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Retelling the Myth of Arwe (Wainaba)

Myths are never mere tales; they are cultural products that show what a society is willing to leave behind and what it is willing to forget. The Ethiopian Arwe, or Wainaba, myth is a myth of a serpent-king or serpent-queen who has traditionally been interpreted as a moral lesson. There is a terrifying monster, which is a serpent, that frightens the land, and a heroic character gets rid of it and establishes order. However, in a more critical examination of this myth, particularly from a feminist and a postcolonial perspective, there is another thing that becomes apparent to me. I observe a story that is highly intertwined with gendered power, religious conversion, and cultural re-writing. This essay presents the retelling of the story by Arwe and proceeds to the plot, but then goes beyond it, considering the historical, cultural, and ideological factors that are usually forgotten. I do not aim at persuasion, but rather at a reframing of the myth as a place of repressed indigenous memory and an oppositional interpretation of the role of women as leaders.

This strategy can be compared to what literary theorist Alicia Ostriker calls a feminist revisionist mythology, the process of criticizing and rectifying gender stereotypes, which find their expression in the traditional narratives (Ostriker 317). Equally, postcolonial activist Ngugi wa Thiong'o in his book *Decolonising the Mind* suggests that the most important part of cultural memory is to take hold of the stories of the natives who were previously written within the colonialist or dominant religious discourse (4). Using these frames in the context of the Arwe

myth, I would like to argue that Ethiopian mythology has been influenced by the government and that the revisions of these narratives may restore the lost aspects of African culture.

According to the traditional version of the myth of Arwe, there was a giant serpent that ruled Ethiopia for centuries. Arwe requires the offering of things like milk, cattle, and young women to be sacrificed. The serpent is finally overthrown when one of the heroes, called Angabo, emerges. Angabo kills Arwe with magic or poison, depending on who the story is told to, and is rewarded with the kingship (Budge 36–38). In other versions, Angabo is associated with Makeda, Queen of Sheba, who is either his daughter or his heir (Littmann 12). Later Christian retellings of the story make Arwe a symbol of the corruption of the pagan or even demonic evil.

Initially, this is the narration of how most individuals, myself included, hear this myth: a conflict between good and evil, civilization and disorder. The plot is a well known structure that involves the journey of a hero that will end in the annihilation of some monstrous evil. However, this is a superficial interpretation of the myth, which hides the underlying cultural changes that the myth holds. What seems to be a mere story of heroism might be holding remnants of deep religious and political inner strife in ancient Ethiopia.

What is usually omitted is the religious and political nature of the context within which this myth was developed. Archaeological studies, like those by Andrea Manzo, show that serpent veneration was practiced in northern Ethiopia long before the establishment of Christianity. Serpent-related shrines, sacrificial remains, and symbolic materials dated to the Proto-Aksumite and early Aksumite periods are recorded by Manzo (Manzo 9–14). This implies that serpent worship was not merely a narrative invention but a genuine religious system practiced by real communities.

Using this definition, Arwe ceases to be a blank monstrous figure and becomes a symbol of what happens when a new religious or political order must delegitimize an earlier one. Christian scholars had the power to debase traditions already in place by transforming an indigenous spiritual figure into an evil figure, which could legitimize their authority. This overwriting of indigenous ideologies in order to justify the formation of new power systems is not unique to Ethiopia; this phenomenon occurred across various cultures where Christianity and other dominant religions have been introduced to replace earlier systems of spirituality.

The other aspect that is overlooked is the gendered point. Some versions of the story characterize Arwe as explicitly female, a serpent-queen, or depict the serpent as male but associated with feminine-coded power. Regardless, there is a noticeable transition in the narrative: immediately after the defeat of the serpent, the figure of Makeda, one of the most powerful women in African mythology, emerges. We should ask why the arrival of a woman ruler is framed through the violent annihilation of an older, possibly feminine or indigenous spirituality. This framing implies that one form of feminine authority is replaced by another that aligns better with the new religious order. Makeda's authority becomes validated not by indigenous religion but through her association with King Solomon and the rise of the Solomonic dynasty.

According to traditional explanations, the Arwe myth is told as a moral lesson that tyranny is punished, harmony is restored, and a divine royal descent is established. However, this interpretation only relies on Christian and dynastic sources that have a vested interest in portraying indigenous spirituality as dangerous, deviant, or disorderly. According to the views of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, dominant religious systems tend to twist native stories in favor of the powerful nations or groups (Ngugi 16–17).

