

Archetypes, Identity and Cultural Continuity in Modern African Poetry

Kehinde Oyetimi, PhD

Department of English

University of Ibadan

Joyetimi2002@gmail.com

+2348074626431

Abstract

African oral traditions, deeply rooted in the principle of art-for-life orientation, continue to resonate strongly in the creative endeavours of modern African writers across various literary genres. From the rich tapestry of oral storytelling to the boundless possibilities afforded by the written word, African literature reflects the societal dynamics within which it exists. Rooted in didacticism, African oral performances celebrate individuals whose ingenuity contributes to communal progress, while also acknowledging the complexities of communal collaboration. These narratives often serve communal purposes by shaping character formations, depicting individuals whose personalities, influences, and achievements embody communal ideals. Archetypes in African oral literature serve as techniques for conveying cultural values, moral lessons, and societal norms, deeply entrenched in the oral traditions and folklore of diverse African cultures, mirroring the collective experiences, beliefs, and identities of the people. While interrogating Okinba Launko's Ire and Other Poems for Performance as a primary text, this paper engages postcolonialism as a theoretical framework, celebrating individuals who have attained the status of national and cultural heroes through their commitment and contributions. Figures pivotal in Africa's and particularly Nigeria's independence movement from colonial imperialism are revered for their role in shaping the continent's destiny. Through historical reflections and poetic tribute, their legacy is honoured, underscoring their significance in the collective memory and cultural narrative of Nigeria. The collection of poems challenges racist narratives that sought to diminish Africa's cultural and intellectual contributions, affirming the rich tapestry of African history and the enduring spirit of its people, thereby inspiring reflection, celebration, and a reaffirmation of African identity and heritage.

Keywords: Modern African poetry, Oral traditions, Postcolonialism, Okinba Launko

Introduction

Oral Traditions and Archetypes of Representation

African oral traditions thrive on the principle of art serving life, a concept that continues to resonate with the creative endeavours of modern African writers across various literary genres. These traditions emphasize the integral connection between storytelling and the lived experiences of the community. From the rich tapestry of oral storytelling to the boundless possibilities afforded by the written word, African literature has always been deeply influenced by the societal dynamics within which it exists. Rooted in didacticism, African oral performances celebrate individuals, whose ingenuity contributes to communal progress while also acknowledging the complexities of communal collaboration, including those involving

individuals with dubious intentions. Many indigenously created verbal narratives are rendered with the intention to serve communal purposes by shaping character formations. These narratives often depict individuals whose personalities, influences, and achievements showcase exemplary conducts of communal ideals.

Archetypes, as prototypical models, hold significant sway in narrative traditions across historical periods. Often embodying figures that played pivotal roles in their societies' histories, these archetypes are revered in many African cultures, sometimes even attaining quasi-religious status. Joseph Campbell (1949) explores the concept of the monomyth or hero's journey, identifying common stages and archetypal characters found in myths and stories from various cultures worldwide. He suggested that these archetypes reflect fundamental aspects of the human psyche and collective experience. Carl Jung (1953) enriched the discussion by defining archetypes as universal, symbolic images and motifs residing in the collective unconscious of humanity. Jung argued that these archetypes shape human behaviour, experiences, and perceptions, manifesting in dreams, myths, and cultural symbols.

Building upon Jung's work, Northrop Frye (1957) expands the concept by defining archetypes as recurring narrative patterns, character types, and symbolic motifs that transcend individual literary works. Frye proposed that archetypes form the structural framework of literary genres, guiding both writers and readers in their interpretation of texts, thus contributing to the universality and resonance of literary works across time and various cultural models. These archetypal frameworks are deeply embedded in African oral traditions and continue to influence contemporary African literature, providing a rich reservoir of symbolic meaning and narrative structure that resonates with readers and listeners alike.

Carol Pearson (1991) provides additional insights by examining primary archetypes such as the Hero, the Caregiver, and the Sage, which she argues are universal patterns of human behaviour and personality. Pearson proposes that recognizing and embodying these archetypes can aid individuals in personal growth and self-discovery. Burn (2008) offers contemporary perspectives on archetypes as recurring symbols, motifs, and literary constructs that convey universal themes and tap into the collective unconscious of readers, thereby enriching the understanding of primordial patterns in literature across different periods and cultural contexts. These contemporary perspectives demonstrate the enduring power of archetypal narratives in shaping both individual identities and collective cultural expressions.

In African oral literature, archetypes convey cultural values, moral lessons, and societal norms. These archetypes, deeply entrenched in the oral traditions and folklore of diverse African cultures, mirror the collective experiences, beliefs, and identities of the people. Far from being static, they evolve dynamically within the cultural contexts and oral traditions of African societies to serve as tropes that transmit historical knowledge while fostering a sense of identity and belonging among community members. Among these archetypes are trickster figures such as Ijapa the tortoise in Yoruba folklore and Anansi the Spider in Akan traditions. These tricksters embody cunning and mischief, challenging authority and societal norms while taking on anthropomorphic roles.

