



Okigbo and the Mythopoeia of Postcolonial Apocalypse

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Abstract

Christopher Okigbo's brief but intensely mercurial life does appear to parallel that of his country, Nigeria, not only of the 1960s, the predominant locale of his poetic concerns but also of contemporary times. Accordingly, in many respects, the poet uses his turbulent personal experiential odyssey to emblemize and iconize collective fate. Relying in the main on the Biblical trope of the prodigal son, Okigbo poetically plots his personal existential graph which symbolically on multiple levels intersects with and mirrors the tragic trajectory of the postcolony. This paper, therefore, examines Christopher Okigbo's deployment of the idiom of modernism as well as traditional Igbo (African) oral poetics to dramatize both personal fate and public (collective) destiny, the one exemplifying the other. In doing this, we have utilized the explicatory tools of the Reader-Response theory to unknot the work and conclude that Okigbo's poetry is a classic instantiation of the mythic fabulation of the Nigeria postcolonial Dystopia or Apocalypse.

Key Words: Okigbo, Igbo, Africa, Myth, Apocalypse

Introduction

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It does sound like a bit of a cliché to begin a discussion of poetry with its definition which, as everybody knows, does not lend itself to a universally-acceptable definition. By the same token, while a school of thought is disposed to define poetry as an agreeable piece of language, written or spoken, that is defined by a heightened and aesthetically-conscious deployment of sound and thought to convey meaning, an oppositional school would conceive of poetry as a concatenation and agglomeration of abstract and abstruse expressions which does not necessarily set out to communicate a meaning and, in the manner of Archibald McLeish, just *be*, without meaning. But all things considered, it seems contradictory, if not downright defeatist for anybody to go out of their way to put pen to paper to convey nonsense, an ideational or polysemic non-meaning. Perhaps, we could conclude by saying that this cast of mind is a classic fallacy of

literalism. Every piece of imaginative work characterized by craft and art does convey or communicate a meaning in varying degrees, regardless. With this in mind, we can begin to enter the textual cosmos of Christopher Okigbo's *Labyrinths* and attempt to unknot its multiple layers of meaning. The foregoing discourse is necessary because the history of the criticism of Christopher Okigbo's poetry has been fraught with and dominated by critical naysayers who argue that Okigbo's poetry is very densely-textured, abstract and utterly hematic, admitted therefore, only a select coterie of initiates. It is important to state that the basis for this turn of mind regarded his poetry is partly due to the nature of his formative years, first, as a student and, second, as a poet. To a very large extent, Okigbo's choice of course of study greatly influenced the eventual *nature* and *character* of his work. After his secondary school education at Umuahia, Okigbo went on to study classics at Ibadan where he read Greek and Latin principally and also studied modern European writers and poets – Spanish, French, English, German, etc. He was, indeed, greatly influenced by the French *Symboliste*, and surrealism, notably the work of Stephanie Mallarme.

It is also important to add that Christopher Okigbo's obsessive interest in music, especially classical European music, jazz in particular, has a very strong influence on his poetry (Nkosi 1972, 133). Thus his poetry appears to be more influenced or shaped by European music than the works of 'dead writers' *a la* T.S. Eliot. Additionally, events in his personal life contributed to the protean, if abstruse, nature of his poetry. The tragic death of Anna, his mother in 1935, for instance, was to have a life-changing traumatic effect on Okigbo as a person and, more important for our discussion, on his poetry, as we shall demonstrate in the course of this study. Thus, the consequent internalization and sublimation of this early family tragedy and his ineluctable repudiation of his priestly duty as the priest of Ajani (or Mother Idoto), due to his pursuit of both western education and Roman Catholicism, ultimately *alienated* him from his indigenous Igbo/African animism and metaphysics, an *alienation* whose overarching ramifications are *writ large* in the volume entitled *Labyrinths*.

