

# **Mythical Archetypes and their Socio-cultural Functions in Nupe Oral Literature**

Ahmad Kofa Babajo

Department of English and Drama, Kaduna State University, Kaduna

Nana Fatimabint Muhammad

Department of English Literature, Kaduna State University, Kaduna

## **Abstract**

This paper examines the socio-cultural dynamics in Nupe oral literature focusing on Nupe mythical archetypes. The study which encapsulates the interconnections of art, people and environment, identifies archetypes of Nupe mythical beliefs which include legendary myth, communal myth and supreme myth. The research aims to decipher societal and philosophical expressions portrayed in Nupe tradition through selected mythical narratives. A qualitative method was adopted in the data collation. The study was carried out through field work, records and conversations with custodians from two Nupe communities: Patigi in Kwara State and Gbara ward under Mokwa LGA in Niger State acknowledging the historical and royal ties shared by the two communities. It also relied on recorded data from previous research on Nupe. The study applied the functionalist theory to showcase socio-cultural rites in myths, marriage and death as portrayed in Nupe orature. The findings of the study reveals that mythical rites were enforced in marriage and death; mythical archetypes play much roles in building communal philosophies; and that Nupe myths exert much influence on social practices.

## **Introduction**

Contemporary anthropological discourse revolves around the investigation into traditions and customs and their impact on societal values and behaviours. Within this discourse, myths as an aspect of oral literature hold a significant place, serving as repositories of cultural heritage and traditional narratives. As Dada (2014, p. 118) states, “oral tradition is the embodiment of people's culture, sociological experiences, and history.” Hence the studies into the social dynamics of Nupe myth within oral literature posits Nupe myth, like that of many cultures, embodies the essence of the people's identity, sociological experiences, and history. It serves as a rich ogre through which the Nupe expresses its beliefs, and philosophies. As Babajo (2018) asserts, “orature is a living, flourishing literature which stores the wealth of Africa’s literary heritage and for generations have been handed down to each other since antiquity” (p. 13). Through an exploration of Nupe oral literature, we gain insight into the complexities of Nupe society, from personal events like birth and death to communal celebrations and cultural norms.

Nupe traditional narratives encapsulate the beliefs of the people, while the social dynamics of their oral tradition aid in comprehending the practises of the community. As Ibrahim (2008, p. 53) states, "there is no society without its cosmological, ideological, philosophical, and metaphysical set up." Understanding the extensive dynamics of myths is imperative in elucidating the origin of humanity from birth to death, explicating the relationships between humans and animals, interpersonal relations, and the cosmic order. Myths fulfil sociocultural functions, explaining ancient history, legendary figures, ethnic

pervasiveness, and more. These mythical beliefs are transmitted across generations as sacred tenets, safeguarding households and communities against adversity and serving as a social construct that upholds divine beliefs, heritage, and values.

The cultural policy of Nigeria, cited by Alagbe (2014), defines culture as “the totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenges of living in their environment, which gives order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic, and religious modes and organisation” (p. 48). Despite the influences of colonialism and missionary activities, myth remains embedded in the culture of many Nigerian ethnic groups. Within Nigerian pastoral communities, oral tales and belief in myths embody their way of life. For instance, Ibrahim (2008, p. 52) asserts, “To the Nupe, the world and all its inhabitants are created by the Supreme Being whom the Nupe refer to as Tochi-soko.” Thus, while oral literature aid in understanding Nupe customs it still serves as a social practice to which traditions function.

The goal of this paper is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the social and cultural functions of Nupe myth within oral literature. Analysing selected narratives, including cosmic, legendary, and communal myths, the study investigates the significance and socio-cultural implications of Nupe oral traditions. Through fieldwork involving direct observation, interviews, and personal interactions with indigenous persons, the paper captures the essence of Nupe myth and its role in shaping communal identity. This research seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on oral literature and cultural preservation by providing valuable insights into the social dynamics of Nupe.

