Okigbo's *Labyrinths,* Prodigality and the Poetics of Decolonisation

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Abstract
Nearly six decades after the untimely demise of Nigerian poet, Christopher Okigbo during the Nigeria – Biafra Civil War (1967-70), we are no closer to achieving critical consensus on the central meaning/message of **Labyrinths,** his poetry volume. A perennially riddling figure, Okigbo has continued to resist settled humanistic closure and also frustrate universally-acceptable readings of his sole offering to the world of poetry. From charges of obscurantism and wilful esotericism to those of plagiarism and sheer failure of craft and an inability to communicate, Okigbo's poetry remains no less hard-going and largely impenetrable. However, following the growing quest in the African academy for holistic decolonisation of the humanities as part of the larger effort at decolonising knowledge in Africa, this paper grapples with the question of prodigality in **Labyrinths** as well as demonstrates the poet's attempt at creating a poetics of decolonisation. Thus, deploying the post-colonial concepts of **mimicry** and **unhomeliness,** this study contends that Okigbo's **Labyrinths** is a signal instantiation of aesthetic decolonisation as it also suggests practical ways of negotiating the booby-traps of a rampaging globalisation.

Introduction

The prodigal son as derived from the Bible is a motif or even a leitmotif whose influence bulks large in literature as a whole and in African literature in particular. Thus, the concept of *prodigality* in the context of colonialism as well as post-colonialism in Africa could be interpreted as a situation in which the ex-colonial subject fritters away and squanders the creative/productive/remedial/regenerative resources of his autochthonous and endogenous culture, more often than not, in the pursuit of foreign, Western-derived values, ideas and ideals. On the other hand, *decolonisation* as a concept refers generally to the struggle for self-rule and self-determination by subject-races, colonised countries and indigenous territories forcibly occupied by foreign powers for the purpose of exploitation and domination (Ashcroft *et al,* 1989, Fanon 1980).

Historically, after the end of the Second World War, the colonisers started losing some of their larger-than-life mystique in the eyes of their African subjects, especially African soldiers who had fought side by side their Caucasian counterparts in the war. They had suddenly realised that the Whites were all-too-human, just like them, the Blacks. This empowering realisation had imbued them with a renewed sense of collective self-belief that whatever the Whites could do, they, the Blacks, could do, as well. They had started agitating for political independence from their colonial masters. And one after the other, African nation-states started gaining self-determination, beginning with Ghana in 1957. Within a short space

of time, African nations were able to secure their political independence. Nigeria, the country from which Christopher Okigbo hailed, got her independence in 1960, a watershed moment, a path-breaking milestone that had signalled other self-empowering possibilities both for the individual and the nation at large.

Much as this heady wind of political decolonisation was blowing across Africa and much of the Global South, scholars and researchers, particularly those in the social sciences and the humanities had started cudgelling their brains as to the other aspects of the collective struggle for *total* freedom and comprehensive emancipation from all forms of *chains* – physical, mental, emotional, psychic, spiritual, economic, and, of course, political. For men and women of letters, they had felt called upon to re-evaluate and re-calibrate their own individual spheres of influence, to wit: the intellectual turf, the African academy. Critically, they reasoned that under colonialism, all of them, being children of empire, were languishing under mental-cum-intellectual colonisation. To be sure, if there was anything that reminded them of their continued mental and intellectual enslavement to the white man, it was *Language.* In Anglophone Africa, for instance, the English language was (and still is) the medium of expression in both formal and informal situations. Apart from the English language, they were reminded of their colonised status by their *education*, their *religion* (Christianity in Okigbo's case), *inter alia* (Nwakanma 2010, Irele 2019, Ashcroft *et al* 1989, Chinweizu*et al* 1980).

Truth be told, it was virtually impossible for any African child raised under colonialism to escape the entanglements and snares of western culture as embodied in language, education, religion and lifestyle. Small wonder therefore, as Fanon argues in *Black Skin, White Masks,* and, to a lesser degree, in *The Wretched of the Earth,* the colonised subject was a little better than a marionette, or an ape or a parrot. S/he was an existential echo-chamber whose mind, suitably messed up by colonial indoctrination, merely *echoes* and *re-echoes white* visions, ideas, ideals and worldview. Reviewing Fanon's magisterial exploration of the Black Dilemma, Sam Ukala posits:

> In trying to grapple with this problem, according to Frantz Fanon, the African creative writer necessarily passed through three phases; in the first, he shows that he has 'assimilated the occupier's culture' by *imitating* his artistic values and forms; in the second 'he becomes uncertain and decides to go back to his past' through 'remembering' his early rural life and his people's tales, which he, however, dresses in western aesthetics. This does not take away his alienation from his people, with whom he cannot affectively communicate, using foreign aesthetics. So, in the third phase, he seeks to *re-integrate* himself with his people by non-literary means, through mobilising and joining them in a political and/or armed struggle against the coloniser (emphasis added, Fanon 1965: 179 quoted in Ukala 30)

Ukala adds that, "After Fanon's third phase of political struggle […], there has been a fourth phase, apparently a logical development from the second phase in which the creative writer *adapts remembered traditional sources*" (31). Ukala's brilliant analysis of the three phases

identified by Fanon as well as the fourth one suggested by Ukala himself, aptly captures Okigbo's unique predicament as we shall make clear in the course of this paper.

As earlier hinted, the narrow purview of this paper revolves around the subject of prodigality and the poetics of decolonisation as exemplified by Christopher Okigbo's poetry volume, *Labyrinths.* Down the years, since the publication of the *Labyrinths,* Okigbo scholars and critics alike have found the idea of "labyrinths" rather fascinating, so much so that their exegetical engagements and efforts at illuminating its mazy and sinuous spoors or, if you prefer, the volume's patently *riddling* character has spawned a burgeoning industry of tropological hermeneutics. Indeed, such is the incredibly apposite choice of title of the volume by the poet himself that the only issue on which there seems to be a critical consensus is the perfect correlation between title and subject of the volume. Perennially protean and multi-layered in significative possibilities, *Labyrinths* continues to frustrate interpretive consensus, thereby forestalling closure as far as the work's overarching message and meaning goes. Like a body of water, say, a river, you take the amount of water your container can carry out of the river. By the same token, *Labyrinths* means different things to different readers. The reason for this semantic elasticity is because the work is by deliberate design "labyrinthine", multi-dimensional, eternally open-ended. This is the essence of a "labyrinth". Thus, the trope of "labyrinth", derived in the main from Greek mythology, implies a maze, a confounding conundrum, which in more ways than one symbolises life's journey itself, especially for a poet-pilgrim. It is, however, intriguing that Okigbo in the "Introduction" to *Labyrinths* remarks that: "The title may suggest Minos' legendary palace at Cnossus, but the double headed axe is as much a symbol of sovereignty in traditional Ibo (i.e., *Igbo)* society as in Crete. Besides, the long and tortuous passage to the shrine of the 'long-juju' of the Aro Ibos may perhaps, best be described as a labyrinth" (*Labyrinths* xiv).

Still on the *labyrinthine* nature of Okigbo's text, it is important to highlight the fact that this very recondite and hermetic character of the work tends to give rise to what Anglo-American New Critics call *ambiguity* and *tension.* This enforced and over-determined ambiguity, this antinomic tension privileges and implicates a panoply of perspectives on *Labyrinths* as a textual site of hermeneutic contestation. Therefore, for the explicative task at hand, we have elected to deploy and utilise the post-colonial concepts of *mimicry* and unhomeliness as our interpretive tools as we search diligently for the poet's ultimate vision.

Accordingly, Lois Tyson argues that:

> Many […] individuals tried to imitate the colonisers, as much as possible, in dress, speech, behaviour, and lifestyle, a phenomenon postcolonial critics refer to as *mimicry.* Postcolonial theorists often describe the colonial subject as having a *doubleconsciousness* or *double vision,* in other words, a consciousness or a way of perceiving the world that is divided between two antagonistic cultures: that of the coloniser and that of the indigenous community (Tyson 368).

Lois Tyson posits further that: "This feeling of being caught between cultures, of belonging to neither rather than to both, of finding oneself arrested in a psychological limbo that results not merely from some individual psychological disorder but from the trauma of the cultural displacement within which one lives, is referred to by Homi Bhabha and others as *unhomeliness."* (368). Every colonial and post-colonial subject (or *subjectivity*) suffers ineluctably from both *mimicry* and, more viscerally, *unhomeliness.* They are all dogged and haunted by the trauma of history which is a direct consequence of the wholesale adoption and internalisation of the western way of life. The next sub-section examines in greater detail this experiential malaise, this nightmare of history as paradigmatically exemplified by Okigbo.