Furthermore, the archetype of the ancestor holds spiritual significance in African oral traditions, serving as an intermediary between the living and the dead. Ancestors may appear as archetypes in stories, offering wisdom, protection, and ancestral blessings. This reflection of ancestors extends to deities who occupy similar roles, playing significant parts as archetypes in African oral literature. These divine beings, often embodying aspects of nature, fertility, and the afterlife, wield influence over human affairs. Examples include Ogun in Yoruba mythology and Nyame, the sky god in Akan mythology. In Yoruba cosmogony, Ogun represents the deity of iron, war, labour, and technology. He is a powerful deity associated with strength, skill, and creativity, often seen as the patron of blacksmiths, warriors, and hunters. Ogun embodies both the constructive and destructive potential of iron, symbolizing the dual nature of technology and warfare in society. Conversely, in Akan mythology, Nyame, the sky god, represents the supreme creator and omnipotent deity. He is the embodiment of all that is divine and powerful, overseeing the universe, including the earth, the sky, and all living beings. Nyame is associated with the elements of life, such as rain, sun, and fertility, playing a crucial role in sustaining life and ensuring prosperity.

Additionally, the motif of the outcast or outsider archetype is prevalent in African literature, reflecting individuals marginalized or ostracized from society due to perceived differences or flaws. These characters navigate trials and tribulations as they seek acceptance or redemption, resonating with themes of identity and belonging in postcolonial literary productions. Writers such as Achebe (1977) and Aidoo (1985) critique colonial stereotypes and advocate for authentic representations of African identity, while others like wa Thiong'o (1986) and Mbembe (2001) explore the complexities of identity formation in postcolonial African societies. Gilroy (1993)

offers a transnational perspective on identity, emphasizing the interconnectedness of black diasporic experiences across Africa, the Americas, and Europe. Similarly, Mbembe locates the complexities of identity formation in postcolonial Africa, discussing the legacy of colonialism, slavery, and imperialism. Through their works, these writers contribute to ongoing discussions surrounding identity, culture, and belonging, as reflected in contemporary African literature and discourse.

Nationhood, the Postcolony and Belonging

The theme of belonging in postcolonial literature navigates the realms of identity, displacement, and cultural assimilation experienced by individuals and communities in the aftermath of colonialism. It reflects the profound influence of colonial legacies on notions of home, nationhood, and belonging. Characters within postcolonial narratives embark on quests for identity amidst the intricate social, political, and historical landscapes they inhabit. They grapple with questions of self-discovery, cultural heritage, and the lasting impacts of colonialism, endeavouring to reconcile conflicting cultural influences, reclaim lost traditions, or construct new forms of belonging in a swiftly evolving world. Postcolonial literature also interrogates the trauma and memory of colonialism, portraying characters who confront painful recollections of oppression, displacement, and cultural erasure as they strive to reclaim their dignity, agency, and sense of belonging amidst historical injustices.

In poetic collections such as Okinba Launko's "Ire and Other Poems for Performance" (1998), poets frequently depict acts of resistance and reclamation as individuals assert their right to belong on their own terms. This may involve challenging colonial hierarchies, reclaiming indigenous languages and traditions, or amplifying the voices and perspectives of marginalized communities. Achebe's "Refugee Mother and Child" (1971) portrays the devastating impact of war and conflict on the lives of refugees, particularly mothers and children, highlighting the human cost of postcolonial strife. Similarly, Awoonor's "The Cathedral" (1971) explores the legacy of colonialism and its effect on African identity, addressing themes of cultural alienation and the struggle for self-determination. Aidoo's play "Anowa" (1970) locates the complexities of power, gender, and exploitation in a postcolonial African society, confronting the consequences of colonialism and capitalism, especially for marginalized women. Senghor's poem "Prayer to

the Masks" (1961) reflects on the tension between tradition and modernity in postcolonial Africa, examining cultural heritage and identity while critiquing the impact of colonialism.

Okigbo's "Lament of the Silent Sisters" (1967) addresses the violence and brutality of postcolonial conflicts in Africa, capturing the suffering and resilience of those affected by war and political upheaval. Okara's "Once Upon a Time" (1962) reflects on the loss of innocence and the erosion of traditional values in postcolonial Africa, exploring themes of cultural disintegration and identity crisis amidst rapid change. Shire's "Home" (2011) foregrounds the experiences of refugees and migrants, offering poignant reflections on the intricate dynamics of identity, displacement, and belonging. Similarly, Shire's "Conversations about Home (at the Deportation Centre)" (2014) confronts the challenges of displacement, migration, and the quest for belonging in a world shaped by colonial legacies. Through these literary works, postcolonial authors highlight the personal and collective struggles of individuals as they navigate the complex interplay of cultural identity and historical memory.

Additionally, Patrice Nganang's "Song of the Broken River" (2017) explores the enduring impacts of colonialism, examining the ways in which historical events shape contemporary African societies. Ladan Osman's "Exiles" (2018) captures the experiences of navigating cultural hybridity and historical trauma, offering insight into the ongoing process of identity formation in the face of displacement. Tjawangwa Dema's "A Love Letter to My Mother's Accent" (2016) provides introspective reflections on language, identity, and cultural heritage within the context of postcolonial realities. Through these diverse narratives, postcolonial literature continues to engage with the themes of belonging, identity, and cultural continuity, shedding light on the ongoing struggles and resilience of communities affected by the legacies of colonialism.

In interrogating the varied dimensionalities of the postcolony, writers may offer alternative metaphors of the archetypal hero for communal emancipation. The communal hero in African oral literature is celebrated for courage, strength, and resilience. These heroes, often ordinary individuals, embark on extraordinary journeys or quests to overcome challenges and enact positive change within their communities. Notable examples from Yoruba mythology include Ogun, Oya, and Sango, each embodying distinct qualities of resilience, strength, and bravery. Ogun, revered as the god of iron, warfare, and technology, epitomizes courage and bravery through his fierce warrior persona. Similarly, Oya, associated with wind, storms, and transformation, and Sango, associated with thunder, lightning, and fire, symbolize courage and

resilience through their unwavering commitment to justice and leadership. Other examples of communal heroes include Sundiata Keita from the epic of Sundiata in West Africa and Shaka Zulu from Zulu mythology, both of whom are celebrated for their leadership and transformative impact on their societies.