However, regardless of this sense of cultural alienation of the poet, he was intelligent and sensitive enough to appreciate the negative effects of his cultural dilemma and, indeed, discern a parallel between his personal fate and the collective destiny. R.N. Egudu declared that Okigbo was the most *nationalistic* of his generation of poets as his work shows, as hinted earlier, a striking parallel between the self and society:

Okigbo can rightly be described as the poet of Nigerian history, for there is a movement in his work which parallels that in the history of Nigeria from her contact with Europe to the early stages of the civil war, when Okigbo died. (Egudu, 1988, 60)

Similarly, Segun Adekoya equally holds that Okigbo's personal fate mirrors that of his country:

The volume, a poeticization of his personal experience, of the chaotic history of Nigeria from the attainment of political independence in 1960 to the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70), and of the collective experience of Africans in and out of colonialism, is conceived as 'a fable of man's perennial quest for fulfilment'. (Adekoya, 1992, 35)

Accordingly, Okigbo's personal crisis mirrors the larger public crisis both in terms of the depredations and alienation of colonialism and the profanation of traditional Igbo religion by Christianity (or, to be more exact, Roman Catholicism). As a poet-prodigal (a returnee), Okigbo imaginatively *returns* to his abandoned office of the Idoto/Ajani priesthood (through, of course, poetic craftsmanship) to satirize and traduce orthodox Christianity and, in so doing, recuperate the lost metaphysical integrity of his African animism. But having immersed himself in western intellectual and religious traditions, it became impossible for the poet not to discreetly and ingeniously mine the poetic resources of the West. The interweaving, therefore, of classical as well as modern European poetic traditions and his indigenous Igbo/African ritual oral traditions *provides* the matrix of the mythopoeia of postcolonial apocalypse in *Labyrinths*.

For us to be able to usefully conduct a proper exegetical excursus on Okigbo's *Labyrinths*, the theoretical insights of the Reader-Response Theory would be useful. The choice of this theoretical framework has been informed by the eclecticism, the hybridity and the ideational syncretism of Okigbo's poetry, a contentual polysemy which furnishes a rich panoply of interpretive perspectives in the criticism of his poetry. Thus the truth-claims of one interpretation, however far-fetched and tangential, remains valid in so far as they find a basis in the textual phenomenon. The complexity and, indeed, the studied obscurity of his poetry (see Chinweizu, *et al*, 1980) encourages the validity of fiercely-irreconcilable interpretive positions. The reader, then, becomes a co-creator of meaning with the poet whose original version of truth is just one out of a multitude of probable interpretations.

The first poem entitled 'The Passage' reads like an *introit*, an obligatory invocation to a muse, preparatory to an epic performance much in the same manner as John Milton's in *Paradise Lost* and Edmund Spenser's in *The Faery Queen* as well as in African oral narrative performances, *inter alia*. Idoto is imaged and conceived as surrogate mother in Okigbo's poetic consciousness:

Anna thus assumes a perpetual and powerful presence in her son's poetry, reified into the goddess, and thus an object of worship, the single most dominant archetype figure of Okigbo's mythic imagination, the basis of an existential dilemma, the live-die option. (Nwakamma, 12).

Okigbo goes on to draw upon the symbolic imagery of the spiritual essences of the bodies of water in his locality, rivers and streams such as Idoto, Onitsha and River Niger (Nwakanma 27). Obi Nwakanma posits that: 'The legend of the

water maid is the most constant poetic image in Okigbo's creative invocation' (27). The performance proper begins with the second poem whose opening lines recall Genesis Chapter One:

Dark Waters of the beginning.

Rays, violet and short, piercing the gloom,
foreshadows the rain that is dreamed of
(Labyrinths 4).

References are made to 'dark waters', 'the beginning' and 'Rays', all images reminiscent of the Genesis story/myth of creation, when Yahweh, Jehova God of the Jews, created the world out of chaos or catastrophe. Echoing this originary primal Act of Creation situated and contextualized in prehistory in a modern/ist environment, comes across as a mock-heroic parody, and, by implication, the poet-protagonist's performance an exercise in self-ironising, self-violating travesty, a poetic ceremony of desacralisation. This negation of sacred duty, of the original creative work of Godhead bespeaks the apocalyptic character of the postcolony. In point of fact, the trajectory of Okigbo's performance seems, therefore, to be from *catastrophe* to *apocalypse* considering the uncanny similarities between the poet-persona and the Nigerian postcolony.

To be sure, the image of 'rainbow', 'rain' and 'fire' in the poem are all borrowed from Genesis as the poet seeks to formulate his private, idiosyncratic myths which he hopes would intersect with public fate. In Miltonic solitude, the poet-persona contemplates the tasks at hand and, likening himself to a 'wagtail', 'a songbird', decides to 'tell/the tangled wood-tale'; to 'mourn/a mother on a spray' (4).

