“beyond the limits of the dream”: Delineating the mythic and ritual sequence in Okigbo’s poetry

Stella Okoye-Ugwu

Abstract: Myth is notably a complex cultural reality that can be approached and interpreted from various viewpoints. Myths generally tell stories about deities or heroic beings. They can be classified into three types: creation myths, eschatological myths, which describe catastrophic ends of the world and myths of gods and goddesses. What we find in the poetry of Okigbo is a combination of all these myths. Myths are the products of a racial or tribal group rather than the creation of an individual. Every culture has its own mythology, according to its cosmology. One hardly comes across a direct statement in his poetry, for he prefers his lines loaded with imagery, allusions, and symbols. This paper aims at delineating the mythic and ritual sequences in the poetry of Christopher Okigbo. Myths are the products of a racial or tribal group rather than the creation of an individual. Every culture has its own mythology, according to its cosmology. Okigbo does not allow for simplicity in the language of his poetry. Okigbo uses the sublime, the esoteric, and the mythic to place his poetry on a universal level. This critical inquiry adopts for its theoretical framework, the mythic/archetypal theory.

Subjects: Performance Theory; Practice and Practitioners; Cultural Studies; Literature

Keywords: Myth; ritual; symbolism; archetype; Okigbo

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Stella Okoye-Ugwu is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. She is also a Fulbright Fellow of the University of Louisville, Kentucky, U.S.A and holds a PhD in African-American Literature. She has to her credit, over fifty learned papers in national and international journals. Her research interests include but are not limited to Race and Gender Studies, Cultural Studies, African American Literature, African Literature, English Literature, Caribbean and Asian Literature. Two of her most recent works are titled “Politics, social burden and didactic nuances of concealment in Emeka Nwabueze’s Rainstorm in the Desert: Focus on polemics of rational choice”. AGATHOS, Vol. 11, Issue 1(20): 75–91 (2020) and “Rethinking the Slave as Hero: A Deconstructionist Perspective in Shakespeare’s The Tempest and Amadi’s The Slave”. Forum for World Literature Studies, Vol. 12(2): 331–343 (2020).

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Christopher Okigbo in his poetry published under the title, Labyrinths with Path of Thunder has successfully projected the African indigenous culture in a very positive light while using traditional African myths and rituals with a blend of ancient Greek and Roman mythology too. This high level of poetic artistry has launched his poetry to a universal crescendo. It has also succeeded in highlighting the rich resources of African indigenous culture and tradition as well as African traditional religion with particular reference to the culture of the Igbos of South-East, Nigeria. As a good writer and poet, Okigbo served as a spokesman for the poor, vulnerable and the voiceless of the society.
1. Introduction

In classical Greek, Mythos signified any story or plot, whether real or invented. Mythology is a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once thought to be true by a particular cultural group. Most myths are related to social rituals—social rituals are set forms and procedures in sacred ceremonies. Darthorne (1979) defines myth as a story, which depicts men as gods, while Northrop Frye (2000) posits that myth is a drive towards a verbal outline of human experience. It is the external presence in the psyche. The Hutchinson Encyclopedia (2003) defines myths as follows:

Myth is a genre of traditional stories symbolically underlying a given culture. These stories describe gods and other supernatural beings with which humans may have relationships and are often intended to explain the workings of the universe, nature, or human history. Mythology is sometimes distinguished from legend as being entirely fictitious and imaginary, legend being woven around an historical figure or nucleus such as the tale of Troy, but such division is difficult as myth and legend are often closely interwoven.

William Boscom (1984) sees myths as prose narratives which are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past. They are accepted on faith, usually sacred, often associated with theology and ritual, and the embodiments of dogma. Myths account for the origin of the world, of mankind, of death or for the characteristics of birds, animals, geographical features and phenomena of nature. They may recount for the activities of the deities, their victories and defeats. They may purport to explain details of ceremonial paraphernalia or rituals (45).