### **Functionalist Perspectives in Nupe Orature**

African oral literature encompasses the entirety of African life, thoughts, and ideas, reflecting philosophy, emotions, behaviours, psychology, relationships, and modes of social and cultural expression. Babajo (2018) advances the theory that "Functionalism itself suggests a structural support for society" (p. 60). Several scholars argue that traditional ritual practices mirror the structures of human relationships and serve as symbols not only of religious aspirations but also of the daily lives of participants. Saliba (2008) contends that while numerous theories regarding African oral performances, including sacrifices, rituals, and myths, have been proposed, no definitive conclusion has been reached. Nevertheless, Babajo (2018) states that, "structural functionalism concerns itself with the construction of form, the beauty of the form, and the way it is arranged and patterned" (p. 58).

This approach is often applied in the linguistic analysis of oral literature, aiding in the examination of its content. It enables an analysis of the work's characteristics based on the aspects being studied, as structural functionalism theory tends to present a work of literature as an arrangement of various components. In contrast, functionalism as a literary theory examines how elements within a literary work serve specific purposes or fulfil certain needs within society. It focuses on understanding the social, cultural, and psychological functions of literature rather than solely analysing its form or content. In the context of Nupe oral literature, functionalist theory is employed to uncover the roles and significance of mythical practices within the Nupe community. It explores how these narratives function to maintain social order,

preserve cultural identity, address existential questions, and transmit cultural values from one generation to another.

This revolutionary concept posits that society possesses a social structure with numerous functions. However, emphasis on the place and purpose of oral literature differs between pre-colonial and post-colonial Nigeria, rural and urban Nigeria, and traditional versus modern society. Orature serves a more significant function in pre-colonial, rural, and traditional settings. The function of orature diminishes over time as modern structures minimize its impact, and as elderly individuals possess more knowledge of rituals, customs, and rites. Functionalist theory in Nupe oral literature elucidates how mythical practices reinforce social cohesion and communal values.

Non-evolutionary theories describe myth as a product of cultural borrowing and modification, as a means of understanding aspects of a society's history, or even as a linguistic phenomenon. However, the prevailing anthropological view relates myths to contemporary behaviour, considering them tools for understanding the ties between and values of people in any given society. Havey (2009) observes that many countries with high levels of basic literacy have much lower levels of functional literacy (p. 79). Although definitions vary, functional literacy typically entails the ability to read, write, and calculate figures well enough to carry out activities deemed necessary to function in society. This underscores the role of oral literature in societies with unwritten forms of learning and education.

### **Synopsis of Nupe Myth**

"Myths are universal, occurring in almost all cultures," asserts Tyler (2009, p. 2). Therefore numerous cultures possess extensive myths featuring heroes. Nupe myth idolises Tsoede, a legendary persona that unified Nupe kingdom into one confederation. Within the artistic value of forms inspired in Nupe myth, it is misleading to isolate the art objects of myth-making cultures from their religious and intellectual context. For instance, the statues and masks of the Nupe *Ndakogboyazhi*, do not exist solely to satisfy an aesthetic impulse but to serve as tools and evidence of oral literature. Nupe rituals prosper in myths as strategies for reinforcing life and power.

Consequently, the use of myth in Nupe oral literature cannot solely be attributed to deliberate influence from other linguistic or cultural groups but rather a representation of a ritualistic, hereditary aspect of oral tradition from pre-historical times. The Nupe have a strong connection to spirits known as *jenuzhi*, which are believed to control the metaphysical realm and affairs of man. Nupe myths underscore the interplay between fiction, facts, truths, and lies in celebrating status, identity, and cultural power. "Harvest of Hatred," a short story collection by Ismaila, teaches generations of readers about the supernatural aspects of Nupe orature, elucidating the Nupe beliefs, philosophies, and values. Other Nupe researchers and authors have championed the preservation of Nupe oral literature, emphasising the diverse means and philosophies — essential to the vibrant formation of Nupe oral literature. Witchcraft practices, is an important aspect of Nupe orature emphasised Egodi (2023), as it guards excessive conducts, shapes social interactions and royal dynamics within Nupe society. Nadel's work on Witchcraft and Anti-witchcraft in Nupe Society describes ritual performances associated with witches, shedding light on the belief systems and social forms prevalent within Nupe culture.

Sociologically, the rituals accompanying these traditional practices reinforce mythical beliefs regarding man, animals, and the surrounding environment.