As earlier noted, Christopher Okigbo lost his mother in 1935 when he was barely three years old. His mother, Anna, had died of cholera, leaving the young boy at the mercy of an inhospitable world, peopled, though, by warm-hearted kith and kin. Having repressed this early family tragedy in his callow mind, Okigbo was to sublimate the image of Anna in adult life in his poetry, thus subjecting her essence to radical trans-substantiation. Obi Nwakanma remarks that Anna appears in her son's work as a myth, the absent goddess, part mother, part lover (11-12). Okigbo, to be sure, further threnodises in the poem:

Rain and sun in single combat,
on one leg standing,
in silence at the passage,
the young bird at the passage. (4)

Normally rain and sun do not occur at the same time, whenever it is raining, the sun withdraws and vice versa. But in some unusual climatic or weather conditions, rainfall and sunshine do occur simultaneously, thereby creating meteorological excitement, especially among children. What Okigbo has done in this excerpt is to deploy this natural phenomenon to highlight and dramatize the spiritual ambivalence at the heart of his poetry: at a personal level, he

expresses pained nostalgia at the passing traditionalism, on the one hand, and on the other outrage at the ambiguous benefits of modernity (cf: Fanon), European penetration into Igboland (Africa) through the agency of the Western school system and the missionary efforts (i.e., Roman Catholicism) practically 'killed' and annihilated the Igbo pantheon of gods and goddesses, thereby demonizing ancestor worship and allied ritual practices in Igboland. The resultant double consciousness (as Fanon exemplifies in *The Wretched of the Earth* and, more explicitly in *Black Skin, White Masks*) suffered by Christopher Okigbo bred in him a harrowing sense of spiritual alienation and fragmentation of experience, a common psycho-social dilemma suffered by all *colonized* subjects. According to Nwakamma:

Okigbo's attachment to Idoto, of course, was mostly intellectual; its myth later grew and afforded him the central idiom of his poetry. His choice of Idoto was a way to reconstruct, and articulate a personal narrative of the poet's alienation from the source of life and memory; a means by which to re-invent the self after a traumatic moment of self-questioning later on in his life. (17).

'Rain and Sun', natural antithesis that they are, iconise an existential condition of anomie, confusion and, paradox occasioned by the antinomic tension between colonialism and Igbo/African animist metaphysics. In 'Initiations', the poet-quester intones:

Scar of the crucifix
over the breast,
by red blade inflicted
by red hot blade
on right breast witnesseth

Mystery which I, initiate,
received newly naked
upon waters of the genesis
from Kepkanly. (6)

In the above passage, Okigbo reflects on his former Christian experience – baptism and the like. He goes on in the same poem to denounce Christianity and express his displeasure with foreign religious dogma. Still trying to find his feet in the world, the young Okigbo was made to imbibe the 'dos' and 'dons' of Roman Catholicism, many of which have to do with piety and personal moral regimen. In the Christian faith, sexual piccadilloes and illicit liaisons are anathema. Thus given the coldhearted rabbinicism and moral pharisaism of the European (mostly Irish/British) catholic priests, the young Okigbo had tended to revolt against the asphyxiating religious orthodoxy. He saw the European men of the cloth as hypocritical and tyrannical. According to the poet, Catholicism, in fostering 'inhibitions', is a partner-in-crime with colonialism.

The heliocentric worldview of Roman Catholicism promotes anti-humanism and rejects black vitalism:

So comes John the Baptist
with bowl of salt water
preaching the gambit:
life without sin, without

life; which accepted,
way leads downward
down orthocenter
avoiding decisions. (6)

For Christopher Okigbo, a religious faith which is not geocentric, that is, man-centered, is useless. In this kind of abstract, dry-as-dust dogma, 'man loses man', and, therefore, 'loses vision'. Commenting on the alleged hypocrisy and the two-facedness of the European religious proselytizers, Obi Nwakanma notes that:

[O]kigbo's attitude to the dominant presence of the Catholic Church in his life and its mission in Africa is seen in his figuration of the famous missionary priest at Onitsha, Flanagan – 'who sowed, the fire seed', or Father Leidan, the 'archtyrant of the holy see' in the original version of the *Heavens gate*. (102).

Like Thomas Hardy, Christopher Okigbo had tended to appreciate the music and the liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church but deeply repudiated its fundamental anti-humanistic ideology.