Okigbo and the Charge of Prodigality

On a personal and private level, Christopher Okigbo's life was a very interesting one. A man of any parts,Okigbo was said to have involved himself in music, sport and literature (Nkosi 133-139). A close reading of *Labyrinths* reveals that the poet was more influenced by music than by literature in the composition of his work. Apart from that, Okigbo was deeply enamoured of foreign writers, most of whom were the so-called Euro-modernist writers and poets such as the French Symbolists in the persons of Stephane Mallarme,Arthur Rimbaud and others, British poets such as T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and W.B. Yeats. Also, having studied for a degree in Classics at the University College, Ibadan, Nigeria, it was inevitable that his references and allusions would revolve around classical mythology, ancient Sumerian world as well as a farrago of disparate Euro-American sources. But beyond all this, what seems to predominate in *Labyrinths* is the poet's religious affiliation to Roman Catholicism. Right from the opening pages of the text, the poet sets in bold relief his total immersion in the doctrinal and ideational cosmos of Roman Catholicism. The term "prodigal" (3), for instance, is derived from the Christian Holy Writ as do words such as "watchman", "watchword"; such phrases as "out of the depths my cry", "give ear and hearken" (3). Although, in this context, Okigbo is ostensibly supplicating to Idoto, his Igbo (African) deity, the poet-suppliant appears to do so using Christian liturgical register.

Having established, *ab initio,* his seemingly undying attachment to his Roman Catholic faith, Christopher Okigbo goes on to deploy this Christian register to depict his journey of self-rediscovery. Consider this excerpt:

> DARK WATERS of the beginning
>
> Rays, violet and short, piercing the gloom,
> Foreshadow the fire that is dreamt of. (4)
> ----------

A close reading of the passage discloses that the poet is adroitly invoking Genesis, particularly Genesis Chapter Seven. Due to man's sinful ways, God felt He had had enough of his serial disobedience. He had destroyed the world with a *flood.* But He later promised to destroy the world by*fire* (2 Peter 3).

In "Initiations", the poet-protagonist writes:

Scars of the crucifix
over the breast,
by red blade inflicted
by red-hot blade,
on right breast witnesseth…(6)

Okigbo makes reference to "crucifix", a significant item for prayer in the Roman Catholic Church. The entire passage speaks of the mysteries of liturgy in the Roman Catholic Church, especially the rites and rituals associated with the sect. It does seem Okigbo is reminiscing over his water baptism by a Catholic priest as well as his catechism under Kepkanly, a priestly figure said to be "a half-serious half-comical primary school teacher of the late thirties" (6). The preponderant deployment of Christian religious objects and elements such as "scar of the crucifix", "God's light" (7), "prodigal" (3, 10) "messiah", "heaven" "penitence" (15) "wine song" (15), "angel" "Calvary" (17), "Horsemen of the apocalypse" (24) "pope's message", "drowning nuns" (30), "censor", "Dan to Beersheeba", "prophet martyrs" (56) and "Pentecostal orbs" (57) seems to create an atmosphere of *ritual* associated mainly with Roman Catholicism. But the fact of the matter is that Okigbo merely utilises and mobilises these Catholic items and ideas as poetic tropes and conceits to foreground the mileage of his spiritual wanderings, having cut himself loose from his autochthonous spiritual and ontologic moorings. The reader, thus, gets a full impression of the poet's sense of *wastefulness* in relation to his native Igbo (African) heritage, which, in brief, inheres in his sacerdotal obligations as priest of Idoto (Nwakanma 150), his racial identity as an *authentic* African.

The point bears reiterating that Okigbo's alienation from his Igbo (African) culture and civilisation is not only down to his religious flirtation with alien belief-systems, his western education is key to his prodigality. As has been thoroughly and elaborately examined, the poet's sense of prodigality, his progressive alienation from his roots could also be found *writ large* in his dress code, food culture, choice of music, sport, and, more crucially, his language of public interaction, namely, English. In vain, therefore, do we seek to skirt the Language Question which itself constitutes the heart of the matter. Following W.E.B. DuBois and Frantz Fanon, scholars and writers such as Achebe, Soyinka, Ngugi, Chinweizu and Es'kia Mphalele have had their say on the insoluble problem of language use in the production and criticism of African literature. Thus, like all colonised persons, Okigbo suffers from *double consciousness,* imbricating in his vexed and conflicted psyche both his Igbo culture and his adopted western ways. In *The Example of Shakespeare,* J.P. Clark examines this psycho-social dilemma that plagues all post-colonial peoples. He calls this identity crisis "The Caliban Complex": the native successfully acquires and masters the master's tongue (i.e., English) and uses it to "curse" him. But the problem is, after the acquisition of the master's language, he loses his own or, at best, mouths gibberish, a mishmash of mother tongue and a second language. The linguistic dilemma of the colonised mind is that he might not be *invisible* chains (Jean-Jacques Rousseau) but he constantly battles with mind-forged manacles (William Blake). This psycho-social thraldom makes his enslavement to the West permanent. The reason for this is that he now *thinks* in English, *dreams* in English, *conceptualises* in English, *sees* visions in English

