed in myth to be actualized in the future and later becoming a credible source of history.

Having established the interface between myth and history, our concern then is how Ogola and Macgoye grapple with such myths to highlight their gender concerns. Since history is created by myth; a form of language or rather a discourse, which establishes culture, it is from this culture traceable down the history of the Luo that Ogola and Macgoye interrogate their gender concerns. It is therefore paramount to consider the nature or form of language (myth) which constructs history.

*4.2 The language of myth*

Our argument based on Barthes' idea of myth as a language, a form of communication, a message that conveys history. Our concern is: what kind of language is myth? How do the authors manipulate ordinary language to communicate, construct or deconstruct myths regarding gender? How does their use of language endear readers to the Luo gender myths they highlight in the novels? Finally, is there a special way through which the community handles or communicates myths?

Reading myth in the texts calls for a critical examination of everyday language or discourses that convey meaning, whether verbal or visual. Barthes' (1972) argument that '…myth can be defined neither by its object nor its material, for any material can arbitrarily be endowed with meaning' reveals the intricate nature of myth. His introduction of the third element of the sign, as an addition to de Saussure's signifier and the signified relationship, brings a new dimension that expresses the symbolic nature of myth. Ogola and Macgoye do not portend a special language for myth, but reveal how ordinary language can be used in a special way to communicate myth in such a way that is deemed the truth. One of the ways myth is effectively communicated is by use of symbolic language.

The persuasiveness of the language of myth is a function of the symbolic meaning it conveys. Such symbols have significantly contributed to the construction of gender identities in the course of history. The Luo history for instance expresses culture through its rich oral literature (orature) materiality that Ogola and Macgoye explore in describing the myths on gender and power. Macgoye infuses oral literature in her description of the rituals performed in different circumstances, similar to Ogola's description of Akoko's naming ceremony. Narrating myths describing the origin of the Luo community is an important responsibility bestowed on adults who are to transmit culture and historical facts to other generations. Proverbial language, allusions and symbolic representations enhance selective communication to a

preferred target. Paulina's father's death is approached with ritual slashing of branches from trees, singing fragments of old praise songs, weeping and other forms of mourning, which makes it a natural way to express one's feelings. There is use of allusions made by the old people in a familiar pattern that enables mourners to express their feelings.

Macgoye expresses the symbolic nature of myth further through the description of Paulina's father's funeral,

> At her father's funeral, she remembered, the oldest uncle had been concerned about the breaking of the roof-pole, to show that the house was now without a head. They had decided to leave it because they could not find any young boys who knew the role they should play in the ceremony. But now in the empty house there was, so often, no lack of children, and the house of promise remained empty. Would it, after all, have been different if Martin had come for the funeral, to fulfil her rights? And yet, if Okeyo had been his son, would he not still have died? (p. 85-86).

The roof-pole is a symbol of the presence of the head of the house. In the event of his death, the breaking of this pole implies that the house has no head, and the wife cannot take over that role. Ironically, it appears that this ritual is fading in meaning and that the attempt to stick to such a myth may not be achieved. On the other hand, Martin is expected to be part of the ritual, but the use of rhetorical questions interrogates the validity of such rituals, which may not make any difference. Martin's is metaphorically referred to as 'the house of promise' with the hope of propagating life but ironically remains empty due to their childlessness.

Focusing on the discourses that exist within Ogola and Macgoye's novels under consideration, what may be identified as myth and what can be left out is a function of their language in use. Through their characters, they engage in gender discourses focusing on the challenges of patriarchy as they highlight the milestones achieved by women with time. Bathes (1972) emphasizes the significance of such discourse in myth, arguing that anything can be myth, provided it is conveyed by discourse.