In 'Watermaid' the poet-protagonist refers to himself as 'the prodigal' (10), a designation at once Biblical in origin and, more cogently, ontologic. At a personal level, Okigbo sees himself as a prodigal, one whom divine providence had favoured and blessed stupendously with a rich cultural heritage but chose instead to fritter away his patrimony through his hankering after empty alien values. Recognizing his error, he repents and wishes to return to his indigenous cultural traditions symbolized by Mother Idoto. Hence, the quest motif in *Labyrinths* is rather pivotal. Segun Adekoya aptly reminds us that: "The quest is multidimensional. It is at once artistic, cultural, economic, religio-metaphysical, romantic, and socio-political.

The poetic idiom for its expression is primarily mythical and secondarily paradoxical. The poet's preoccupation, the central theme of all literature, is the vegetation myth which dovetails with the myth of eternal return' (35). Standing in for everyman, Okigbo comes across as an improvident hobo, a *flaneur*, a cosmic wanderer, drifting from the source of life, seeking fulfillment in the wrong places. The poet-prodigal, afflicted with alienation, rootlessness, and psycho-spiritual fragmentation desires moral-cum-spiritual wholeness, having lost his ontologic compass. As always, his personal fate parallels the collective

misadventure. Being a product of a hybrid culture, Okigbo (read: *Nigeria*) suffers 'a near erasure of ethnic memory and identity' (Nwakanma 62). Okigbo laments thus: '*And the cancelling-out is complete*' (35). Obi Nwakanma remarks that:

'Okigbo wrote also in *Limits*, describing the imaginative or psychic disruption of the mind conditioned by colonialism an event which the poet likens to the violence and chaos of Picasso's 'Guernica'. (62).

'Lustra', composed of three short poems, thematizes the quest motif. In other words, the poet-protagonist whom we meet from the very beginning of the poetic odyssey continues his pursuit of personal self-redemption and rehabilitation. Clearly influenced by the Psalms, notably Psalm 121, 'Lustra' turns on the subject of cleansing as its object of quest, but cleansing from what exactly? From what type of pollution does the poet-prodigal seek cleansing? And with what agent does he hope to secure or achieve total cleaning? Evidently, Okigbo is seeking cleansing from the contagion of colonialism and Roman Catholicism whose real damage resides or occurs in the colonial unconscious, the psyche or the colonized mind (see Ngugi, *Decolonizing the Mind*). A colonized mind is akin to a mummified sarcophagus, it is a spiritual wasteland. Cleansing from the multiple deleterious effects of colonialism becomes for the 'defiled' poet *a sine qua non*. He needs and desires it for an effective *rapprochement* with the originary source; the animistfount of being. Crucially, since return and rehabilitation can be secured only through sublimation, through symbolization, and through imaginative artistic self-identification, poetry-making thus assumes the all-important role of quasi-religious piety and devotion to Mother Idoto. According to Adekoya, 'The subject of *Labyrinths* is the making of poetry. A record of the growth of Okigbo's poetic sensibility from the inchoate stage of a neophyte ('the young bird at the passage' (p. 4) through that of 'a shrub among the poplars' (p. 24), the talkative 'weaverbird' of *Siren Limits*, to the mature stage of the 'town crier' with an iron bell' (p. 67), it enumerates the different phases of the journey into creativity, the inevitable accidents or failures had ('the errors of the rendering', pp. 8-9), the atonements or sacrifices made, and the brief ecstasy-laden epiphany of fulfillment, which is the true reward for every creative artist. (36).

Part of what could be gleaned from Adekoya's interpretation of Christopher Okigbo's poetry is that the poet conceives and also executes poetry as liturgy, a throwback to the ancient practice of the Roman Vates as well as ancient African traditional oral art:

Here is a new laid egg
Here a white hen at midterm (14)

But, given his dual or double consciousness, as W.E.B. DuBois and Frantz Fanon would posit about the nature of the colonial subject, Okigbo successfully melds and conflates figural tropes of thought and feeling drawn from both foreign (Western and Eastern civilizations) and indigenous Igbo/African cultural

traditions to compose the 'new laid egg', that is poetry,. Writing on the shaping influence of foreign and local poetic resources on Okigbo's work, Nwakanma notes that:

[H]is poetry evolved from a unique mix between the symbols of European Christianity, the pagan cults of classical Sumeria and the offerings to a matriarchal African deity, Idoto, by which he inscribed his quest for identity. His repudiation of Christian orthodoxy was a demonstration against its usurpation of the traditional religious mores. (103).