and *interacts* with his environment, his social life-world in English. The slumber of his *Black* tongue in his *White* mouth indicates his epistemo-ontologicatrophy (Fanon). This, invariably, is the tragedy of the colonial unconscious; of *mimicry* and *double vision*. Hence in *Decolonising The Mind* and *Moving The Centre*, Ngugi calls for the dismantling of what he calls the "Politics of Language".

Accordingly, for Obi Nwakanma, Christopher Okigbo was actively involved in the politics of decolonisation in the years leading up to Independence in Nigeria in 1960 (83, 87). The poet also realised as a "prodigal son", the error of his ways and consciously decided to turn over a new leaf; to return to Mother Idoto, the symbol of Igbo heritage and African autochthony. According to Nwakanma, Okigbo is able to actualise and achieve his self-remediation via the institution of poetry (107). He might not have gone back to the dark and dingy shrine of Idoto, but deep in his soul, Okigbo realised and recognised the elaborate charade that was the life of a Westernised native. This painful realisation had provoked his rejection of Christian orthodoxy and morality (78). 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 civilisation and the unmediated materialism of modernity" (Nwakanma 123).

Disillusioned with the Roman Catholic Church (Nwakanma 103) and all that it represents, Okigbo deliberately decides to retrace his steps back to his *native* and *original* fount of the self his *Igbo* heritage. This conjunctural journey of self-retrieval and rebirth on his part is the focus of the next sub-section in this paper.

Okigbo and the Poetics of Decolonisation

There is a sense in which *Labyrinths* comes across as "research findings" on the part of Christopher Okigbo in the aftermath of his erstwhile life of dissipation and dissolute dog-life; a purposeless pursuit of bulimic worldliness, women and western ideals. This phase of libertinism now behind him, the poet-protagonist (or the prodigal-poet) sets about the task of inking the momentous life-transforming phase of remorse and repentance. The ensuing product of "homecoming" which he describes as "globules of anguish strung together on memory" ("Introduction" xiv) is *Labyrinths* as we know it. Okigbo thus retraces his steps by re-embracing his indigenous, endogenous *Igbo* (African) religion and cultural practices, *inter alia.* This, however, begs the question: How does he do this? Quite simply, Okigbo *returns* to Mother Idoto, a "village stream" in his community. According to Obi Nwakanma: "*Heavensgate* is the projection of an aesthetic experience through which the poet's private life is linked to the terms of a communal myth, and yields the possibility of collective redemption. And redemption is by a return to an experience, which Okigbo enacts, partly by the symbolic offertory to the upkeep of the Ajani shrine through his uncle Nweze Ikejiofor, whom he gave money regularly for that purpose, and partly by the possibility of his poetry" (150).

Okigbo might not have gone physically to the Ajani shrine to pour libations and propitiate Mother Idoto as would conventional orthodox priest, but knowing his priestly obligations to his community, Okigbo fulfils them *symbolically*, through his *Afrocentric*, *decolonising* poetics and poetry. This assertion requires us to pay a bit more attention to the

character and nature of his poetry. How Afrocentric and decolonising is it? We should, perhaps, recall that some Africanist and African scholars and critics have superciliously dismissed Okigbo as a signal instance of Euro-modernist ape. Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike in their vitriolic Jeremiad, *Toward The Decolonization of African Literature* charge him with valorising all the worst aesthetic elements of Euro-modernism, thus refusing to identify any redeeming aesthetic feature drawn or quarried from his oral Igbo cornucopia.