One of the issues interrogated by Ogola and Macgoye is gender identity: what womanhood entails. Identity is a product or creation of language, which is able to create attitudes and self-image. *Coming to Birth* and *The River and the Source* indicate how women are socialized into womanhood: what Butler (1990) terms as a sort of performance that one learns to perfect over time. Paulina and Akoko learn to be 'women', and attempt a good performance of this 'act' that qualifies them as 'women'. There is an ingrained mythical image of womanhood that is a form of language that defines a woman, and in turn compels women to comply with this definition. Jung (1989) also acknowledges myth as the primordial language natural to psychic process and that no intellectual formulation comes anywhere near the richness and expressiveness of mythical imagery. The naturalness of this language is a form of power that compels one to comply with the societal expectations of womanhood.

*The River and the Source* and *Coming to Birth* explore the concept of womanhood from the Luo cultural context. While Ogola traces the growth of her character from the pre-colonial rural to the modern urban context, Macgoye directly moves her protagonist from rural to urban, exploring her reaction to urban life as opposed to her rural/traditional orientation. Their description of events and circumstances explain what it means to be a woman, and what one must do to become a 'real' woman. Paulina and Akoko are pitted against rigid cultural structures that linguistically construe the ideal womanhood that must be attained. Myth constructs ideal womanhood that every woman strives to achieve. Their bodies are compelled to conform to what is historically known as the idea of womanhood described by Butler (1990). Each of the women eagerly looks forward to getting married and having children. Language constructs such myths through which women and men's bodies are

induced to become (from Barthes' description) a cultural sign, materialize oneself in obedience to a historically determined possibility. This is a creation of space for linguistic structures to construct the self. Ogola and Macgoye exploit these linguistic structures in constructing womanhood or manhood through their description of how men and women attempt to perform their gender as defined by culture. Martin's aggression versus Paulina's timidity, for instance, indicates the ideal gender-power relations within the patriarchal system. The authors use language creatively to indicate what it means to be an ideal man or woman in the society. Such language use, as Barthes describes, is *myth; which arrests language by reducing complex phenomenon into a few traits taken as definitive,* so that timidity is a sign of womanhood while aggression is naturally masculine. Myths thus determine how gender and power may be defined.

Ogola gives a symbolic description of a woman who comes back to her father's house after she is married as a 'migogo', which explains that a woman has no place in her home once married.

> …Such a woman became a migogo whose chief appearance would be at funerals and would have absolutely no say in her former home, marriage being such a binding thing. To abandon ones marital duties for good or bad reasons was a very serious matter… (p. 15).

She is only accepted as a 'visitor' with limited freedom, which is meant to discourage women from challenging patriarchal authority. Marriage is a permanent engagement, regardless of the circumstances. Paulina also prefers to bear with Martin's beatings than the shame of having him send her back to her parents. Foucault acknowledges that power could be regulated through control of the conditions in which "knowledge," "truth," and socially accepted "reality" are produced (Erikson & Murphy, 2010, p. 272). The production of knowledge, truth and reality is a linguistic function. The purported truths about gender dominance that constitute ideal manhood and womanhood can be contested, but since the production of this knowledge is entirely patriarchal, the language creates 'truths' about gender is manipulated and considered natural with regard to that particular gender. These myths make women like Paulina suffer without challenging their suffering under patriarchy.

The description of gender stereotypes by Ogola and Macgoye is so natural that the characters fit in. Women are expected to be timid, submissive and dependent. Myths defining these traits, according to Barthes (1972), remove history from language, making particular signs appear so natural, absolute or eternal. In the traditional culture as described in *The River and the Source* and *Coming to Birth*, the society is keen in maintaining what is known to be ideal manhood and womanhood. Such myths are often not questioned, though Barthes acknowledges that through myth, people are plunged into a false nature, which is a constructed system. While Paulina in her naivety attempts to fit into this description, Akoko breaks out of this structure of awareness, giving an alternative definition of womanhood. Ogola describes the perceived 'naturalness' of gender and the 'accepted' discrimination of women thus:

> If it was hard for a boy to get an education – it was well nigh impossible for a girl. The purpose of female existence was marriage and child bearing – and by the same token to bring wealth to her family with the bride price. In fact a poor man with absolutely nothing to his name except some daughters had a guaranteed wealth if they could hang on long enough to come of age. If education was not necessary for boys, it was superfluous for girls… (p. 129).

