A Critical Linguistic Interpretation of Intertextuality and Ideology in Ben Okri's Poetry

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Abstract
This study explores the use of ideology and language in Ben Okri's books of poetry: *An African Elegy* and *Mental Fight.* Previous studies on Okri have concentrated on the theme and style of his fiction. Consequently, little critical attention has been given to his poetry. This study is aimed at drawing critical attention to the ideological and rhetorical orientations that underlie his poetry and how intertextuality has enhanced the communication between the poems and precursor texts. A careful study of Okri's poetry style reveals that he incorporates textual and ideological insights from several sources and from his own works in the process of creating knowledge and meaning. This study enables us to understand how Okri enriches his creative force and universe by drawing profusely from a large corpus of precursor texts. Therefore, working within the tenets of critical discourse analysis (CDA) this study examines Okri's exploration of the resources of intertextuality and reveals how it has enabled him to construct new ideological and semantic frames.

Key words: intertextuality, Ben Okri, ideology, rhetoric, discourse, poetry

Introduction

Okri is widely known as a novelist. Accordingly, the critical attention on his writing is mainly focused on his novels. Kamalu's study (1997) was one of the first known studies of Okri's poetry. Kamalu adopted the allegorical mode to examine Okri's *An African Elegy*. Okri's poetry manifests a medley of incorporated texts, styles and techniques such that

analysts find it cumbersome pigeon-holding him into a single literary tradition. Okri's poetry has intertextual relationship with classical and modern literature, the modernist poetic tradition, folk tradition, the holy Bible, and several others. Thus, while some critics tag him a modernist/post-modernist poet, others regard him as a post-colonial bard. This study is not out to 'judge' Okri's poetry strictly with the 'standard of anglomodernist poetry' (Chinweizu, et al 149) nor to castigate him as one of those who have 'assiduously aped the practices of 20th–century European modernist poetry' (Chinweizu, et al 163). Rather, the study is keen in understanding and analyzing '... what is individual, what is the peculiar essence of the man' (Eliot, 48) and the relationship between his texts and precursor texts.

Literature Review and Theoretical Foundation

Intertextual theory is one of the modern approaches to literary criticism and textual exegesis that draws from the notion that no text is pure and autonomous. Its basic assumption is that every artistic creation or text is indebted to a body of texts. Linguistic and literary studies recognize the relevance of precursor texts in the creation and recreation of texts. Text incorporation, which belongs to the textual metafunction of language, is a linguistic feature that negates the claim by certain linguists that every text or utterance is unique. According to Adejare (124), text incorporation is 'the re-use of portions or features of an existing text in the creation of a new text.' While accepting the uniqueness of every utterance or text at the formal level, Adejare contends that the use of known texts as the basis for creating new ones is indisputable. Text incorporation, the linguistic counterpart of intertextuality, is drawn from the notion that no text is pure and autonomous; hence every artistic creation or text is indebted to a precursor text. While dismissing the notion of textual autonomy in artistic compositions, T. S. Eliot (49) submits:

> No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone.
> His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation
> to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone, you must
> set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.

Eliot is of the opinion that every art and indeed every author is, in some ways, indebted to certain previous texts or traditions. This is commonly referred to as 'standing on the shoulders of giants' (Bloor & Bloor, 54). Similarly, Bloom (1973, 1975) in his works on the theory of influence, which adopt a combination of the Freudian psychology, the theory of tropes and the kabbalistic mysticism for textual analysis, sees 'influence' (the predecessor of intertextuality) as the relationship between a text and a particular precursor text. Kehinde (372) contends that influence was abandoned in favour of intertextuality because of some inherent flaws in it. Influence was considered to be author-centred and evaluative. To Culler, the difference between influence and intertextuality is that while one is author-centred, the other is text centred.Culler (103) views intertextuality from two perspectives:

> (1)'it calls our attention to the importance of prior texts, insisting that the autonomy of texts is a misleading notion and that a work has the meaning it does only because certain things have previously been written' and (2) 'leads us to consider prior texts as contributions to a code which makes possible the various effects of signification….the study of intertextuality thus is not investigation of sources and influences as traditionally conceived; it casts its net wider to include anonymous discursive practices, codes whose origins are lost, that make possible the signifying practices of later texts.'