It is pertinent to note that Christopher Okigbo remains one of the finest poets to emerge from Nigeria. One never ceases to wonder about the quantum of fine poetry that would have emerged from his pen if he had not been cut down in his prime at the outset of the Nigeria Civil War in 1967. This is equally reflected in Chinua Achebe’s (2008) account of his little daughter’s reply to him when she heard of Okigbo’s death: “don’t let him die”; Okigbo’s poetry never dies but lives on in the eternal lines—“beyond the limits of the dream”.

The poetry of Christopher Okigbo is a long mythic journey. His poems are woven in such a manner that they leave the reader gaping for more elucidation. Anozie (1972) opines that it was through his study of Classics that Okigbo got to embrace the vast field of ancient mythologies, sages, and folk legends. This is why his poetry is full of allusions to legendary heroes of Greco-Roman mythology and other landmarks of ancient history and civilization (1972, 13). Nwakanma (2010) equally observes that Okigbo’s poetry is an elaborate ritual which reveals the complex dimensions of his experience of life (82).

2. Theoretical framework

Mythic/Archetypal critical theory interprets a text by focusing on recurrent myths and archetypes in the narrative, symbols, and imageries. Carl Jung (1966) describes the images that we see after waking from a dream “archetypal”. He also coined the term “collective unconscious” because he felt that all humanity has common experiences. According to Jung, the archetypes found in the collective unconscious provide the basis for worldwide myths, imagery, and symbols. Birenbaum (1988) is also of the view that myth follows certain identifiable tendencies and takes form in similar shapes because humanity at all times and places has shared a common unconscious fund of experience. The mythic theory will be used to foreground the analysis of the selected poems of Okigbo and make a valid research statement on the use of myth by Christopher Okigbo in his poetry.

3. Methodology

This study used the qualitative and descriptive study with content analysis method. The selected poems of Christopher Okigbo were critically engaged and analyzed to yield meaning to the reader. The poems were randomly selected and follow no particular order.
4. Scope of the study

The scope of this research is limited to the poetry of Christopher Okigbo, published under the title, *Labyrinths with Path of Thunder*. However, inferences were drawn from other collections as well.

5. Literature review

Many scholars and critics have written quite a lot on the poetry of Christopher Okigbo. These diverse critics have written books and essays that have handled the diverse aspects of his poetry. Ali Mazrui’s in his *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo* (1972) hinges his thesis on the fact that as a poet, Okigbo should not have joined the army during the Nigerian civil war. He also alludes to Okigbo’s unique style of writing and the obscurity of his poetry. His analysis is more biographical than literary. Similarly, the central theme of Paul Theroux’s article (1965) is that “Okigbo is an obscure poet, possibly the most obscure in Africa” (12). He suggests two ways of studying Okigbo’s poetry: one can examine Okigbo’s words or echoes from other writers, or simply listen to the music of the poetry. Theroux’s essay does not follow any particular theory or concept.

Anozie has two notable works on Okigbo’s poetry. These are “Christopher Okigbo: Creative Rhetoric” (1972) and “Poetry and Empirical Logic: A Correspondence Theory of Truth in Okigbo’s LAMENTS” (1970). The first uses a biographical approach in the interpretation of Okigbo’s poetry. In the second essay, Anozie hinges his analysis on what he calls Okigbo’s “logistics” and the “law of organic composition”. He argues that outside this law, critics tend to misunderstand Okigbo’s poetry. The main thrusts of his argument are that Okigbo constructed his work “on empirical model” and that the poet was trying “to reproduce the syntax and semantics of the Yoruba drums”. He uses the structuralist method to interpret Okigbo’s poetry, and some critics are of the opinion that his method only made the poetry more difficult than it was already.

Adetugbo (1971) examines Okigbo’s poetry along with those of Soyinka and Clark in his essay, “Form and Style”. He engages the works of these three poets using the formalistic and stylistic approaches. He is of the view that Okigbo’s poetry is loaded with imagery and symbolism, and that its major themes are personal quest and dramatization of his inner conflict; which give unity to his poetry. In the same manner, Izevbaye’s essay, “Okigbo’s Portrait of the Artist as a Sunbird: A Reading of HEAVENSGATE” (2011) is an expository study of Okigbo’s poetry. He sees the difficulty of Okigbo’s poetry being as a result of his allusions to personal myths and forgotten cultures.