In works like Okinba Launko's "Ire and Other Poems for Performance," heroic figures are exalted with the lyrical flourish typical of oral poetry. Drawing from the praise-chant tradition of Yoruba oral poetry, Launko's collection depicts how the community elevates these individuals to the status of modern-day heroes, thereby commemorating their contributions to the socio-political and historical landscapes of major African nations. With a preponderance of imagistic expressions, the persona, like a traditional bard, sets out on a quest of storytelling, celebrating the virtues and deeds of these heroes. The lyrical and performative elements of Launko's poetry reinforce the communal aspect of heroism, emphasizing the collective memory and cultural significance of these figures.

By highlighting the heroism of individuals within their cultural and historical contexts, postcolonial literature not only preserves the rich oral traditions of African societies but also adapts these narratives to contemporary realities. These modern-day heroes serve as metaphors for communal resilience and resistance, offering a sense of identity and continuity in the face of postcolonial challenges. The interplay between traditional and contemporary forms of heroism in literature underscores the enduring relevance of these archetypes, providing inspiration and a sense of purpose for present and future generations.

Once again the season is ripe
For the renewal of our songs

The Ruler of the Sky yawns,
And a new calendar opens at once
For the birds and the fishes
And the plants growing new tubers

Lo! I clear my throat-and
The hills re-arrange their wardrobe
For my song. (*Ire and Other Poems*, 5)

The nexus of co-relational existence among the various elements in nature is profoundly recognized in many cultural traditions. There is a deep attachment to cosmic powers, particularly to the supersensible forces upon which the sustenance of all elemental forces of nature relies.

The bard pays homage to the deities, acknowledging that every constituent part of nature is imbued with energy that sustains cosmic balance. For the bard, every aspect of nature possesses an internal rhythm that daily finds expression in its own unique way. The morning, signifying the beginning of the day, carries a level of ritual observance. The cycles of the day, the phases of the moon, the sun's orbit, and the changing seasons all recur within the natural order. In oral traditions, it is believed that survival depends on the will of the deities, and any alterations in the natural order are seen as signs of their displeasure. It is within this rhythm of collaborative existence that people consciously or unconsciously build observatory rituals.

The planting seasons naturally precede harvest time, demonstrating nature's time frame for the emergence of certain phenomena. The association between humans and nature produces rituals that are intricately linked to these cycles. Harvest customs, sacrifices, and songs are derived from moments of harvest and reflect humanity's attempt to harmonize its energies with those of nature at specific cyclical moments. It is customary in such societies to appeal to certain deities for their benevolence during these times. Sacrifices intended to invoke the goodwill of these deities are offered, reinforcing the reciprocal relationship between humans and the divine.

In this intricate relationship, the bard's role is crucial as a mediator who interprets the signs of nature and the will of the deities. The bard's songs and stories not only pay tribute to the cosmic powers but also serve as a guide for the community, helping them to understand and navigate the natural cycles. The rituals and observances he describes are a form of dialogue with the divine, a way for the community to express gratitude, seek favour, and maintain balance. The cyclical patterns of nature, mirrored in the community's rituals, ensure that the cosmic balance is upheld, and that the community remains in harmony with the universe.

This harmonious relationship between humans and nature is essential for the community's survival and prosperity. By recognizing and respecting the rhythms of nature, and by performing rituals that honour the deities, the community fosters a sense of belonging and continuity. The bard's homage to the deities and the natural order underscores the importance of these traditions in maintaining cosmic balance. This interconnectedness of all things in the universe reflects a worldview where every element plays a vital role, and where human actions are seen as integral to the ongoing harmony of the cosmos.

Esumare,
Voice of Orunmila, my father
In your cloud of many colours

You will still daub my song ...

Cloths.
Beads,
red and crystal (*Ire and Other Poems, 5, 6*)

In the Yoruba cosmos, Orunmila is ascribed as the owner and controller of the sky, embodying both its benevolent and erratic tendencies. The sky, much like the dual nature of humanity, displays a range of behaviours that reflect its ambivalence. It can transform into a frightening blackness with the emergence of a thunderstorm, a powerful and intimidating display of nature's force. This unpredictability requires seafarers to perform sacrifices, appealing to the deity to harness the sky's benevolence for safe passage and protection. These rituals underscore the profound respect and reverence for Orunmila's power, acknowledging the deity's control over the sky's capriciousness. In other moments, the sky reveals a spectrum of iridescent colours, a beautiful and serene spectacle that captivates and inspires. The bard, through his poetic expression, seeks to capture this duality, drawing a parallel between the unpredictable nature of the sky and the complexities of human existence.

The bard's figurative exploration of the sky under Orunmila's dominion reflects a deeper understanding of the Yoruba worldview, where natural phenomena are closely tied to divine influence. This portrayal is not just about the physical sky but also about the spiritual and emotional realms it governs. The sky's varying states—its stormy darkness and its colourful brilliance—mirror the human experience of struggle and joy, uncertainty and beauty. By seeking to articulate this cosmic duality, the bard connects the audience to a larger existential framework where the sky's moods are manifestations of divine will and human emotions. This intricate relationship between the sky, the deity, and humanity is a testament to the interconnectedness of all elements in the Yoruba cosmology. It emphasizes the importance of rituals and sacrifices as means of navigating the unpredictable forces of nature, while also celebrating the awe-inspiring beauty that the sky can bestow. Through his lyrical quest, the bard not only pays homage to Orunmila but also evokes a profound sense of wonder and respect for the cosmic order

Mother of Fishes
it is only in the hands of lepers
that beads are mute-
in dexterous hands, beads turn
to song, to ornaments ...