The anonymous practices and codes whose origins are lost may be encoded and expressed in the 'society's religious and ceremonial texts' (Bloor & Bloor, 59) as significant aspects of culture. Intertextuality, therefore, finds its validity within the contexts of culture. Bloor and Bloor (52) note that 'intertextuality involves the intrusion (or adoption by the speaker/author) of aspects of previous texts into a new text either through citation, attribution or reference, and also the hybridization of one genre or text type with another.'

Bloor and Bloor (54) perceive intertextuality as a discourse process that is associated with the notion of textual re-creation, reiteration

and interpretation. They argue that intertextuality has two main functions within CDA:

(1) it plays an important role in revealing speakers' and writers' strategies in reinforcing or re-formulating ideas and beliefs, and

(2) it can reveal traces of the dominant ideology or evidence of ideological struggle and cultural change.

Thus, an enquiry for intertextual relationships between discourses does not amount to investigating their sources in order to determine their originality or discredit their users. Rather, it is to enable the analyst to connect the ideological and semantic components of a text with that of a precursor text and thus interpret the former within a particular histo-cultural context. Again, intertextuality provides the understanding that 'every text carries resonances of all the texts that have preceded it, and that all discourse is the sum of the past discourse' (Bloor & Bloor, 58). The features of a precursor text can be wholly incorporated or modified in the new text depending on the writer's intention.

Lemke traces the interconnectedness between ideology and intertextuality. Lemke's study on heteroglossia and the ideological uses of language recognises the heterogeneous nature of our social communities which can be analysed into sub communities. These subcommunities have 'many specific kinds of formal relation to, and functional modes of interaction with, one another, as well as with what we choose to call "other" communities' (38). He further maintains that an important component of the identity and interactions of a community or sub-community is how it uses language, and how it constructs the relations of its texts and ways of talking to those of other communities and subcommunities. Relying on Bakhtin's system of social heteroglossia of a community's language use, Lemke argues that each social subcommunity is defined by the ways it uses language thematically, rhetorically, generically and axiologically. Each social subcommunity has a distinctive 'voice' and social voices can be defined with varying degrees of delicacy which are expressed in relations of Alliance and Opposition. These social voices, according to Lemke, belong to social classes. They can be perceived as the voices of distinct generations, gendered voices, hegemonic and dominated voices, and voices of distinct

social segments (professors, housewives, technocrats, Catholics, etc)'(38). Thus, every text can be read as carrying on an implicit dialogue with other social voices that may stand in alliance with or opposition to it. Hence every text, in some sense does the social work of reconstructing the social relations of the community (Lemke, 38-39). Social formation and discourse are ideologically mediated hence Eco (22) contends that it is the duty of the critical reader to 'find out what in that text is ideologically presupposed, untold.' Intertextuality enables the analyst to trace how the discursive use of language evidence dominant ideology or challenge such dominance. It therefore reveals ideological struggles and cultural changes within the social communities and subgroups. It is the study of how power is enacted in texts and talks that connects intertextuality with critical linguistics. The aim of this study is to examine how intertextuality enables Okri to reinforce or re-formulate ideas and beliefs and also interrogate dominant ideologies in his poetry.

Intertextual Relations with the Modernist/Post-modernist Tradition
Okri is unarguably a postmodernist writer. In accordance with the postmodernist form of writing, Okri's poetry manifests in the form of intercourse of discourse and ideological resistance. It is this purview that animates the intertextual relations Okri shares with the modernists as is evident in his implicit repetitions and self-conscious allusions to their works. Though he employs some modernist techniques, it is at the level of ideas and vision that his poetry interconnects very strongly with modernism.