Egudu has to his credit, a number of critical essays on Okigbo’s poetry. One of such essays is “Defense of Culture in the Poetry of Christopher Okigbo” (1973). His main argument is that Okigbo supports the native culture and has a satirical attitude towards Christianity. He is of the view that the recurrent themes in Okigbo’s poetry are religious suppression and religious revival. He carries this argument over to his other essay, “Okigbo’s DISTANCES: A Retreat from Christ to Idoto” (1979). The major thrust of his argument here is that Okigbo rejected Christianity and its beliefs to return to his native religion. This is also the same issue he presents in a chapter of his book, *Four Modern West African Poets* (1977). In all of his works on Okigbo, Egudu concentrates on the analysis of African culture and tradition.

Equally, Nwakanma’s book, *Christopher Okigbo, 1930–67: Thirsting for Sunlight* (2010) is a deeply introspective work. It chronicles the entire family life of the Okigbos in all of their journeying through life. It touches on practically every aspect of their lives and interrogates the enigmatic qualities of Okigbo’s poetry. Therefore, what Nwakanma does in his work is largely on the man, Christopher Okigbo.

Dan Izevbaye (2011) in his essay, “Living the Myth: Revisiting Okigbo’s art and commitment” interrogates the dramatic ritual as well as the Nigerian politics of the 1960s as they unravel the dilemma at the centre of Okigbo’s poetry. On the other hand, Anthony J. M. Nazombe (1988) in his
Labyrinth as a Ritual Initiation Pattern in Christopher Okigbo's *Labyrinths* sees Okigbo as a poet-persona and traces the Labyrinths of the poet's quest for fulfillment through all the different stages of his poetic journey.

In addition, Tem Edwin (2017) in his “Religion and Myth as poetic resources: A Study of Christopher Okigbo's *Labyrinths with Path of Thunder* and Bate Besong's “Disgrace: Autobiographical Narcissus” argues that Okigbo and Besong have been able to blend domestic and foreign symbols to make their poetry provocative and sublime. He further describes both poets as revolutionists as he explores what he describes as “an unusual mix of religion and myth in a manner that made their poetry terse” (1).

6. Discussion

6.1. The ritual sequence in the poetry

In his poetry, Okigbo deploys the ritual method to a very large extent in navigating the trajectory of his poetic oeuvre. The ritual dynamics has significantly contributed to the success of the mythological techniques inherent in his poetry. The ritual method is a prophetic and traditional technique that Okigbo has extensively explored in his poetry. Okigbo (1962) says that,

Heavensgate was originally conceived
as an Easter sequence. It
later grew into a ceremony of
innocence, something like a mass,
an offering to Idoto (*Labyrinths*, xi).

It means that in the form the poem was originally conceived and in the latter form it eventually took, the poem is basically, one long ritual. The entire collection of poems, *Labyrinths with Path of Thunder* (1971) is a composite ritual drama. It should be noted that for Okigbo, ritual involves both the Christian and traditional rituals sequences. When he writes, he moves freely from one to the other. This serves the aesthetic purpose of giving his poetry, an organic unity. The interconnectedness of the poems is captured by Okigbo himself in his Preface to *Labyrinths*, when he says that “although these poems are written and published separately, they are in fact, organically related (xi).