### **Functions of Nupe Mythical Archetypes in Nupe Oral Literature**

Nupe mythical archetypes includes legendary myths, communal myths, and supreme myths. Legendary myths celebrate heroes and heroines who have achieved remarkable feats in the community, such as *Tsoede*, the originator of the Nupe people. Communal myths celebrate tales about society, including specialised stories, songs, and narratives of objects, places and happenings. Supreme myths revolve around the belief in a higher supremacy controlling human existence, establishing a hierarchy in Nupe belief system with the *Tsochi soko* “almighty God” at the pinnacle.

- (a) **Nupe Legendary Myth:** As narratives of heroes and heroines who have achieved remarkable feats in the community, Nupe legendary myths celebrate and idolise individuals such as *Tsoede*, the originator of the Nupe people, and *Etsu* (Kings) like Masaba, *Etsu Mua’zu*, *Manko Dendo*, *Estu Majiya*, *Estu Jimada* etc. The heroic stance of *Tsoedo* to becoming *Estu Nupe* goes thus: *Tsoede*’s return to *Kin Nupe* was after his father’s death, the King of *Idah*. He journeyed late at night making an escape back to his mother’s land, *Nku* as his half brothers pursued him and his twelve men across the River Niger until they could no longer catch up with them. At the time of this trajectory, *Tsoede* met two *Kyadya* men who assisted them. The first man sat on a stone called *Kuta* while the second one was collecting *giginya* fruit at the confluence of Rivers Niger and Kaduna. This man put *Tsoede* and his men in a canoe and hid them in a nearby bush at the river bank. When *Tsoede*’s half brothers met this two men to ask for *Tsoede*’s whereabouts, they misdirected them.
- (b) **Nupe Communal Myth:** This refers to tales about the society, including specialised stories, songs about various pastoral communities, their origins, practices, and skills. These myths may involve songs, proverbs in reference to gods, ancestors, spirits, and narratives of supremacy. One of such is the *Kyadya* people of *Bini*, they are believed to have assisted *Tsoede* upon his arrival to *Bini* from *Idah*. Hence *Tsoede* rewarded them with the first title of *Kuta* ever since they became established as the Lords of water and local rulers over the aboriginal inhabitants who were the *Batachi*.

The myth attached to the *Ndakogboya* cult goes that there was a Nupe king whose mother used to interfere in the affairs of the court making the people disregard his order. The king consulted a priest who instructed him to provide a lengthy fabric. The priest sewed the fabric in the form of a long cylindrical tube then applied a substance to it which made the apparel cover up the king’s mother. The long cylindrical tube apparel carried the king’s mother up into the sky and she was never seen again. The implication of this myth is that the cult of *Ndakogboya* is closely connected with protecting the royal court.

Nadel (1961, p. 232) narrates the tale involving the *Kusopa* in the planting of kola nuts. It states thus, “kola plantation in the country of *Kusopa*, certain rites which

are practised by that group only emphasise the unique position of the kola nut planters. Only the knowledge of that special ritual can the success of the difficult and precarious cultivation be assured.” The ritual takes two possessions, the first is practised by the kola nut planters who collect dead leaves, grind the leaves and then disperse the powder on the farm lands. The second possession is carried out by the Master of threshing, *Maji Tsuba* who is the village priest of Labozhi by performing a ritual in a hut where a woman is buried.

- (c) **Nupe Supreme Myth:** This is the belief in a higher Supreme Being controlling human existence and essence. This myth establishes a hierarchy in the Nupe belief system, with the *Tsochi soko* (almighty God) at the pinnacle, followed by spirits *jenuzhi*, magicians/priests, *bochizhi*, and ancestors *ndakoyizhi*. These entities are above humans *za'angi*, serving as mediators between humanity and the almighty God. The theological framework of the Nupe, as outlined by S. F. Nadel's studies posits *Soko* as the Supreme Being and the focal point of Nupe religious beliefs. The delineation between the sacred and profane is expressed through the term *nyaSoko* (God's own or belonging to God).

A number of research works on Nupe myths identifies four entities in Nupe cosmology: *Yizhe* (the created world, synonymous with *kin* or earth), sky (equated with God, *Soko*), with the belief that *Soko lokpa* signifies God's transcendence and immanence. Within *Kin Nupe* religious philosophy, a belief in a higher supreme order prevails, controlling the spirit kingdom, human existence, and cosmic elements. The Nupe theological hierarchy encompasses *Tsochi Soko* “almighty God” above *jenuzhi* “spirits”, above *bochizhi* “magicians/priests”, and further above *ndakoyizhi* “ancestors” all of them are above *za'angi* “man” helping man to guide the human world.