Dan Izevbaye in "Okigbo's portrait of the Artists as a sunbird: A reading of *Heavensgate* appears more comfortable in bringing to the fore the formal(ist) elements of Okigbo's poetry. The implication, therefore, is that African aesthetics have a tenuous hold on the poet or, more specifically, his craftsmanship. Donatus Ibe Nwoga also saw the need to hold brief for Okigbo against the prevalent charge of extreme aestheticism levelled against him (Nwoga, 1973, 14-26). However, Romanus N. Egudu disagrees with these form-oriented African critics who fail to see how deeply indebted Okigbo is to his autochthonous Igbo artistic heritage. In examining what he refers to as "vernacular rhetoric", Egudu posits that Christopher Okigbo, contrary to all the wrong-headed and erroneous charges and accusations of obscurantism and Euro-modernism, is actually a proud scion of the soil, what with his lavish and liberal mobilisation in *Labyrinths* of local Igbo oralities such as proverbs, fables, parables, anecdotes, folksongs and folklore. Egudu claims that: "Curiously, it is his [Okigbo's] early poems rather than in the later ones that Okigbo actually made use of these vernacular rhetorical devices (and even more) we have noted in connection with some other African poets" (303).

Okigbo, it is also worth noting, deploys "significant images out of an Igbo anecdote, folksong and a proverb; and these are employed in "Heavensgate" (303). Eguducontinues: "The bird image in "DARK Waters of the Beginning", for instance, is based on an Igbo folktale" (303). The image of the "rain and sun in single combat" has correctly been interpreted as the state of psycho-spiritual disorientation, a season of anomie, as it were, in which the Westernised native son finds himself, torn as he is between the cross-winds of globalisation on the one hand and the vital primacy of cultural authenticity, on the other (Egudu 304; Adekoya, 35). Thus Egudu concludes that: "the protagonist of Okigbo's poem is in such a situation, culturally and spiritually speaking, and that is why he draws his image from this story. In fact […] the image of the 'sun and rain' is based on a traditional chant with which children in parts of Igbo society used to greet the rainbow" (304).Egudu goes on to add that Okigbo in *Labyrinths* utilises "vernacular names of objects or natural phenomena directly or literally translated, as images" (305). Thus what is usually ascribed or attributed to Euro-modernism or foreign influences are really deftly – wrought instantiations of *transliteration* or *glossing* in *Labyrinths.*

Such, indeed, is the stridency in the sustained denunciation of the so-called "Hopkins Disease" (Chinweizu*et al* 172) in the poetry of the Ibadan-Nsukka school of Nigerian poetry that Isidore Diala goes hammer and tongs to the formidable foundations of these anti-Okigbo criticisms with a view to dismantling them. In a very important study entitled, "Okigbo's Drum Elegies" Diala demonstrates the overwhelming influence of Igbo oral resources in the making of *Labyrinths.* Apart from clarifying the confusion around the use of the term "lament" as deployed by the poet, Diala delivers a superb disquisition on the pivotal place of Igbo funeral

drumming and music in Christopher Okigbo's poetry. Besides, against the fashionable attribution of much of *Labyrinths* to the countervailing and overarching influence of Mesopotamian and Sumerian mythologies, Diala sets the record straight:

> [s]teeped in Igbo myths of reincarnation, the symbolic deaths and resurrections common in Igbo folklore and the emblematic births, deaths, and rebirths, inherent in African puberty rites, Okigbo hardly needed Greek or Sumerian mythology or even Christianity to appreciate the facts of death and resurrection." (96).

As part of his cultural re-education, Okigbo had had to spend some time among Yoruba people as a secondary school teacher at Fiditi Grammar School, in Old Oyo State, Southwest, Nigeria. Surrounded as he was by the sights and sounds and smells of the Yoruba, Okigbo was able to appropriate and expropriate their oral poetry elements, particularly the most popular and common sub-genre of Yoruba oral poetry, the *oriki* (heroic or praise poetry) (Olatunji 1984, Osundare 2000 and Finnegan 1970). Described as "laudatory apostrophizing" by Ruth Finnegan (112), the *oriki*is a form of oral poetry which is characterized by narration, colourful description and attribution built around a series of nominal noun clauses, etc.,to highlight the subject's physical, social, moral and, sometimes, military qualities with a view to swelling and massaging their ego and encouraging others to emulate them. A fit-for-purpose oral song-poem, the *oriki* is composed to praise and lionize both animate and inanimate entities and objects such as the *flora* and *fauna* of the object universe, ideas, worldviews and ideals (Barber 1991).