...

Mother of Fishes
silent I await your power
of mutations. (*Ire and Other Poems, 6*)

As previously stated, all constituent parts of nature possess their internal energy, each expressing itself in distinctive ways. Among the Yoruba, Orunmila is believed to coordinate the affairs of the sky, while the sea and its various tributaries fall under the domain of the sea-spirit, known as Olokun. Each deity in the Yoruba pantheon has its own sphere of influence, operating independently without impeding on the domains of others. This structure reflects a harmonious balance within the cosmos, where each element and its corresponding deity contribute to the overall order and functionality of the universe.

The sea, under the stewardship of Olokun, is a microcosmic metaphor of the macrocosmic universe. It encapsulates different shades of mysteries that mortals still find hard to completely decipher. The vastness and depth of the sea symbolize the unknown and the unseen, realms that are governed by divine forces beyond human comprehension. Olokun, as the guardian of these watery domains, embodies the enigmatic and powerful nature of the sea. The sea's unpredictable tides, its hidden depths, and its life-sustaining waters all serve as reminders of the intricate and often unfathomable workings of the natural world.

In Yoruba cosmology, the clear demarcation of each deity's domain ensures a balanced and orderly universe. This belief system underscores the importance of understanding and respecting the distinct roles that various natural elements and their deities play. The sea, with its myriad tributaries and boundless expanse, reflects the broader universe's complexities and interconnectedness. Through their reverence for deities like Olokun and Orunmila, the Yoruba acknowledge the profound influence these forces have on their lives. The sea's mysteries and the sky's capriciousness are not seen as mere natural phenomena but as expressions of the divine, each with its unique energy and purpose within the grand tapestry of existence.

Yemoja is the mother of fishes, here identified by the bard.

Then Olokun, mother of Eri,
Gave orders to her daughter
And Eri swelled her breasts
And rain seized the world. (*Ire and Other Poems, 9*)

The myth of Olokun's attempt to destroy the earth by means of a great flood re-enacts the dual nature of the sea, which holds both creative and destructive capabilities. In traditional Yoruba

societies, barren couples often seek Olokun's favour to have children, reflecting the deity's association with fertility and creation. The worship of Olokun, as the energy of the sea, is particularly prevalent around coastal areas, where the presence of the sea is a constant and powerful force in daily life. In these regions, the sea's influence is deeply ingrained in the cultural and spiritual practices of the people.

Mermaids, believed to be soldiers of Olokun, further emphasize the deity's powerful and mysterious nature. When floods occur, these coastal communities offer sacrifices to appease Olokun, hoping to mitigate the destructive aspects of the sea and restore balance. This practice underscores the deep respect and reverence for the sea and its governing deity. The ritualistic offerings serve as a means of maintaining harmony with the powerful forces of nature, acknowledging their potential for both creation and destruction. Through these traditions, the duality of Olokun's nature is recognized and honoured, reflecting the complex relationship between humans and the natural world.

Obatala
I salute you:

Honours grow no weed
in the forest of time
all hail to your white honour

I am waiting: ...

Esu Laaroye
Dweller on the fatal cross-roads

Confuser at Oke-Ado market
Ruler of Bere roundabout
It is morning
Wash my eyes of the night

...
King of Ire, your generous heart
Filled with pity, and you
Took Iron into your forge, and
Iron became your *iwofa*

Oh Ogun, the sky is immense,
But the sky grows no grass
Take me too into your forge
Let me taste the anvil of wisdom ... (*Ire and Other Poems*, 7, 8)

From the above lines, the bard alludes to Obatala, who in Yoruba cosmogony is revered as the sculptor-god. In the Yoruba creation myth, Obatala is entrusted by Olodumare, the Supreme Being, with the task of creating humans. However, due to a moment of carelessness caused by his over-indulgence in emu, the Yoruba equivalent of palm wine, Obatala's senses become dulled, and his hands falter while forming these beings. This lapse results in the creation of individuals with physical differences, such as albinos, cripples, and the blind. The myth underscores the idea that even divine beings possess human-like flaws and that these imperfections contribute to the diversity of humanity.

Esu Laaroye, often misunderstood, is regarded as the trickster deity in the Yoruba pantheon. Contrary to the interpretation of some Euro-American critics who equate him with the Satan of Judeo-Christian or Islamic texts, the Yoruba do not perceive any of their deities as inherently evil. Instead, they view the deities as embodying the characteristics and tendencies of their respective roles and domains. Esu, in particular, is seen as the god of Ifa, an intricate system of divination. Ifa serves as a vital tool for consulting the deities, revealing fate, destiny, and providing guidance in times of uncertainty. Despite advancements in science and technology, many Yoruba people continue to seek Ifa's counsel before making significant decisions, illustrating the enduring cultural and spiritual importance of this practice. Esu's role as the guardian of communities and villages further emphasizes his protective and guiding influence.