The ritual starts with the first poem and ends with the last. Okigbo refers to the poems between the beginning and the end as “various stations of the cross”. He uses the prayer method in his poetry. A prayer is usually addressed to a deity depending on the religion in question. It could be addressed to the saints, spirits, the Virgin Mary, or even to the ancestors. Okigbo in his characteristic manner of poetic ambivalence addresses his prayer to any of these. He makes a subtle invocation in the form of a prayer to the deity, Idoto, in section one of “The Passage”. Later in the same poem and again in “Newcomer”, he prays to his ancestors, and his late mother, Anna:

Anna of the panel oblongs
Protect me
From them fucking angels
Protect me
My sandhouse and bones (17)
At the beginning of this collection of poems, he prays to the earth goddess, “Earth bind me fast” (63). By the end of the text, he reverses his prayer:

Earth, unbind me; let me be
the prodigal; let this be
the ram's ultimate prayer to
the tether … (72).

In the first prayer to the earth-goddess, he wants to be bound, but in the second prayer, he wants to be unbound. The protagonist who, at the beginning of Labyrinths, was sorry to be a prodigal, at the end of “Path of Thunder” prays to be allowed to be a prodigal. This gives the aesthetic literary effect of antithesis. Okigbo’s poetry is basically in the form of a sermon or a retreat to a deity or an oracle. The Jadum section of “Initiations” (8) is an admonition, while section ten of “Fragments out of the Deluge” (33) is a denunciation of sin and an allegorical mythic sequence. Sections four and five (42–43) of the “Lament of the Silent Sisters” are threats. The entire length of “Path of Thunder” is a mythic exposition of misery and woe. In “Path of Thunder”, for instance, the speaker warns of an impending disaster waiting to happen. He strikes the note of warning that Nigerians should have a change of heart and amend their ways, failure of which would lead to war. Nigerians failed to hearken to the warning, and change their hearts, and there was a civil war. This kind of prophetic sequence is what confirms the notion that a poet is also a prophet.

Okigbo’s poetry is a traditional ritual drama. Here, we find the devotee going through various labyrinths and Stations of the Cross to be finally united with his deity. This ritual plot is sub-divided into four scenes: “Heavensgate”, “Limits”, “Silences” and “Distances”. Soyinka (1976) in his Myth, Literature and the African World, refers to ritual as “the drama of the gods.” He also views drama “as a cleansing, binding, communal, recreational force” (2:4–5). The poems of “Heavensgate” provide the pedestal for the cleansing rituals while the crystallization of the new discovery of fulfillment on the part of the protagonist is the ultimate union with the deity.

7. The mythic sequence in the poetry
Okigbo negotiates the trajectories of myth and ritual as the prominent foci of his poetic journey. He deftly opens his “Heavensgate” on a mythical note:

Before you mother Idoto
naked I stand
Before your watery presence
a prodigal
leaning on an oilbean
lost in your legend.

Under your power wait I
on barefoot
watchman for the watchword
at Heavensgate;
Out of the depths my cry;
give ear and hearken … (1).

In his “Introduction” to Labyrinths, Okigbo has this to say: “Idoto is the village stream of which I drank, in which I washed as a child” (xi). It seems that for Okigbo, the stream has transmuted to the supernatural status of a mythic goddess. This is further buttressed by the response of Pius Okigbo, the elder brother of Christopher Okigbo to a question during an interview with him at Enugu. He confirms that Idoto is a sacred stream that everybody reveres in Ojoto. He says that they do not eat fish from the Idoto stream.

Okigbo’s prayer to the goddess, Idoto at the opening of his poem resembles the classical invocation of the muses by the poets. Virgil (1880) introducing the journeys of Aeneas at the beginning of his Aeneid says:
Declare to me, o muse! 
the causes, in what the deity
being offended, by what the
queen of heaven was provoked (1:10-11).

The poetry of Okigbo is replete with sequences of mythic rituals. Re-incarnation is another mythological symbol in his poetry. The myth of re-incarnation has it that a dead relative goes to be re-born by a relative whether male or female that he or she loved while alive. Sometimes, it is said that it is not necessarily always out of love, but sometimes to make up for short comings in the previous life. Okigbo says in an interview with Whitelaw (1970):

I am believed to be a re-incarnation of my maternal grand-father,
who used to be the priest of the shrine called Ajani, where the Idoto,
the river goddess, is worshipped … that is, I should carry on his duties …
And in 1958, when I started taking poetry very seriously, it was as though
I had felt a sudden call to begin performing my full functions as the chief
priest of Idoto (42).