Nupe myth include a wide spectrum of mysticism and practices, reflecting philosophy, psychology, relationships, and expressions of social values. Within Nupe society, myths serve to reinforce social cohesion and communal values, providing narratives that shape societal norms and belief systems. Non-evolutionary theories describe myth as a product of cultural borrowings and modifications, a means of understanding society's history, or a linguistic phenomenon. However, the most common anthropological view relates myths to contemporary behaviour, considering myths tools for understanding the ties within a society.

### **Socio-cultural Functions of Marriage and Death in Nupe Orature**

Nupe oral literature transcends storytelling; it embodies the cultural ethos of the community, reflecting its social dynamics, values and vices. Popular amongst Nupe social-cultural functions is the rites of marriage and death. Nupe myth fulfils multiple social functions, fostering communal solidarity. Marriage rituals in Nupe society serve as rites of passage, marking the transition from adolescence to adulthood. These rituals not only unite individuals but also strengthen familial bonds and community cohesion. The diverse marriage traditions practised such as relationship and charitable marriages in Kin Nupe reflect the social structures and values of the region. Death rituals in Nupe culture encapsulate the belief in rebirth and ancestral continuity. Nupe people commemorate the passing of loved ones through elaborate funeral

rites, symbolising the transition from earthly existence to spiritual realm. The distinction between "good" and "bad" deaths creates the moral dimensions of Nupe cosmology, wherein virtuous lives are celebrated and malevolent forces are confronted.

The evidence of metaphysics in Nupe myths, shapes social activities and religious beliefs, with rituals serving as acts and myths ingrained in Nupe community practices. These rituals permeate communal structures, influencing social paradigms while embodying ideological stance in marriage and death. Marriage traditions vary for both Niger and Kwara Nupes. Yet, death beliefs similarly reflect a belief in rebirth and supernatural forces. Nupe social cultural functions play a vital role in shaping native values and structuring societal narratives, contributing to cultural continuity and celebrating Nupe identity and philosophies. Nupe social cultural dynamics is characterised by a synthesis of ancestral wisdom, divine revelation, and natural symbolism. Through rituals and ceremonies, Nupe people commune with the divine realm, seeking guidance, protection, and spiritual fulfilment. The aesthetic dynamics of Nupe mythology lies in its symbolised acts, metaphors, and allegories enforced into everyday life.

### **Overview and Interpretations of Nupe Myth**

The research on Nupe myth studies various aspects of the community's cultural practices, focusing particularly on Nupe belief systems, Nupe mythical archetypes, and Nupe etiquettes relating to marriage and death. Regarding belief systems enforced with Nupe myths, the research revealed a theological covenant within Nupe cosmology. At the apex stands *Tsochi Soko*, the almighty God, revered as the creator and sustainer of the universe. Beneath God are spirits, magicians, and ancestors, serving as mediators between humanity and the divine realm. This hierarchical framework shapes Nupe religious practices and societal norms, reinforcing the interconnectedness of the spiritual and material worlds. At the core of Nupe cosmology lies the belief in a higher supreme order governing human existence and cosmic elements. The theological hierarchy, with *Tsochi Soko* (almighty God) at its pinnacle, explains the Nupe people's reverence for divine authority and spiritual mediation. Spirits, magicians, and ancestors occupy intermediary roles, serving as conduits between humanity and the divine realm. Through myths and ceremonies, the Nupe community reinforces its connection to the spiritual realm, affirming the supremacy of divine order in shaping human affairs.

In summary, the study on Nupe legendary myth, communal myth, and supreme myth unveils the cultural beliefs and narratives that define the Nupe. Nupe Legendary Myths exalt heroic figures like *Tsoede*, the visionary leader who forged the Nupe confederation. *Tsoede*'s journey from exile to kingship symbolises the resilience and unity of the Nupe people. Similarly, other legendary figures such as *Etsu Masaba* and *Etsu Jimada* embody the valour and leadership revered in Nupe society. Tales of communal origins and traditions shape the collective identity of the Nupe people. These myths celebrate the diverse pastoral communities within Nupe society and their unique contributions to the traditions of the region. For instance, the myth of the *Kyadya* people highlights their pivotal role in assisting *Tsoede* and establishes their authority as water lords and local rulers.