It was inevitable that Okigbo was going to be enamoured of the Yoruba *oriki* and without fail incorporate its formal and technical features into his own poetry. Unsurprisingly, this artistic expropriation is in evidence in "Silences" (comprising "Lament of the Silent Sisters" and "Lament of the Drums"), a poem-sequence composed ostensibly to *commemorate* the imprisonment of Chief Obafemi Awolowo and to *mourn* the tragic death of his eldest son (xii). As can be seen, "Lament of the Silent Sisters" is arranged in antiphonal pattern – a series of call-and-response, or, more specifically, Crier and Chorus in a normal *oriki* performance format among the owners of the artform the Yoruba. In "Lament of the Drums IV", for instance. Christopher Okigbo writes:

> And the Drums
> Once more and like masked dancers
> On the orange –
> Yellow myth of the sands of exile–
>
> Long-drums dis-
> Jointed, and with bleeding tendons,
> Like tarantulas
> Emptied of their bitterest poisons

And to the Distant-but how shall we go?
The robbers will strip us of our thunder … (*Labyrinths*49).

It has been established by many critics that Okigbo, in this short poem, invokes the tripartite structure of human life in the African experience – the dead (ancestor world), the living (present time) and the unborn (future). He uses "long-drums" in particular to emblematize the "undead" ancestors who, according to African belief, keep watch over their living kith and kin. Drawing upon multiple cultures, civilizations, epochs and world views, Okigbo succeeds in establishing the universality of death (and, as Nwakanma and Diala point out, reincarnation). But he reverts to his Igbo and Yoruba (African) cultural belief systems to highlight the myth of Eternal Return. Further, regarding himself as a paradigmatic representative of all uprooted Westernized Africans suspended precariously on the crest of globalization, Okigbo in "Distances" threnodises his personal (and, by implication, *collective*) journey of *re*-discovery, renewal and rebirth: he calls it a "Homecoming" (53).

Having experienced surgery and realizing how incredibly fleeting and evanescent mortal life is, and, therefore, precious, the poet-pilgrim gives vent to this chastened sense of awareness. According to Adekoya: "Cyclic in design, the journey motif projects the poet-protagonist, an Everyman figure, as a seeker after elusive truth. Every soul is a pilgrim in the world and suffers the anguish of existence which issues out of the three-pronged alienation from the godhead, from society and from oneself". (35)

In the same publication, Adekoya aptly pinpoints the nature of Okigbo's peregrinations: "The quest is multi-dimensional. It is at once artistic, cultural, economic, religio-metaphysical, romantic, and socio-political" (35). This archetypal journey motif is powered essentially by such elements of oral poetry as repetition, parallelism and sound semiotics. Evidently, the entirety of *Labyrinths* is designedly gnomic, charged every step of the way with the architectonics of *ritual*. Deceptively arcane and abstract, *Labyrinths* actually gives the lie to the Derridean heresy regarding the full-orbed adequacy of the spoken word. According to Niyi Osundare, "Jacques Derrida said it all when he declared that there is nothing outside the text, a controversial statement widely cited as a divine dictum in the 'discursive practices' of enthusiastic deconstructionists. With increasing concentration on bare textuality came an attendant *graphocentrism* which privileged written symbols over spoken words, visual analogues (Ong p. 74) over phonemic sources, the seen over the heard" (Osundare, 2022, 4).

It would amount to a signal case of gross hermeneutical blindness to suggest that Christopher Okigbo privileges *graphocentrism*over phonocentrism, the seen over the *heard* in *Labyrinths* because of his signature elliptical suggestiveness, the aporetic indeterminacy of his lines, the inchoate echoes of precursor-voices and the meandering tributaries of his borrowings (Diala 95). Again, an attentive reading of his text uncovers its overwhelming reliance upon the rhetorical strategies of oral speech, and, in this case, oral poetry. Principally hinged upon repetition, parallelism and the sonic overtones of lexical items, the text returns the reader to the very source of poetry, to wit: *the human voice.* Okigbo might not have accompanied most of his poems or poem-sequences with instrumental orchestration, but almost the entire volume lends itself to *performativity*. *Labyrinths* aspires endlessly towards the condition of music (Nkosi 136). And, as we know, music, or more specifically, *rhythm*, is the enabling element of

ritual. *Labyrinths* as an example of ritual poetry rides on the riffs of rhythm to achieve its ritual intensity and function.