This portrays a mythic relationship between Okigbo and the water goddess, Idoto. It is pertinent to note here that in his “Introduction” to Labyrinths, Okigbo re-states that his poetry is like an offering to Idoto. The bedrock of his poetry appears to be myth; the myth of Idoto and the myth of re-incarnation- the cyclic nature of life. In praying to his late mother, Anna Okigbo, the poet is adopting the Igbo traditional belief in ancestor worship. In his fascinatingly unique way, he does not do it in the manner of deity worship, but does it like a Christian praying to a saint. This is a very illustrative instance of how myth, religion, and ritual are united in an all encompassing embrace to bring out the aesthetic beauty in the poetry of Christopher Okigbo.

In the poem “The Passage”, the reader encounters the “oil bean” symbol. The oil bean tree is regarded as a totem, and legend has it that the spirits of little children stay there to wait for kind women that would become their earthly mothers. It is a sacred tree found in most shrines in Igbo land. There are some other trees which equally considered sacred. In this poem, the protagonist is seen:

  leaning on an oil bean,
  lost in your legend
  under your power wait I
  on barefoot,
  watchman for the watchword
  at Heavensgate

The poet protagonist in this poem could be likened to the kindred spirits of little children that wait around the oil bean tree looking out for their intended mothers. He is waiting for mother Idoto to accept him back as his mother. The oil bean tree is associated with the village gods and goddesses. The significance of this symbol is that it provides a spiritual anchorage for the protagonist. In “Lustra”, the protagonist decides to engage in a ritual cleansing. He goes to the hills with sacrificial items. He presents “a new laid egg”, “a white hen at midterm”, and “vegetable offering with five fingers of chalk”. In Igbo cosmology, these items are objects of purity and cleansing:

    Fingers of penitence bring
    To a palm grove
    Vegetable offering with five
    Fingers of chalk . . . (15)
The protagonist's first meeting with the goddess did not end on a good note since the goddess perceived him as unworthy. Hence, the appearance of the goddess to him is very fleeting and momentary like the lightening. He consequently describes her appearance as “match-flare in wind's breath”. The protagonist then goes ahead to fulfill the conditions for the ritual cleansing by offering the sacrificial items and effecting a worship in the “palm grove”. In the poem “Siren Limits”, we encounter the protagonist in the presence of the “Queen of damp half light” suppliant for acceptance and re-integration after the performance of the cleansing rituals. It does appear that the gods have endorsed his purification rites after his presentation of the sacrificial items. There are other sacrificial items used, such as “bamboo towers”, “yesterupwine”, and “a tiger mask and nude spear ….” For Anozie (1969), “most of these symbols selected by the poet carry a military nuance or association”. In which case, the protagonist appears combattant, and ready to battle any aggressor that will attempt to prevent him from reconciling with his local indigenous gods and probably force him to remain in the foreign Christian religion against his wish.

In Igbo cosmology, it is known that the sound of the “drums and cannons” are always associated with ritual worship. In his Introduction to Labyrinths, Okigbo explains that “[t]he long-drums are on the other hand the spirit of the ancestors, the dead”. In “Lustra”, the protagonist is involved in the ritual of purification, offerings and solemn worship in the “palm grove” in the midst of “thundering drums and cannons”, and to further this ritual, in the poem “Lament of the Drums”, the symbol of the drum is yet again evoked for the performance of the “feast-of-seven-souls”. This feast is not a joyful one, but a tragic celebration. The same drums had to lament and wail until they suffered dislocation and “bleeding tendons”. This scenario pictures the disdain and bitterness of the ancestral spirits at the havoc wrecked on the society by the rampaging invaders, symbolized by the Christian religion.