Modernist poetry is dominated by insipid atmosphere of rottenness, restlessness, loneliness, pervasive feeling of unease, anxiety, and despair. Thus, the universe of Okri's poetry is replete with these features. But it appears his postmodernist experiment is a balancing of forces: he creates a picture of the hopelessness of life on one hand, and on the other he subverts it through a vision of hope and possibilities of change. In other words, though he recreates a chaotic, immoral and materialistic world, a world order that imposes despair or even nihilism like the modernists, he paradoxically rejects this modernist hopelessness — an ideological carryover from Romantic despair. Troubled by suffering humanity, Okri paints a disturbing picture of a fractured, decadent world,

but as a writer with humanist orientation, he insists that there is hope for humanity and that man is capable of redeeming himself and his world. This avid expression of hope can be found in 'Is Humanity Exhausted?' (*Mental Fight*).

  Okri's poetry seeks intertextual relations with Eliot's disordered, sick world in 'The Waste Land.' This grim picture of hostility or cruelty, pain, death and chaos are evoked in Okri's poetry. For instance, apart from the disorder implicit of April being the cruelest month, winter keeping us warm, and summer surprising us with a shower of rain in 'The Burial of the Dead,' Eliot continues thus:

> What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
> Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
> You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
> A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
> And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
> And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
> There is shadow under this red rock,
> (Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
> And I will show you something different from either
> Your shadow at morning striding behind you
> Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
> I will show you fear in a handful of dust (51-52).

Similarly, Okri writes in 'Stammerings on Bedrock'

> Karma proceeds upwards
> Through skies of aquamarine terrors;
> The world loops under
> Bringing the tyranny of rain
> Upon the heads of priests
> And upon the rest of us
> The mania of a planet ruled
> By fear
> …
> I have seen destruction
> Sown in the fields.
> `Birds murdered in innocent flight
> Withhold the rain (*An African Elegy*)

Besides connecting ideologically with Eliot's vision of the world by drawing extensively from images of nature, 'Stammerings on Bedrock' incorporates lexical items that share sameness or oppositeness of meaning with certain items in Eliot's 'The Burial of the Dead.' Words like 'bed rock', 'fear', 'water' and 'aquamarine' in Okri's poetry are synonymously related to Eliot's 'red rock', 'fear' and 'water'. The 'beat' of the sun in Eliot's is ideationally related to the 'tyranny' of the rain in Okri's. Okri's 'rain' however ties with Eliot's 'sun' in their oppositeness of meaning.

And in 'The incandescence of the Wind' (*An African Elegy*), Okri paints the same picture of despair and fear as in the poem above. Eliot uses the city as a symbol of development or modernity to question the notion of civilization in the midst of so much destruction and disorder. In 'The Burial of the Dead', 'The Fire Sermon,' and 'What the Thunder Said' he describes London as an unreal city.

In like manner, in 'The Cross is Gone' (*An African Elegy*) Okri ideationally connects with Eliot by describing London as a city 'smelling of incense and radiation/And disease and French perfume and hidden wars' and a city 'Whose history, weighed down with guilt and machines, /Laughed all around us like ghosts/Who do not believe in the existence of men.'

Okri goes ahead to use the city as a metaphor for a world enmeshed in love of pleasure, a world without positive values even as 'The air and distance weave such burning/Miracles from the houses and church spires/ The towers and glass offices of multinationals'. He adds that 'In the phantasm of the city/Glacial vision prevails'. Eliot and Okri, representing modernism and postmodernism respectively, are obviously reacting to and rejecting twentieth century industrialized or mechanized world, and its notion of civilization — of course modernists often retreat into the past or create an ideal world in attempt to escape from the decay and anxiety of the modern world. The image of the city in both poems is therefore semantically and ideationally opposed to that of the 'village shrines' Okri evokes in 'Incandescence of the Wind' above. However, the underlying ideology of 'Incandescence of the Wind' validates the nostalgic feelings of modernists and their quest for a return to the glorious past. Okri extends his interrogation of civilization to *Mental*