Cross-roads in the Yoruba worldview are spiritual and symbolic. They suggest a maze of uncertainty where only initiates, through the assistance of Esu, the dweller at the cross-roads, can make guided decisions. Sacrifices to this deity are often offered at designated cross-roads, signifying their importance in seeking clarity and direction. Esu's inclination to foment confusion is expressed in the characteristic chaos of marketplaces, such as the Oke-Ado market in Ibadan, Oyo State, Southwest Nigeria, as alluded to in the poem. This depiction of Esu highlights his complex nature as both a trickster and a guide, reflecting the nuanced understanding of deities in Yoruba cosmology.

Ogun, the Yoruba god of war and the patron deity of blacksmiths, hunters, warriors, and all those whose occupations involve the use of metal, is also honoured by the bard. In Yoruba tradition, several symbolic instruments are closely associated with Ogun, each reflecting his attributes and significance. These include iron and metal tools, chains, and palm fronds. The machete, a metal tool, is prominently used during many court proceedings in Yoruba traditional communities,

where individuals swear by Ogun by kissing the machete to affirm their truthfulness. Failing to tell the truth after swearing with Ogun's totem incurs the deity's wrath. Ogun is often invoked to witness contracts, ensuring honesty and integrity. This deity commands significant reverence and adherence, even in modern circles, highlighting his enduring importance.

In these intricate portrayals, the bard acknowledges the depth and complexity of Yoruba deities, each with distinct roles and attributes that influence daily life and spiritual practices. The interconnectedness of these deities with various aspects of nature and human existence underscores the rich tapestry of Yoruba mythology. Through these allusions, the bard emphasizes the importance of understanding and respecting the divine forces that shape the world, reflecting a profound cultural heritage that continues to resonate in contemporary times. The depth of the destructive capabilities of Ogun is captured in the richness of his Oriki (praise-chant) as documented by Finnegan (1970) and partly re-produced here:

Ogun kills on the right and destroys on the right.
Ogun kills on the left and destroys on the left.
Ogun kills suddenly in the house and suddenly in the field.
Ogun kills the child with the iron with which it plays.
Ogun kills in silence.
Ogun kills the thief and the owner of the stolen goods.
Ogun kills the owner of the slave-and the slave runs away.
Ogun kills the owner of thirty 'iwofa' [pawns] – and his money, wealth and children disappear.
Ogun kills the owner of the house and paints the hearth with his blood
Ogun is the death who pursues a child until it runs into the bush.
Ogun is the needle that pricks at both ends.
Ogun has water but washes in blood. (113)

In Yoruba culture, it is believed that many deities once existed in human form during prehistoric times. Upon their death, they did not cease to exist but rather transformed, changing their place of abode and ascending to divine status. This transformation allowed them to become archetypes of an idyllic and perfect civilization, embodying the cultural values and structures from which they emerged. These deities, now in their superhuman capacities, continue to influence the culture, guiding the people and providing a model for societal ideals. They remain integral to the cultural heritage, their legacies preserved and celebrated through ritual observances that keep their stories and influence alive.

These deities maintain their presence and significance in the community through ritual practices and ceremonies. The rituals serve as a means of communication with the divine, reinforcing the

cultural norms and values that the deities represent. The deities' transformation into divine beings allows them to perpetuate their influence on the culture, acting as custodians of tradition and moral standards. Their stories, recounted in oral literature and myth, provide a framework for understanding human experiences and the natural world, while their worship ensures the continued relevance of their teachings. Through these practices, the deities sustain their roles as both historical figures and living embodiments of cultural ideals, bridging the past and present in a continuous cycle of reverence and adherence.

Archetype of the mentor: Locating cultural memory and identity

In "Ire and Other Poems for Performance," there is a deliberate celebration of individuals who, through sheer commitment, have attained the status of both national and cultural heroes. The poems, infused with the oral traditions of praise-chants, extend beyond the confines of ritual altars to honour these figures in various public ceremonies. This literary practice reinforces the intertwining of cultural reverence and national pride, showcasing how modern heroes are elevated to a quasi-divine status within the community. The deliberate invocation of deities in these chants signifies the continuity of cultural values and the transference of divine attributes to contemporary figures, reflecting a society's need to anchor its identity in both the spiritual and the temporal realms.

The poem "Mourning from a Corner of Shyness" is performed in honour of the late sage, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, a significant figure in Nigeria's political history. Awolowo, known for his visionary leadership and profound impact on the nation's development, is commemorated through this poetic performance, highlighting his enduring legacy. The poem's performance serves as a sociopolitical commentary, merging cultural heritage with national memory. By evoking Awolowo's name within the framework of traditional praise-chants, the poet not only pays homage to his contributions but also situates him within the broader narrative of African heroism. This fusion of past and present underscores the dynamic nature of cultural memory and its role in shaping national identity.

The performance of the poem begins with a mention of Ogun before proceeding to the main body of the rendition, symbolically linking Awolowo to the attributes of this powerful deity. Ogun, the god of iron, warfare, and technology, embodies resilience, strength, and creativity—qualities that resonate with Awolowo's legacy. By invoking Ogun, the poet draws a parallel

between the divine and the human, suggesting that Awolowo's efforts and achievements were not merely political but also had a profound cultural and spiritual significance. This invocation serves as a reminder of the interconnectedness of the spiritual and sociopolitical spheres in African societies, where leadership and heroism are deeply rooted in both cultural and divine endorsement. Through this layered narrative, the poem reinforces the idea that true leadership transcends the political domain, encompassing a holistic vision that includes cultural preservation and spiritual integrity.

AH! A WO! A WO-O-O-O!
Name that shapes the lips into a flute
Awo!
Name that trills in the throat like a song
Awo!
Song exploding into air, like iron gong
Awo!