Thus in keeping with the true *function* and *nature* of African art, Okigbo repudiates the doctrine of extreme aestheticism or the art-for-art's-sake movement that was prevalent in 19th-century Europe but equally found its way into the works of some 20th-century European poets. Therefore, contrary to the views of Chinweizu *et al* that the early Okigbo prioritized art-for-art's-sake in his poetry, the evidence before our eyes demonstrates the opposite. Small wonder, Nwakanma avers that '[Okigbo's] poetic aim was to reconcile these disparate worlds, to find order in the fragmented self. Okigbo perceived the ordinary facts of his individual life as inextricably linked, and inexorably transformed by that gestural performance – the symbolic return to his duties at the Ajani shrine through poetry, after his futile pursuit of the alien gods of western civilization and the unmediated materialism of modernity' (123).

Put in a more direct form, Okigbo's poetic intention was to use himself as a paradigmatic representative of the collectivity, a self-as-society nexus that foregrounds the ideology of the interdependency between individual fate and collective destiny. And this communitarian ethos warrants the creation of poetry of reconciliation and/or poetry as catharsis geared towards the exorcism of the spectre of a deeply traumatized past. 'Lustra' thus embosses the quest motif conveyed through movement, a journeying from some place to another, to a better place.

In 'Newcomer', the self-dramatization continues as the poet re-enacts and re-constitutes the tortuous and stultifying rituals of Roman Catholicism:

Time for worship
Softly ring the bells of exile,
The angelus,
Softly sings my guardian angel.

Okigbo here recalls without fondness the tedious rituals of the church. Again, he sees himself under these circumstances as a 'prodigal'. The phrase 'bells of exile' betokens the belfry or the church bells which were rung at specific periods of the day for Church programmes such as the mass, mid-week service, Holy Communion and Catechism class. The 'angelus', therefore, becomes a trope of culturo-spiritual alienation for the poet and his folk. The 'angelus' lures them

away from their indigenous religion to an alien faith, and, consequently they – the Igbo converts- suffer epistemic rupture and spiritual deracination. Writing about ‘Limits’ in the Introduction to *Labyrinths*, Okigbo remarks: ‘Limits and Distances are man’s outer and inner worlds projected – the phenomenal and the imaginative, not in terms of their separateness but of their relationship - an attempt to reconcile the universal opposites of life and death in a live – dieproposition: one is the other and either is both (xi)’. The term ‘Limits’ conveys a sense of degree, extent or range. The poet here focuses primarily on himself as he tries to use poetry as a site of self-rehabilitation, of emotional recovery and healing. Like all humans, and, more fundamentally, like all colonised peoples, Christopher Okigbo tends to suffer the *angst* of finitude caused mainly by colonialism. The objective correlative ‘fragment’ reifies the primacy of ontology and epistemic violence instigated by colonial conquest. The consequent fragmentation of experience leaves the beleaguered ego in tatters, his shattered dignity and self-concept needing re-membering. There is thus a sense in which the term ‘Deluge’, another objective correlative, suggests the flood of socio-cultural despoliation wrought by colonialism and western imperialism. The poet images and figures himself as a ‘weaver bird’, a bird noted for musicality and creativity:

Suddenly becoming talkative
like weaverbird
summoned at offside of
dream remembered... (23)

Okigbo also refers to himself as ‘emigrant’, one who leaves one’s homeland to settle in another country. But in the context of the poem, the poet-sojourner is not referring to a geographical peregrination, involving border-crossing, but a change of moral-cum-spiritual abode, of existential consciousness from a deeply-felt sense of unworthiness. In this connection, the poet intones;

I have had my cleaning. (23)

In ‘Limits II’, Okigbo refers to ‘Horsemen of the apocalypse’ (24). It has been said that:

The four Horsemen of the Apocalypse are described by John of Patmos in his Book of Revelation, the last book of the New Testament. The chapter tells of a “book” or “scroll”, in God’s right hand that is sealed with seven seals”. The Lamb of God, or Lion of Judah, (Jesus Christ) opens the first four of the seven seals, which summon forth four beings that ride out on white, red, black, and pale horses. Although some interpretations differ, in most accounts, the four riders are seen as symbolizing Conquest, War, Famine, and Death, respectively. (See Google)