These myths serve not only as repositories of historical memory but also as principles that inform social norms and group practices. The heroic journey of *Tsoede*, from his escape to

the establishment of a unified kingdom, symbolises the resilience and unity of the Nupe people. The tales about societal origins, practices, and spiritual beliefs, illuminate the diverse narratives that form the foundation of Nupe communal life. From rituals to narratives of gods and ancestors, communal myths is an array of cultural expressions which reinforce social cohesion. The myth of the Kyadya people, who assisted Tsoede upon his arrival in Bini, exemplifies the symbiotic relationship between communal myth and historical memory.

The paper also highlights the social dynamics embedded within Nupe marriage traditions. The findings reveal the profound influence of Nupe myth on various aspects of community life, from the celebration of marriage to the commemoration of death. Marriage rituals serve as rites of passage, marking the transition from adolescence to adulthood and strengthening familial bonds. In exploring death rituals, the study uncovered customs that symbolise the Nupe people's beliefs in ancestral continuity. Through elaborate funeral rites, Nupe individuals commemorate the passing of loved ones, recognising death not as an end but as a transition to the spiritual realm. The diverse oral traditions practised in Kin Nupe reflect the social cultural dynamics of the region. Through these myths and rituals, Nupe individuals uphold cultural norms and reinforce communal solidarity.

### **Conclusion**

This paper on socio-cultural dynamics of Nupe myth within oral literature has shed some light on its profound influence on the people's community identity and beliefs. Through the exploration of Nupe legendary myth, communal myth, and supreme myth, the study uncovers the cultural narratives that shape Nupe society. Nupe oral tradition stands as a testament to the resilience and creativity of African culture. With myths of legends, environment and gods, the Nupe people affirm their identity, transmit their values, and celebrate their heritage.

As Africa embraces modernity, Nupe orature continues to evolve, adapting to new realities while preserving its core essence. By honouring cultural legacy, the Nupe people ensure that their rich oral tradition remains a source of inspiration and wisdom for generations to come. From tales of heroic figures to communal origin stories and spiritual cosmologies, Nupe myth serves as a cornerstone of cultural continuity, transmitting ancestral wisdom and guiding principles across generations. As the Nupe community navigates the complexities of modernity and globalisation, the preservation and celebration of oral literature remain vital in safeguarding Nupe heritage and fostering a sense of collective belonging.

### **References**

- Alagbe, J. (2014). Historical Yoruba cultural indices in Daniel O. Fagunwa's the forest of God. *Lapai Journal of Languages, Literatures and Communication Studies*, 2(1), 47 - 61.
- Babajo, A. K. (2018). *Orature: meaning, nature and Forms*. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.), Streamline Communications Ltd.
- Bukar, U. (2018). *Gods and ancestors: mythic tales of Nigeria*. Klamidas Communications Ltd.
- Dada, A. O. (2014). Yoruba Invective Songs: A Study of Tunbosun Oladapo's Sokoro. *Lapai Journal of Languages, Literatures and Communication Studies*, 2(1), 116 - 126.
- Egodi, U. Onogwu, E. O. & Agbo, C. (2023). *Witchcraft in Africa: meanings, factors and practices*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

- Ibrahim, B. F. (2008). *Themes, patterns and oral aesthetics in Nigerian oral literature*. Haytee Press.
- Ismaila, A. A. (2011). *Harvest of hatred*. Kraftgriots, 2011.
- Saliba, J. A. (2009). *Sacrifice: religious ritual*. Microsoft Encarta, Microsoft Corporation.
- Tyler, L. (2009). *Mythylogy*. Microsoft Encarta, Microsoft Corporation.
- Umotong, I. D. (2021 May 27). Witchcraft in Africa: malignant of development. *Nnamdi Azikiwe Journal of Philosophy*, 12(2), 165 - 177.
- Yahya, M. K. (2003). *The Nupe people of Nigeria, in studies, tribes and tribals*. Kamla-Raj.