*but how shall I even dare to call you-I,
with only this mouth, too small for your legend?
No! –slender fern in an evening of forest trunks,
I shall hide here in my corner and hoard my shyness.
(Ire and Other Poems, 13)*

The journey to Nigeria's independence from colonial rule involved several key figures who played pivotal roles in the movement towards self-governance. Among these influential individuals was the late Chief Obafemi Awolowo, a prominent leader who was instrumental in the fight for Nigeria's freedom. The poet illustrates Awolowo's significant impact by portraying himself as a 'fern in the forest of trunks,' a metaphor that highlights the poet's sense of humility and insignificance in the presence of such towering figures. In this imagery, the fern, with its modest size and lack of flowers, symbolizes the poet's recognition of his own limited stature compared to the monumental contributions of leaders like Awolowo.

His legacy is profoundly captured through this metaphor, emphasizing his towering presence in the historical narrative of Nigeria's independence. The poet's self-depiction as a small, unassuming fern among mighty tree trunks serves to underscore the vast difference in their achievements and stature. This imagery not only reflects the bard's reverence for Awolowo but also speaks to the broader theme of individual contributions within a collective struggle for national liberation. It suggests a deep respect for the monumental efforts of those who paved the

way for Nigeria's independence, acknowledging that the poet, despite his own efforts, views himself as a minor participant in the grand historical journey shaped by such formidable leaders.

OHAWO-

Let me hide here in my shyness,
Among the smaller mourners:
For when bullocks start on a stampede
The egret's grace is out of place-
[or who can hear the soft fall
Of a teardrop amidst a cascade of waters?
Ah, in a market of weaverbirds
Even the nightingale must sing unheard ...]
(*Ire and Other Poems, 14*)

In the preceding lines, the disparity in size between the bullock and the egret is depicted, much like a tear drop is insignificant in a cascade of water. This profound illustration highlights the immense stature of Chief Obafemi Awolowo and the ideological path he chose to follow. The poet's use of these metaphors underscores Awolowo's towering presence and influential legacy in Nigeria's history. The comparison to a small egret beside a massive bullock, and a tear drop within a cascade, powerfully conveys the vast difference between Awolowo's impactful contributions and those of others. Such analogies are fitting for heroes whose time on this side of the cosmic divide has significantly contributed to the progress of their society.

Awolowo's life and work are immortalized through these vivid metaphors, emphasizing the profound respect and admiration he commands. The poet's deliberate choice of imagery serves not only to exalt Awolowo but also to reflect on the broader sociopolitical landscape he helped shape. Awolowo's influence extended beyond his immediate actions; he was a symbol of the struggle for self-governance and the quest for a better, more equitable society. His ideological pursuits and the policies he championed were pivotal in steering Nigeria towards a path of progress and self-determination. The reverence depicted in the poem is a testament to the lasting impact of his leadership and vision, which continue to inspire subsequent generations.

By celebrating Awolowo through these metaphors, the poet acknowledges the enduring significance of his contributions. The imagery of the bullock and the egret, and the tear drop within a cascade, serves as a poignant reminder of the vast gulf between ordinary efforts and extraordinary legacies. Awolowo's life work is portrayed as a beacon of hope and progress, a standard against which the efforts of others are measured. His legacy is enshrined not only in the

annals of Nigerian history but also in the hearts and minds of those who continue to draw inspiration from his vision for a just and prosperous society.

For it is an evening of long, loquacious tongues;
An evening when smart mourners with mealy
Mouths
Scramble to make profit of the ritual of shedding
Tears
...
Oh Awo-
Many voices will rise tonight in your praise
But please don't listen:
Many hands will be pleading for help from pain
But don't even notice
(*Ire and Other Poems, 14*)

Never in the historical pigmentation of the Nigerian political topography was there much contentions and threats of secession that heralded the advent of the civil war. Chief Awolowo was the premiere of the old Western region. As premiere, he insisted that the education educator and infrastructural development should take the major chunk of the region's economy. Amidst tensions, he introduced free education at the primary level in the entire Western region. In addition to that, Awolowo ensured the implementation of free medical healthcare facilities to individuals till the age of 18. Of all the regions in the nation today, none competes favourably in educational advancement than the southwest. Awolowo, going by historical records, had a robust and an all-embracing nationalist spirit to push the southwestern region forward. Within the spectrum of advancement, there were indications of unrest that were foisted on the nation with the events that led to the civil war.

remember, it was these same voices
who jeered, when you were here,
when you warned of storms about to break
in the fragile house of freedom:
remember, it was these same wringing hands
that hung down helpless, so soon ago,
when you screamed and screamed for vigilance
against the onrushing roar of Terror
(*Ire and Other Poems, 15*)

Awolowo argued against the drive for creating more states in Nigeria, emphasizing the nation's lack of capacity to manage them effectively. Nigeria's civil war, also known as the Biafran War (1967-1970), was primarily caused by a combination of ethnic, political, and economic factors. Deep-seated ethnic tensions among Nigeria's major groups—the Hausa-Fulani in the north, the Yoruba in the west, and the Igbo in the east—were exacerbated by political instability following Nigeria's independence from Britain in 1960, including a series of coups and counter-coups. Economic disparities and competition over resources, particularly oil in the Niger Delta, further fuelled the discord. The immediate trigger was the secession of the Eastern Region, dominated by the Igbo, who declared the independent Republic of Biafra. The federal government's refusal to allow secession and the ensuing military confrontation led to a devastating war characterized by significant civilian suffering and loss of life. Even decades later, the nation continues to grapple with the profound losses and unresolved issues imposed by the civil war.