In the “Watermaid”, Okigbo introduces another type of myth embedded in Igbo mythology in his poetry. This is the myth of the watermaid. The watermaid is believed to be an extraordinarily beautiful woman. This mythic belief is usually upheld in the riverine communities of Southern Nigeria. She is supposed to live in the water, such as, lake, river, sea, or even the ocean. Therefore, she is very similar to the Idoto of Ojoto, in the sense that she is equally a water goddess. The watermaid is said to have the boa-constrictor as her totem. Like some Greek goddesses, she can fall in love with a man, in which case the man encounters good fortune as long as he abides strictly by her instructions. This is the deity that Okigbo’s protagonist seeks to befriend. The watermaid has already shown him some measure of favour in her brief appearance to him. However, the protagonist yearns for a deeper, fuller, and more permanent union with the river goddess.

There is yet another mythological dimension to the poetry of Okigbo. This is closely-knit with the mythical concept of re-incarnation. It is the myth of re-birth. Re-birth is different from re-incarnation in that the person re-incarnated is different from the incarnator. In re-birth, the person goes through the cyclic processes of birth, growth, development, maturity, old age and death, all over again.

Suffice it to say that Okigbo believed that even before his birth, he was destined to be a priest. This awareness of his special call underlies the first section of “Heavensgate”, which is titled “The Passage”. It reads:

Me to the orangery
Solitude invites,
A wagtail, to tell
the tangled-wood-tale;
a sunbird, to morn
a mother on a spray. (Labyrinths, 4)
The process of cleansing and initiation begins here. Okigbo’s cleansing and initiation are more internal and symbolic than apocalyptic and dramatic. He records at least four or five initiations, using different symbols. The first initiation symbolizes his childhood experiences as epitomized by his childhood teacher, Kepkanly. The second initiation embodies his Christian experiences which are summed up in the person of John the Baptist. The third and fourth initiations come from Jadum and Upandru respectively. Jadum and Upandru are sage symbols. It should be noted that after his initiation, there is a side comment: a sort of *obiter dicta*. After this fourth initiation, for instance, the narrator tells the initiate that the high office of priest requires a very high moral character: “And he said to the ram: Disarm”. (9). Invariably, it means that when one is invested with this high office, he must give up his sensual life.

Another way Okigbo uses myths is by innuendoes. The title, “Labyrinths”, recalls the myth of Orpheus who wandered through the sky to the underworld to be reunited to his wife, Eurydice. Orpheus was a poet-musician. Therefore, Okigbo’s poet-hero, like Orpheus sets out on a quest for union with the goddess. There is also the similarity with the wandering Aeneas in Virgil’s *Aeneid* (1880). After the destruction of Troy, Aeneas sets out in a quest for a new home, almost like Okigbo’s long drums and, most especially, in the figure of the indefatigable sunbird who refuses to succumb to the carnage and destruction of the native religion. The sunbird, like Aeneas lives on after the devastations. It reads:

But at the window out-side
   a shadow:
   The sunbird sings again
   From the limits of the dream,
   The sunbird sings again
   Where the caress does not reach (35)

The myth of Sir Garwin (1959) also comes to mind as one reads Okigbo's *Labyrinths*. There are other examples of Okigbo’s allusive use of myths which echo Spencer’s *The Faerie Queen*, Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678) and even Satan in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1992). Moreover, the title, “Labyrinths” is reminiscent of the dark maze through which Orpheus had to wade through the underworld to get to the palace of Pluto and Persephone. Another way that Okigbo uses myths is in the imagery he invokes. This can be deduced from some of the imageries, like the rainbow imagery in the poem, “The Passage”.

Dark waters of the beginning
   Rays of violet and short, piercing the gloom
   Foreshadows the fire that is dreamed of.
   Rainbow on far side, arched like
      A boa to kill
   Foreshadows the rain that is dreamed of. (4)

The rainbow imagery is significant in Biblical and African mythologies. The “dark waters of the beginning” echoes the deluge that destroyed the world of Noah in the Biblical account.