Given Christopher Okigbo's experience in colonial Nigeria as a government appointee, a civil servant and an active member of a emergent *literati*, he foresaw the tragic trajectory along which the country was careering. The burgeoning culture of the politicisation of ethnicity, political grandstanding and corruption as well as the wheeling and dealing in the civil service and foreign service, he knew that it would take a miracle of Biblical proportions to steady the listing ship of state from certain disaster. Apparently, war, carnage, wanton loss of life and property were looming on the horizon. It was a matter of time as Nigeria sat precariously on a tinder-box of a conflagration. Consider this:

Banks of reed
Mountains of broken bottles.
and the mortar is not yet dry (*Labyrinths* 25)

Romanus N. Egudu considers the above excerpt as part of Christopher Okigbo's poetry dealing with the subject of the poet's literary struggle. He argues that, like Okigbo himself had confessed, poetry-making is a very tortuous exercise, hence, Okigbo's work is 'generally difficult and sometimes obscure. In fact, it is sometimes so confused that, it appears meaningless' (21). Still commenting on 'Siren Limits III', Egudu indulges in source-hunting by tracing Okigbo's source of metaphors and imagery to Ezra Pound's Canto VIV, which is said to deal with the Malatesta theme (22). The phrase 'dust of combat' taken from:

So we must go,
Wearing evemist against the shoulders,
Trailing sun's dust saw dust of combat,
With brand burning out at hand-end

Is said to have been borrowed from W.R. Greg's *Literary and Social Judgment* (N. Trubuer & Co, 2nd ed, 1869) 'in which is contained Greg's criticism of Charles Kingsley's 'Westward Ho!' (Egudu 23). Okigbo's deliberate cultivation of obscurity as well as his characteristic reluctance to shed light on his work, when approached to do so by critics, has given fillip to the negative views expressed by Chinweizu, *et al* on his poetry.

Further, Okigbo, in propagating his myth of poetic non-meaning, once disclosed that he does not set out to communicate a meaning in his poetry, his poetry simply incarnates a passing personal mood, feeling or experience (see Nkosi 133).

But let us return to the couplet:

Banks of reed.
Mountains of broken bottles.

There is a hint of T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* in this couplet, notably aspects of Eliot's poem where he tries to convey the routinised dreariness of post-war Europe. As always, Eliot uses what he called objective correlatives to concretize

some of the psychological and emotional turmoil and the benumbing sense of *ennui* in the wake of the war. Thus, 'banks of reed' and 'mountains of broken bottles' convey a sense of physical devastation, a situation similar to a forest after a fire.

The atmosphere of desolation and ruin at once suggests both personal crisis and collective trouble. Little wonder, Okigbo tells us that: 'And this is the crisis point' (25). In 'Limits V-XII' ('Fragments out of the Deluge'), Okigbo references lexical items such as 'sarcophagus', 'alabaster', 'fennel', 'the beast' and 'Enkudu' in an attempt to foreground the classical and Mesopotamian provenance of his allusions and symbolic scheme. A close examination of these items reveals that their sources are as diverse as ancient Egypt ('sarcophagus'), the New Testament ('alabaster'), Mesopotamia ('Enkudu'), among others. The global and the historical amplitude and sweep of his allusions and poetic associations tends to lend his poetry a pan-human, multi-civilizational epic dimension. His exploitation of Sumerian myth (see pp. 32-3) to further deepen his threnodic and dirgic denunciation of the spiritual devastation of postcolonial Africa lends credence to our view. From the foregoing analysis, it would seem that the major themes which preoccupy the poet are religious depredations wrought by Catholicism and political crisis in the nascent Nigerian state. Given, therefore, the extreme interfusion of far-fetched disparate poetic (mythic) borrowings, associations, allusions and references in his 'over-determined' poetry, it is usually difficult to disentangle and separate religio-spiritual concerns from political themes. This ideational interfusion has spawned a kind of hit-and-miss or stumble-and-fall hermeneutical guesswork on *Labyrinths*. Perhaps bearing this in mind, Okigbo has mercifully furnished some explanations of aspects of his volume, for instance: 'Both parts of silences were inspired by the events of the day...' (*Labyrinths xii*).