Awolowo consistently maintained that Nigeria is more of a geographical expression rather than a unified nation. The colonial powers, in their effort to unite over 300 ethnic nationalities, failed to consider the deep linguistic, ethnic, and religious differences that exist among them. Awolowo believed that each state should be viewed as a federating unit, each possessing its autonomy. According to the poet, Awolowo's prediction of inevitable national collapse is only natural, given the historical and ongoing challenges. Since independence, Nigeria has made little progress, largely due to recurring military interventions in its governance. The various states within the nation are surviving by a single thread, struggling to maintain coherence and stability amidst the persistent challenges of managing such a diverse and complex country.

Oh Awo-
The road of courage is a harsh & solitary lane:
But you walked it, unbowed, & were not once
Astray—

*The rest of us have God above to take the blame:
We make our choice of cowardice & meekly kneel to pray:*

*In the house of principles, even rafters are unsafe:
but you lived in yours, unswayed by the wounds of Time-*

*The rest of us sell friend & faith for gold and for ease:
In banks, or halls of power, the heroes are still the Harlots.*

(Ire and Other Poems, 15,16)

The bard here indirectly indicts the Nigerian collective for the retrogressive position the nation has maintained since independence. The activities of Awolowo were regarded as treasonable which led to his eventual arrest and imprisonment. He spent a total of three years in prison. Nigeria's First Republic (1963-1966) collapsed due to a confluence of political, ethnic, and economic tensions. The republic was marked by intense regional rivalries and ethnic divisions among the three major groups—the Hausa-Fulani in the north, the Yoruba in the west, and the Igbo in the east. Electoral fraud, corruption, and violent political competition undermined democratic processes, leading to widespread disillusionment. The Western Region's crisis, including the breakdown of law and order and the subsequent declaration of a state of emergency, further destabilized the country. Economic disparities and disputes over resource allocation, particularly regarding oil revenues, exacerbated tensions. These issues culminated in a series of military coups in January 1966, which overthrew the civilian government, ending the First Republic and plunging Nigeria into political instability and eventually civil war.

After Awolowo's release from prison, the military government thought it wise to employ his services. He was asked to take up the portfolio of the federal commissioner of finance and as vice chairman of the federal executive council. He saluted the decision of the then military government for the creation of a 12- state federal system in 1967; however, he warned that certain considerations were neglected and so unrest and division were imminent. Many political analysts of Nigeria socio-political system still insist that the recent developments in the country have given solidifying credence to the fears registered in Awolowo's predictions that the nation's problems are largely based on ethnic, religious and linguistic divergences. Of this the poet reminisces that he (Awolowo) "warned of storms about to break/in the fragile house of freedom"

Oh Awo—
no matter how many voices however passionate
besiege your resting ears tonight, please
refuse to listen, till History has flailed us:

leave us to suffer the scourge of hollow men,
the lashing of former helots, now haughty commanders
let the land first abjure its lust for venal gods

& only then, when we have been cleansed by

suffering

& are newly wise, oh Awo, return again to speak to us.

(Ire and Other Poems, 16)

The passion with which the poet articulates his contention is very dirge-like. Though dead, the poet engages the sage in a dialogue. Without doubt, there is an attempt at eulogy to the platform of an archetypal hero. The phase of the crusaders who tried to ensure the independence of the nation has passed. The poet calls the rulers of the nation hollow men who lack the full capacity to marshal the nation to its harbour of rest. The poet has succeeded in fusing diverse thematic concerns in this rendition starting from the historic background to the nation's attainment of independence to the contributions of Awolowo and finally to the present state of the nation.

In "Ire Ni", the poet employs the narrative technique of the dramatic as he lends voice to the celebration of Wole Soyinka, one of Africa's most fecund literary writers. The poem is particularly arranged for performing voices.

AM:

Forgive us!

Ah we see him now! We see the Great One!

We salute!

M1:

Baaba o! Ah step forward

Intrepid son of your father!

M2:

Welcome, forgive us!

We pay respects as due!

Forgive our blindness-

(Ire and Other Poems, 34)

Soyinka is remarkably the first African to have won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986, a prize most coveted by not a few writers. It is instinctual therefore that an attempt at celebrating the icon is expected. The poem therefore illustrates the creative prowess and literary ingenuity of Soyinka.

M1:

This is your birthplace, among us:

You who went dancing

In the stadium, where the spirits

Of white Masks dared to dance-

M2:

- And won the trophy there!

M1:

You who went riding
In the race where only the proud horses
Of white men alone
Had ever been decorated-

M2:

-And you went prancing,
And stole the victory there!

(Ire and Other Poems, 35)

Characteristic of African folktales is the depiction of the interaction of the human world and that of the supernatural. Within the lines above, a duel of some sort is brought up where the representative of the world of humans is expected to engage a delegate of the world of the dead. This kind of narrative is usually structured to portray the triumph of the human spirit. There is a journey motif where the hero embarks on a quest proving the worth of the human energy. The dialogue between the characters in the rendition foregrounds this narrative device. Celebrations and eulogy usually follow the triumphal return of the hero. The hero in such oral narratives undertakes such quest with the singular aim of bringing victory to the community. In other forms, the journey motif may be structured in cases where the need for a sacrificial lamb may be needed.

This brings up the issue of the scapegoat motif. This simply implies the ritual of cleansing usually carried out in specific and stipulated occasions. An individual is selected and made to bear the uncleanness of the whole community thereby averting the wrath of the deities and hence guaranteeing the continued existence of the community. Soyinka is thus captured in this symbol as “dancing/in the stadium, where only the spirits/of white masks dared to dance.”