The issue of religion is very important to Okigbo in the sense that after his foray in Western education and Christian religion, he abandons Christianity and settles for the traditional Igbo religion, symbolized by the female deity, Idoto, the river goddess and his cultural mother. Okigbo variously describes her in his poems as his “watermaid”, “lioness with armpit fragrance” and “white queen”. His new inclination towards the traditional Igbo religion starts from the point when he comes to the realization that he is an exile in the Christian religion. To this end, he delineates an array of symbols to navigate the canvass of his poetic journey from Christianity to
traditional Igbo religion. He uses a variety of symbols, characterized by their suggestive indefiniteness, rather than the communication of any meaning.

Most of the Christian symbols deployed by Okigbo are not for the promotion of the cause of Christianity. He actually uses the religious symbols to further portray his rejection of the Christian religion. For instance, in the poem “Initiations”, he explains his initiation into the Christian faith through the agency of “Kepekany”, he uses the symbol of the “crucifix”:

SCAR of the crucifix
over the breast,
by red blade inflicted
by red-hot blade,
on right breast witnesseth (Labyrinths, 4)

The crucifix is a major Christian symbol of salvation right from the beginning of the Christian religion. However, in this context, the use of the symbol of the crucifix is not in the sacred sense at all. Okigbo's use of the symbol here suggests anything but salvation. The experience has scarred the protagonist for life because it was inflicted with a “red-hot blade”. The initiation is a painful one and leaves the protagonist with resentment and scorn for the entire sad experience. In this light, Dan Izevbaye (1973) considers the pain of the experience as “the consequence of his resentment”. He argues that the cause of the resentment stems from the worthlessness and corruption of the other initiated ones.

Okigbo further questions the validity of the “crucifix” as a symbol of salvation since those seemingly transformed by the touch of the crucifix become no better than worthless and dubious characters. These are the characters he considers as “living-dead”, “fanatics”, “selfish self-seekers” and “morons”. The protagonist consequently, disdains the process of conversion and the convert while abhorring the initiation and sees the Christian baptism as a landmark and a mystery which he must shed from his memory.

The “crucifix” symbol appears yet again in “Distances III” (Labyrinths, 49). Here, the protagonist finds himself among the “pilgrims” bound for “Shibboleth”:

IN THE scattered line of pilgrims
bound for Shibboleth
in my hand the crucifix
the torn branch the censer

It is indeed as Egudu (1977) insists, that “the poet is showing us how the protagonist is being tempted by the vision of the part of the Christian world, which contains the elements that contradict its spiritual objective”. The height of Okigbo’s cynicism towards the Christian faith and how its dogmas run counter to life appears in his presentation of the figure of “John the Baptist” as coming with a “bowl of salt water” and “preaching the gambit”.

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

The poet finds it difficult to visualize a “life without sin”. He considers such a life as no life at all. This is borne out of the fact that he sees it as hypocrisy of the religious men to imagine that anybody can live a sin-free life. “John the Baptist” is seen here preaching salvation “with a bowl of
“salt water” which presents to the protagonist a symbol of false salvation. Izevbaye (1973) considers the scenario that the “salt water has become distasteful because of its supposed association with the baptismal rites of primitive Christianity”.

Another symbolic figure which the poet-protagonist associates with the Christian religion is “Kepkanly”. This symbol that has a funny origin is associated with Okigbo’s childhood memories. Okigbo himself provided the explanation in a footnote in Labyrinths with Path of Thunder (1971). According to Anzie (1972), Kepkanly is an ancient school teacher now fossilized in his [Okigbo’s] memory into a poetic symbol. All of Okigbo’s resentments, cynicism and displeasure for the Christian religion become personalized in the figure of Kepkanly.