Appositely, in traditional Igbo (African) culture, every human act, however quotidian and workaday, is imbued with a ritual feel, hinting ever so slightly at the playfully serious nature of human life. Hence, *Labyrinths* valorises the *word* but discounts the *sign!* For, as the saying goes, the Letter (sign) killeth but the *Word* (the spirit) giveth life. The autolectism of the Derridean sign, which itself derives from the Barthean doctrine of the "Death of the Author", is therefore cast aside in favour of the essential pragmatism of human agency. In the same connection, Christopher Okigbo's poetry leaps straight out of the prison of print to engage with the reading eye and the listening ear, provoking in the process an ideological *volte-face.* Osundare tells as also that meaning is *sounding* and sounding is *meaning* (Osundare, 2000, 1). This catchy truism finds ample justification in *Labyrinths* where, in spite of the surface opacity of the lines, the underlying message of the poems shines through via the *sounding* of the words-on-the-page. This phenomenology of sound tends to rescue the text from the obscurantist catacombs of polysemic overcoding or prosodic non-meaning. As Osundare piquantly posits: "[T]he aesthetics of sounding is regarded as humanity's blessing from the gift of the tongue" (Osundare, 2022, 14-5).*Labyrinths* is a prime instance of *written* orality, in this regard.

Not much need said about "Path of Thunder" which enjoys critical consensus regarding its valorisation of Afrocentric, autochthonous aesthetics. Accordingly, critics and scholars, through the years, have pointed out the nationalistic-cum-patriotic thrust of the poem-sequence that makes up the Postscript: "Path of Thunder". Complete with musical accompaniment, use of local aesthetic features, the *flora* and *fauna* of the tropical scene, "Path of Thunder" is truly a triumph and fulfilment of the poetics of decolonisation. And, as we round off, it is important to evaluate some rather thorny issues in decoloniality and postcolonial discourse. In conference after conference, seminar after seminar, Africanists and African researchers, scholars, theoreticians and critics have consistently called for the total and holistic decolonisation of not just African literature, or even the Humanities, but the whole knowledge – production ecosystem. This, again, begs the question: How feasible or practicable? The undying warning of the late Obi Wali continues to ring in our ears as we grapple with this dilemma. We cannot wish away the Language Question and all its abhorrent spin-offs. To talk of aesthetic decolonisation, we must do away with foreign languages as media of expression and use only African languages to *produce* and *criticise* our literatures. This nativism (not to say atavism) alerts us to the impossibility of total decolonisation in a rapidly-globalising world. As many postcolonial theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha, Ngugi, Achebe, Soyinka, Rushdie, Spivak, Aijaz Ahmad and Edward Said have reminded us (following DuBois and Fanon), ours is a *hybrid* situation. We cannot afford to throw away the baby with the bathwater. As Achebe perceptively argues in *Morning Yet On Creation Day,* the English language has come to stay in Africa as a medium of expression and the right and proper thing to do is to infuse it with elements of African speech-patterns, African oralities, thereby domesticating or *Africanising* it as has been done since the inception of African literature. Obi Nwakanma captures our contention succinctly:

> [Okigbo and his generation] were all products of a hybrid culture: a generation uprooted early from their traditional, indigenous cultures, and put through the elitist mill of English education. The result sometimes was that ambiguous creature of the empire – the native Englishmen – wearing the Fanonian white masks under their black skins. In time, many of these boys felt the deep insufficiency of both worlds, and the fragmentation of their consciousness, which became the source of their deepest conflicts. Okigbo's life reflected that conflict, that sense of an inner disturbance, inherent in the dual consciousness of an Anglo-African identity (54).

Going forward, in addressing the poetics of decolonisation, it is worth noting that this issue of *hybridity* which has condemned African intelligentsia to a perennial state of *mimicry* or a crisis of consciousness is one that cannot be wished away but accommodated, warts and all. Who can reinvent the wheel?

Conclusion

In this paper, we have shown how Okigbo presents himself as a living sacrifice on the altar of cultural self/collective retrieval and rebirth in the aftermath of his prodigality. Adopting a self-as-society strategy, Okigbo's journey of personal re-discovery and cultural remembering and memory embosses both the poet's personal odyssey of holistic redemption as well as collective effort at socio-cultural wholeness, Just as Okigbo has been able to forge in the smithy of his conflicted soul a personal "original" voice from a plethora of precursor-voices, musical echoes and disparate borrowings, so has his country, Nigeria and, indeed, continent, Africa, been able to pitch for *authenticity* in the face of a rampaging globalisation.

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