Ogola and Macgoye also describe the Luo culture, examining the concept of gender and power by highlighting the motivation behind relationships in discourse. Their use of language exposes the beliefs that hold the society, such that what is communicated is understood by its members. *The River and*

*the Source* and *Coming to Birth* emerge from a tradition of storytelling that uses myth, folk narrative and inter-textual references to other forms of Luo oral tradition, which the authors deploy as strategies to express their gender concerns. Myths on gender roles and expectations are communicated through proverbs, superstitions, narratives and other forms of imagery. Gender myths in the texts therefore are expressed in a special way, or rather; the myths find a way of expressing themselves as the authors narrate experiences in their stories.

Ogola and Macgoye deploy these strategies differently. While Ogola deploys more of proverbs, folk tales, and rituals, Macgoye expresses such beliefs mainly by way of superstitions and direct translation. They express their gender concerns creatively, exploring myth as a metalanguage, turning language into a means to speak about itself by repressively concealing the construction of signs (Barthes, 1972). Their understanding of Luo cultural beliefs illustrate how cultural signs, though not hidden, get distorted in their meaning. Though Macgoye and Ogola's writings represent the same culture, it is evident that their interpretation of the same circumstances and myths varies. Barthes further explains that unlike signifiers, myths are not arbitrary. They contain a kind of analogy that motivates them. The differences noted in Macgoye and Ogola's cultural interpretation relates to their varying cultural and religious orientation. Perhaps in an attempt to understand and integrate into the Luo culture, Macgoye is more sympathetic to the culture, letting Paulina attempt to fit in rather than openly challenge cultural myths. The distortion of cultural signs is given an easy getaway when Marjorie describes Paulina's attempt to perform her gender in a cosmopolitan setting, where Luo myths may not count and transgression of such myths do not attract grave consequences. Superstitions are easy to discount in such setting, thus giving us an opportunity to critique Paulina's lack of aggressiveness in fighting for her rights as a woman. At the same time, Martin's aggression becomes extremely non-sensible. Ogola on the other hand places Akoko at the cradle of culture, thus foregrounding her anti-patriarchal agenda through Akoko's aggression and self-assertion.

**Conclusion**

This paper has discussed the interface between myth and history in Margaret Ogola's *The River and the Source* and Marjorie Macgoye's *Coming to Birth*. The focus of the discussion was to demonstrate how myth provides a basis for the understanding and construction of gender. Additionally, the study focused on how the language of myth constructs admissible history and continues to sustain the conceptualized notions of gender.

From the findings, it is evident that Ogola and Macgoye invent characters and events that correspond to history, though the events and characters are not history in themselves. In *The River and the Source* and *Coming to Birth*, they creatively explore the interconnectedness between myth and history, reworking myths that expose the ideological foundations from which mythical narratives emerge as socio-cultural responses to historical moments. This creativity indicates that myth, as a language in discourse, is able to construct admissible facts that are not necessarily history. Their linguistic imaginary alludes to the traditionally held mythic narratives, which they explore insofar as it determines gender relations.

Moreover, Ogola and Macgoye also describe the Luo culture, examining the concept of gender and power by highlighting the motivation behind relationships in discourse. Their use of language exposes the beliefs that hold the society, such that what is communicated is understood by its members. *The River and the Source* and *Coming to Birth* emerge from a tradition of storytelling that uses myth, folk narrative and inter-textual references to other forms of Luo oral tradition, which the authors deploy as strategies to express their gender concerns, while situating them within social and historical contexts. Myths on gender roles and expectations are communicated through proverbs, superstitions, narratives and other forms of imagery common in the orate/traditional society but still permeating in the present gender discourses. Gender myths in the texts therefore are expressed in a special way, or rather; the

myths find a way of expressing themselves as the authors narrate experiences in their stories.

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