In the poems, “The Passage” and “Newcomer” we are presented with yet another remarkable symbolic figure, “Anna of the panel Oblong”. Critics have given differing interpretations to what the Anna figure represents to the protagonist. Izevbaye (1973) considers “Anna of the panel Oblong” to be the protagonist’s “personal saint”, while Egudu (1977) insists that Anna belongs to the Christian church. However, Anzie insists that “Anna of the panel Oblong” is “the poet’s own mother, the late Anna O. Okigbo”. In the poem, “The Passage” we find the protagonist making a pathetic appeal to “Anna” immediately after getting to the crossroads:

O Anna at the knobs of the panel oblong
hear us at the crossroads at the great hinges

The protagonist pleads with “Anna” to protect him from the ravages of “them fucking angels”. To this end, Izevbaye is of the opinion that “the appeal to the personal saint, Anna, for succor is a desperate step which he takes because he is threatened by the danger of succumbing to the Christian call to worship. Another enigmatic symbol is encountered in the figure of “bells of exile”. In the poem, “Newcomer”, the protagonist associates the chiming of the bells with his exile:

Softly sing the bells of exile,
the angelus
softly sings my guardian angel

He sees the church bells as reminiscent of his alienation from his Igbo traditional religion. Izevbaye (2011) opines that “the peals of the angelus bells recall the prodigal’s state of exile, and the involuntary sign of the cross which accompanies these bells becomes transformed into a gesture of defiance against the usual response”. In the poem, “Limits VI”, the symbol of the dumb bells is effectively delineated to project the protagonist’s harassments and subjugation by the adherents of the Christian religion.

They cast him in the mould of iron,
And asked him to do a rock-drill
Man out of innocence
He drilled with dumb-bells about him (24)

In the poem “Lament of the Silent Sisters”, the “dumb-bells” symbol is evoked again, but for the last time. The “Silent Sisters” are themselves as “dumb-bells outside the gates”.

Dumb-bells outside the gates
In hollow seascapes without memory, we carry
Each of us an urn of native
Earth, a double handful eternally gathered (35)
Anozie (1972) believes that regarding the “Silent Sisters” themselves, “this state of silent insecurity or dullness is logically connected in Okigbo’s creative intuition with fundamental inarticulation and poor poetic vision caused by an imperfectly integrated personality” (109). In the poem “The Passage”, the reader is presented with the protagonist being addressed as a “prodigal”. In the Biblical account, the prodigal son went astray and later came back to beg the father’s forgiveness. Here, we find the prodigal protagonist after going astray is back at “Heavensgate” to ask for forgiveness:

Under your power wait I
on barefoot
watchman for the watchword
at Heavensgate

However, it must be noted that the word “Heavensgate” as used here connotes a different meaning other than the biblical meaning. The protagonist has discovered a new heaven, which is the “watery presence” of “mother Idoto”. It is not as if he has actually entered his safe heaven. He has only come to the awareness of approaching the threshold of the abode of the water goddess to seek a re-union and be launched into the arms of mother Idoto, after his foray into the Christian religion.

8. Conclusion

Okigbo believes that an African writer should dig deep into his roots for the materials to accomplish his artistic quest. Considering the fact that Okigbo abandoned the Christian religion in favour of the Igbo traditional religion, it is understandable to see that he shows more deference in his deployment of the traditional religious symbols. According to Adetugbo (1971), Okigbo “develops his theme through the incongruous use of eclectic images, some pagan, some Christian, some traditionally Igbo, while others are culled from Western literature” (182). His interest in Igbo traditional religion centres on the female deity, Idoto, a cultural mother of Ojoto people.

Okigbo certainly relies to a large extent on the delineation of the Igbo traditional religious symbols for the espousal of his thematic oeuvre in his large body of poetic canvass. Moore is only right to the extent that these symbols are ready tools in Okigbo’s poetic journey; otherwise, his assertion that “Okigbo is able to draw upon a living knowledge of pagan ritual and symbolism, set in the familiar landscape of his forest village” (176) is not only condescending, but misrepresentative. Okigbo’s rejection of the Western-Christian indoctrination in favour of the African traditional religion is not synonymous with promoting paganism. In effect, Okigbo’s poetry succeeds and remains timeless because it moves from the traditional to a universal espousal of mythological dimensions of human existence.

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Author details
Stella Okoye-Ugwu
E-mail: stella.okoye-ugwu@unn.edu.ng

1 Department of English and Literary Studies University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

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