According to Isidore Diala:

Okigbo's predilection for titling his poems 'elegies' or 'laments' would seem to explicitly validate Izevbaye's contention that the poet had a fascination with death and his embodying a haunting death wish. Nevertheless, M.J.C. Echeruo has noted that "'Lament' in Okigbo, like 'Elegy' in the later poems, is a generic term for a poetic utterance, since every poem worth that name (which would exclude narrative and even epics) was in fact, a song of passion ... A 'lament' is, thus, not necessarily a poem of mourning" ("Christopher Okigbo" 14). Obumselu concurs and points to the origins of Okigbo's penchant for calling his poems "laments" and "elegies": "The use of the word *elegy* in the title of a poem that is not a tribute to the dead is, of course, a classicism. Okigbo knew that the Greek founders of the elegiac tradition conceived of it as a reflective ode on any subject written in long lines of alternating pentameters and hexameters. But it was... Senghor who led Okigbo back to this classical usage" ("Christopher Okigbo" 76).

Nevertheless, Okigbo's own accounts privilege "Lament of the Drums" and "Lament of the Masks" as *elegies*, that is, mournful tributes to the dead, modeled moreover on African funeral drumming. (88)

'Lament of the Silent Sisters' is, according to Okigbo, composed of poetic elements taken from G.M. Hopkins's popular poem *The Wreck of the Deutschland* in which Hopkins's mourns the drowning of Franciscan nuns who were fleeing religious persecution, 'Sirenes' of Debussy's *Nocturne*, 'No in thunder' (from one of Melville's letters to Hawthorne as well as a series of related airs from sources as diverse as Malcolm Cowley, Raja Ratman, Stephane Mallarme, Rabindranath Tagore, Garcia Lorca and the yet unpublished Peter Thomas' (*Labyrinths*xii). Again, Diala helps us illuminate the subject-matter of *silences*:

Identifying the theme of *Silences* - 'Lament of the 'Silent Sisters' and 'Lament of the Drums' - as "the triumph of the authentic tragic consciousness over the demeaning facts of decay and death" (243), Robert Frazer contends that Okigbo's conception of the tragic while "congruent with the spirit of Greek tragedy" is transcultural (244). Frazer sees in Awolowo, Patrice Lumumba, Tammuz, Christ, and Paulinus a tragic pantheon whose ordeals the drums lament. (96)

Regardless of what has been said in the quote above, it bears reiterating that *Silences* was inspired by the political upheaval instigated by the Action Group party in Western Nigeria.

At the time, there was violence and a general mood of political tension in Ibadan, the political capital of the old Western Region. Obi Nwakanma refers to the tragic development as a watershed of conflict which enveloped Okigbo's generation (175). Furthermore, this critic dubs the period 'The Conflict Generation' (176), as a state of emergency was declared in western Nigeria in order to stem the orgy of bloodlust that had gripped the polity. Added to this, Patrice Lumumba was brutally assassinated in the Congo, a sad turn of events which had signaled symbolically a crisis of continental proportions.

As part of the snowballing conflagration in western Nigeria, Chief Obafemi Awolowo was imprisoned on charges of treason, and, to make matters worse, Segun Awolowo, his oldest son, met his untimely death in an automobile crash in 1963. Consistent with the apocalyptic trajectory, in 1964, the entire country was engulfed in political disturbances. Nwakanma notes:

Okigbo had constructed an abstract parable in which he conceives a personal tragedy in its universal context. There was a new and more terrifying mood of violence in the air in Ibadan by 1964. At that time a feeling of hopelessness had gripped the country. The political leadership had failed to

stem or contain the political crisis that had threatened the country from 1962. Okigbo worked feverishly under this mood – ‘the smell of blood’ was in the air. (208).

‘To this anguished cry of Moloch’ (God of war) (*Labyrinths* 40) the poet insinuates the insidious role of Nigerias’.

Political elite who, for all intents and purposes, could not be bothered about providing the much-needed leadership through what Achebe has called the power of personal example (Achebe, 1983). This breed of self-aggrandising kleptocrats is variously referred to as ‘robbers’ (46), ‘elephants’, ‘eagles’, ‘Scavengers’ (40). Deeply saddened by the unsavoury state of affairs, in Nigeria, Okigbo, then, intones ‘a swansong’ (41), bemoaning the betrayal of the hopeless and disinherited masses:

And they took the hot spoils of the battle
And they shared the hot spoils among them:
- - - - -
- - - - -
- - - - -
- - - - -
And you talk of the people:
There is none thirsty among them. (29)