There are a number of ways in which my interpretation does not agree. Originally, Arwe can be a native/feminist/matriarchal power, not necessarily evil. The description of Arwe as monstrous might be an intentional attempt to delegitimize pre-Christian religious systems. Second, the myth also reflects a significant cultural change, particularly the replacement of indigenous beliefs with Christianity. Third, the ascension of Makeda cannot be separated from the political ambitions embedded in the myth. Her leadership becomes valid only after the demonization of the earlier belief system. This follows Ostriker's argument about feminist myth revision: the necessity of examining how the authority of women has been constrained and renegotiated by patriarchal discourses (Ostriker 318). Fourth, the monster-like framing of Arwe most likely indicates political propaganda by the newly emerging Christian state and the early Solomonic dynasty.

I am not sure that Arwe should be perceived as a villain, but I think that Arwe is a tragic victim of religious and social change. This reframing does not reject the violence attributed to Arwe in the myths, but situates it within a broader trend in which dominant cultures label the beliefs they intend to replace as monstrous.

Arwe is a myth, not in the sense that the information provided is fantasy, but in the sense that it performs the cultural roles that myths typically play: It describes origins, such as the emergence of Ethiopian kingship and the Solomonic dynasty. It carries moral lessons, but the lessons are relative to the morals of the storyteller. It encodes cultural change using supernatural symbols like the serpent, the hero, and the queen. Arwe's myth serves as collective memory shaped by power structures. These elements place Arwe firmly within the mythic tradition, even though interpretations shift over the ages. Myths can be described as what Ngugi wa Thiong'o terms carriers of people's values, transferring cultural knowledge across generations, while also revealing who holds the power to determine which version is preserved (Ngugi 15).

Arwe is misunderstood because it is often read through Christian or colonial lenses. These narratives provide little context about indigenous Ethiopian spirituality and often express biases against serpent symbolism and feminine power. This systematic exclusion of indigenous perspectives has left a large gap in interpretation.

This misconception needs correction through several approaches. First, we should focus on archaeological and anthropological facts, such as Manzo's research on serpent worship. This documentation gives essential context that written Christian sources lack. Secondly, oral traditions need to be re-examined, as they often preserve older interpretations without Christian influence. Third, we must use feminist and decolonial theories to locate the suppressed forms of women's authority. Ostriker's theory of feminist revisionist mythology offers a way to identify how gender stereotypes shape narrative conventions (Ostriker 320). Fourth, we must understand that serpent symbolism in African cultures is not consistently negative. Serpents can represent wisdom, fertility, or ancestral spirits. The automatic association of serpents with evil is Judeo-Christian, not universal.

With these frameworks, we can see the myth as a complex cultural text rather than a moral fable. It allows us to ask whose voices are preserved? Whose are silenced? What cultural information has been encoded, and what has been intentionally erased?

Retelling the Arwe myth with attention to what has been overlooked reveals much more than a heroic tale. It reveals the tensions between competing spiritual systems, the reconstruction of cultural memory, and how women's leadership is involved in myth-making. The next step in seeing Ethiopian mythology more clearly is to reinterpret Arwe not as a monster but as a symbol of displaced indigenous tradition.

I do not intend to convince readers that this is the only legitimate interpretation, but to show that myths change with the teller, and that those changes matter. Through a feminist and postcolonial interpretation of the Arwe myth, we can better understand how cultural transitions were encoded in narratives, how power dynamics shape collective memory, and how indigenous customs persist even within narratives designed to undermine them.

The story of Arwe teaches us that myth is a potent tool that can preserve history while also obscuring it. In feminist revisionist mythology, as argued by Ostriker, we can reclaim lost voices and confront gender stereotypes (Ostriker 321). Likewise, postcolonial strategies promoted by Ngugi wa Thiong'o help us understand how colonial and religious systems have manipulated indigenous African stories. When these critical frameworks are applied to the Arwe myth, we take a significant step toward reclaiming Ethiopian cultural heritage, which is a heritage that includes not only the mighty Queen Makeda but also the serpent figure whose memory was overwritten to construct her.

Works Cited

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Remixed Retelling Myth: Critical Reflection

My decision to remix and retell the myth of Arwe grew from both personal heritage and academic curiosity. Coming from an Eritrean Christian background, I have always been surrounded by Ethiopian and Eritrean religious iconography. The vibrant, heavily symbolic images that adorned the walls of the churches I grew up in are very nostalgic. Because my heritage historically intersected with many of the political and cultural developments I examined during my research, the project felt deeply connected to my own lineage. The idea for the remix itself emerged when I encountered an old iconographic depiction of Arwe in which she appears only as a serpent, eventually killed and symbolically dismissed. That image troubled me. I realized that the traditional narrative not only demonized her but also flattened her into a mere obstacle for the rise of a new political order. In response, I wanted to create a visual retelling that acknowledged her complexity and restored her dignity. My remix therefore portrays Arwe not as a monstrous threat but as a powerful feminine figure whom the people defend, an intentional reversal of the demonization embedded in older depictions (Fig. 1).