M1:

Oh you Marathon Man
Who went boldly into a competition
Meant for the cream of
the world's athletes-

M2:

-And brought the trophy back home
Onto the wounded shoulders

Of the black race!
(*Ire and Other Poems, 35*)

There is a subtle playback to history especially as regards the inaugural interaction with Europe which many believe resulted in the underdevelopment of the black race. The Transatlantic Slave Trade and the colonial incursion of Africa have remained the major outlets of discourse in African history. The assumptions that filtered in after the different stages of these contacts questioned the humanity of the black man and his contributions to the body of world advancement. Racist theorists hold tenaciously that Africa and the black man had no history but had been one long night of darkness and retrogression. They insisted that the black man lacked creative proclivities and so could not have cultivated a distinctly relevant cultural past worthy of scholarly inquisition. Since they did not share in the same cosmic pool which situates the African worldview, cultural, linguistic and religious aesthetics, it was expected that they would lampoon what they failed to understand.

The literary award of the Nobel Prize for Literature given to Soyinka eclipsed, earlier unfounded bias and racial prejudice held against the man of colour. The award stated in unambiguous terms that Africa possessed both aesthetic and literary potentials.

M1:
If any white mouth dare open again

AF:
To call us the sons of slaves-

M2:
To say that we have built nothing-

AF:
Contributed nothing-

M1:
Planted nothing-

AF:
Nurtured nothing-

M2:
In the fruit garden of the world-

AF:
In the rich earth of knowledge-

M1:
We shall simply fill his ears-

AF:
And the ears of his grandfathers-

M2:
With the melody of his name!

AF:
With the thunder of your name!
(Ire and Other Poems, 37)

The dramatic ambience created by the bard engenders participation where dialogue, generally found in the domain of drama and prose narratives, is judiciously utilised. The deployment of this technique indicates that archetypal heroes uniquely represent the ideals of their communities and are thus collectively celebrated. Soyinka, therefore, takes the appellation of an archetypal hero whose activities have permanently led to test contentions and tensions about the African person. Soyinka's greatness is thus celebrated:

ALL:
WOLE SOYINKA!! WOLE SOYINKA!!

PS:
Ehn, Wole gboye o

ALL:
Ehn, Egbon gbayi o!

Nothing more captures the elevation of the human spirit than the portrayal of the person of Nelson Mandela of South Africa in the poem “Tshotsholoza.” The poem situates that dark period in the history of South Africa where the height of man's inhumanity to his kind was exhibited. Yet the poet takes a step further as he extols that worthy instinct in the human make-up which prioritises courage and self-sacrifice at the very face of dehumanising experience.

A man neither age nor prison has broken,

Nor the pain of separation from loving wife
And pining children; nor the loss
Of the unspeakable caress which comes
From standing free in a forest,
Touching leaves...

Any attempt at tracing the history of South Africa to its present state would be adjudged an adventure incomplete without Nelson Mandela. The darkest part of South Africa's history was the apartheid regime which saw the dominance of a minority white over the aboriginal majority black. This experience has been documented even in the literary productions of writers from that country. Mandela's South Africa was caught in this harrowing encounter. The apartheid system reduced black South Africans to sub humans, living within the margin set out by the racist white minority. Mandela's political and humanist ideologies were at- contrapuntal levels with what played out in South Africa. The psychological impairment that resulted from the system reached its limits when the likes of Mandela raised and supervised guerrilla attacks and sabotages against the perpetrators of the regime. The use of armed struggle was a last resort to Mandela after attempts with peaceful protests proved non-effective. Mandela was later charged and imprisoned on the basis of leading armed struggle against the incumbent government. Mandela's imprisonment lasted for over 27 years. The poet foregrounds the anguish he bore, vividly capturing both his psychological and emotional pain. Yet he salutes the courage of Mandela.

Conclusion

African oral literature is a rich tapestry interwoven with archetypes that convey cultural values, moral lessons, and societal norms. These archetypes, deeply rooted in the oral traditions and folklore of diverse African cultures, evolve dynamically within their cultural contexts, acting as potent storytelling devices. They not only transmit historical knowledge but also foster a sense of identity and belonging among communities. Through these narratives, the collective experiences, beliefs, and identities of the people are mirrored, providing profound insights into the essence and evolution of African societies.

Postcolonial literature addresses the trauma and memory of colonialism, portraying characters who confront painful recollections of oppression, displacement, and cultural erasure. These narratives strive to reclaim dignity, agency, and a sense of belonging amidst historical injustices. The exploration of such themes serves as a critical examination of colonial legacies and their

enduring impact on individuals and societies, highlighting the resilience and struggle for liberation and cultural restoration. This literary approach underscores the importance of acknowledging and addressing historical wounds to pave the way for healing and empowerment. *Ire and Other Poems for Performance* celebrates individuals who have attained the status of national and cultural heroes through their commitment and contributions. Figures like Chief Awolowo, pivotal in Nigeria's independence movement, are revered for their role in shaping the nation's destiny. Through historical reflections and poetic tribute, their legacy is honoured, underscoring their significance in the collective memory and cultural narrative of Nigeria. The poems in the collection pay homage to icons like Wole Soyinka and Nelson Mandela, showcasing their sense of communality and exemplary courage in the face of adversity. Okinba Launko's collection serves as a reminder of Africa's resilience, creativity, and capacity for greatness despite historical injustices and challenges, affirming the rich tapestry of African history and the enduring spirit of its people.

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