The poet sets up a Manichean binary between ‘They’ (i.e., the politicians) and ‘the people’, and this oppositionality runs through the latter part of *Labyrinths* as the poet becomes increasingly public-oriented and politically-conscious. The politicians morph from ‘A fleet of eagles’ (31) to ‘scavengers’ (40), ‘robbers’ (46) and ‘bearded Judas’ (43). It is important to stress the nature of the office of the poet under this dystopian regime. He does not just see himself as the imaginative leader of the society, he equally conceives of his role as akin to that of ancient Greco-Roman poets and Vates who were, in essence, poet – prophets/seers. Accordingly, Christopher Okigbo remarks that:

Nevertheless, a poet-protagonist is assumed throughout; a personage, however, much larger than Orpheus; one with as load of destiny on his head, rather like Gilgamesh, like Aeneas, like the hero of Melville’s *Moby Dick*, like the Fisherking of Eliot’s *WasteLand* (xiv).

Thus, with this fairly high-minded self-concept as a poet of destiny, Christopher Okigbo focuses his attention on the postcolony riven as it is with tribalism ethnicism, corruption, and violence. This incendiary cocktail could only invite apocalypse, as terms such as ‘tanks’, ‘detonators’, ‘thunder’, ‘chalised vintage’, ‘wailing’, ‘martyrdom’ and ‘death’ exemplify. *Distances*, for instance, which dramatizes the poet’s psychic and spiritual homecoming thematizes death. Apart from Diala’s and Izevbaye’s accurate reading of this aspect of Okigbo’s

persona, Adekoya expresses a similar view: 'The poet's homecoming is celebrated in terms that suggest the Worship of Death:

Death herself
the Chief Celebrant
in a cloud of incense
paring her finger nails

At her feet rolled their heads like cut fruits;
She bathed her knees in the blood of attendants;
her smock in entrails of ministrants... (55)

Continuing, Adekoya aptly remarks that: 'The images remind us of the pogrom in which thousands of Igbo people lost their lives in the Northern part of the country...' (38). In *Path of Thunder* (Poems prophesying War) Okigbo tends to shed some of the abstract arcaneness and the elliptical suggestiveness of his previous poetry to speak in the more gnomic tones of the 'town crier' since he was writing during the Swinging Sixties, the so-called 'Conflict Generation' in Nigeria/Africa. Okigbo deploys terms such as 'thunder' to speak of the culture of coups and countercoups that had pervaded the Nigeria polity at the time:

The General is up... the General is up...
commandments
the General is up the General is up the General is up.
- - - - -
- -
the elephant has fallen
the mortars have won the day
- - - - -
- -
Jungle tanks blast Britain's last stand. (69).

In 'Elegy for Slit-drum', the poet could not have been clearer and more direct in his satire of the climate of political turmoil which enveloped Nigeria even as politicians of different ideological stamps repudiate their mandate to deliver on the dividends of democracy:

'The cabinet has gone to hell
The timbers are now on fire
the cabinet that sold itself ministers are now in gaol
- (68)

The 'elephants' (politicians) and 'thunder' (metaphor for coup-plotting, and hence, for the military) dominate the text-scape of 'Path of Thunder', and, as the saying goes, where two elephants fight, the grass suffers:

Wherever they treaded,
The grass was forbidden to be there (67).

The 'grass' are the Nigerian masses whose patrimony, the 'hunters' are jockeying to 'share'. This desire to 'share' the meat (i.e. political power) between the political class and the military is at the root of the postcolonial apocalypse that is still with us to date. Hence, Isidore Diala reveals that: '*Path of Thunder* has been read as a sequence of elegies on the fate of a doomed nation' (Diala, "Forebodings" 29). But given the obvious merger of author and persona in the sequence as well as its demonstrable valedictory tone, it also both mourns and exalts the poet's own imminent fate. National history and the poet's personal narrative coalesce and assume a singular tragic trajectory especially with the latter's assumption of responsibility to influence the former. (100).

Fittingly, Diala asseverates that '[O]kigbo vision in the poem is of the end of a dispensation in the proportion of a Yeatsian apocalypse:

And a great fearful thing already tugs at the cables of
the open air

- - - - -
- - - - -

The last lighted torch of the century. (66, Diala 106)

The tragic recurrence of this *dansmacabre* in the Nigeria body politic is what the image of the Yeatsian 'gyre' emblemizes. And Diala discloses this much when he writes that: 'The natural proclivity for futile routines and violence, the treacheries of politics and public life, and the poet's premonitions of defeat and death also recur' (104, emphasis added).

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