My intended audience consisted of individuals who might already have a general understanding of mythology, but may be less knowledgeable about Ethiopian mythological traditions and visual art. Because of this, I knew I needed to create an image that both resonated with recognizable mythic patterns and introduced viewers to the specific symbolic language of Ethiopian and

Eritrean Christian art. Research was integral to this process. As I examined images, manuscripts, and early iconographic representations, I noticed a consistent pattern in which Arwe's serpentine body symbolized chaos and illegitimacy. This observation led me to a new conclusion: retellings often inherit political biases, and visual depictions can serve as powerful tools for reinforcing those biases. My remix intentionally countered this by depicting Arwe as a feminine figure whose beauty is understated instead of glamorized. I left her facial expression intentionally neutral to direct the attention to the context of the scene and not to her emotions. This choice subtly critiques the long tradition of portraying her as an embodiment of evil by shifting the focus toward the community's recognition of her value.

To strengthen these shifts, I incorporated multiple rhetorical appeals throughout the project. Ethos was portrayed through my use of traditional Ethiopian/Eritrean iconographic techniques, such as flat perspective, symbolic color palettes, and halo-like framing symbols. These features signaled to viewers, especially those familiar with Christian iconography, that the remix was grounded in authentic traditions. Pathos appears in the emotional resonance of the imagery. For example, the protective posture of the figures surrounding Arwe evokes empathy rather than fear, flipping the emotional expectations established in older depictions. Similarly, the menacing posture of the dark-robed authority figures, evokes feelings of impending doom. Logos, meanwhile, surfaces through the intentional structure and symbolism woven the whole composition. Each visual choice from her placement at the center, the balanced symmetry, the absence of a violent confrontation, logically supports the argument that myths can be reinterpreted in ways that reveal new values. Exigency came from the need to challenge inherited narratives that cast powerful feminine figures as threats, while the limitations of available

imagery, the stylized nature of traditional iconography, and the restrictions of AI-generated art was giving me some resistance.

Reflecting on the production process, I found that the medium itself offered surprising features. Working visually allowed me to use color, shading, and symbolic motifs to communicate layers of meaning that would have been difficult to convey through text alone. For instance, the gold tones surrounding Arwe subtly reference sanctity, while the deep blues behind the villagers suggest stability and loyalty. These visual modes, integrated together, all reinforce the reinterpretation I was aiming for. However, creating a text in this genre was not easy. I initially had to explore numerous AI image-creation tools, many of which produced results that felt too modern or too extravagant for the iconographic style I required. So, I learned to manipulate prompts, revise outputs, and later edit the final composite image once it was on the presentation.

What I liked most about my final delivery was the coherence of the finished product. The colors harmonized well, and the arrangement aligned with the narrative structure I was intending. A few challenges emerged along the way. It was difficult getting the AI tools to accurately replicate Ethiopian/Eritrean stylistic features. Some outputs distorted facial proportions made details that felt inconsistent. If I had more time, I would be more attentive to the technical aspects of the image. I would try layering hand-drawn elements or conducting deeper research into specific regional artistic traditions.

Throughout the remix process, I improved significantly in my ability to craft effective AI prompts. My writing became more precise, and I learned how to guide the technology toward outputs that aligned with my goals. Although I grew more confident in these techniques, I still wish I had developed stronger manual editing skills to fix the image after generation. I attempted

some rearranging, cutting, and layering to ensure the final product matched my narrative intentions, but I felt limited by my technical experience. With more time, I would practice digital illustration techniques to supplement the AI-generated base.

Looking back on the entire experience, I found the most professionally valuable aspect of the assignment to be the blend of research and technical writing/execution. In future academic or workplace settings, especially those involving technical writing or digital content, the skills I practiced in this project: prompt design, revision, and multimodal storytelling, will undoubtedly be relevant. The most challenging part of the remix was simply finding the right tool and learning how to make it work for a culturally specific visual tradition. Next time, I would begin with a better idea and more structured comparison of available platforms to avoid unnecessary mistakes.

Ultimately, what satisfied me most was how the final image looked and felt. The coordinated colors, the balanced composition, and the overall sense of harmony made the finished product visually compelling. More importantly, the remix allowed me to honor a myth from my cultural history while challenging the ways that narratives, and the images that compliment them, shape our understanding of the past.

Appendix

Fig. 1



Works Cited/AI Usage