Fight where he draws from historical knowledge frame to put the 20th century civilization on trial:

> Wandering down blind alleys of populism
> Refusing to admit our vast crimes and mistakes
> Denying the horrors of the slave trade
> Minimising the reality of the gas chambers
> To reconcile civilisation with genocide ('The Stony Ground')

The reference to lexico-semantic items like 'vast crimes', 'horrors of slave trade', and 'gas chambers' raises a contradictory view to the word 'civilisation' and whatever it stands for in the 20th century discourse. It signifies a loss of faith in the 'civilisation.' He pursues the same line of argument in 'Time to be Real' (*Mental Fight*) where he charges humanity to:

> Open up history's chamber of horrors
> And clear out the skeletons behind the mirrors
> ………………………………………
> A cleaning of pogroms and fears
> Of genocide and tears
> Of torture and slavery
> Hatred and brutality

Words and groups such as 'chamber of horrors', 'skeletons', 'pogroms', 'fears', 'genocide', 'tears', 'torture', 'slavery', 'hatred' and 'brutality' connect Okri's texts to precursor texts and historical experiences such as the slave trade, the world wars, the Biafra-Nigeria civil war, the Igbo massacre, the Rwandan genocide, the Jewish experience in the hands of the Nazi regime, and other texts that signify human suffering and injustice. Okri's texts therefore evoke these texts and their historical consequences as a reminder of the animalism in human beings. The texts also serve as warning to humanity to avoid the re-enactment of such barbarism in the 21st century.

An intertextual study of this nature lays bare how Okri, like any other good writer, draws upon stylistic patterns and content materials from various texts in order to expand his poetic canvas and enrich the

experiences he depicts in his poetry. Okri opens 'The Cross is Gone' to a network of discourses when he writes:

> We wandered round the crowd
> And gazed at the cross
> Upon which was written, on that wintry day,
> Summary with the blessedness of its naming___
> For it was Easter Sunday ____
> The words, clear as glass:
> Christ has died
> Christ is risen
> Christ will come again

The graphological design of the above lines certainly evokes Pound and Eliot, but it is the intertextual reference of the last line to the Bible and also to W.B. Yeats's "The Second Coming" that is of greater import here. It is important to note that while Okri's text relies on Yeats's as a precursor text, Yeats' has the Holy Bible as its precursor text. Thus, the discourse opens an ideational (experiential & logical) connection and dialogue between Okri, Yeats and the Bible. Again, the phrase 'Easter Sunday' and the parallel structures 'Christ has died/Christ is risen/Christ will come again' relate to the discourse of 'Mass' in Catholicism. In 'The Second Coming' (and somehow in 'The Magi'), Yeats presents his view of history as moving in cycles, that is, each historical era is a cycle of about two thousand years. He implies in the poem that just as the birth of Jesus Christ marked the end of the Greco-Roman or classical civilization, and the beginning of the Christian era, the violence, destruction and moral bankruptcy of his time were signs of the end of the Christian era and the birth of another historical cycle that would usher in a new world order. Similarly, Okri , perhaps in view of the violence and decay and many other disorders such as slave trade, the two world wars and the pervading anarchy in a world with neither conscience nor faith, connects intertextually with Yeats by perceiving mankind's journey into the twenty-first century, the new millennium , as the beginning of a new era and an opportunity to create new values; create a new world devoid of the many disorders, evils and illusions of civilization which characterized the twentieth century. Thus, he subtitles *Mental Fight* 'an

anti-spell for the twenty-first century', and dedicates it to 'Humanity in the Aquarian Age'. In 'Hold on to Your Sanity,' Okri writes:

> At the end of powerful eras,
> And at the birth of new ones,
> Strange spirits spew up
> In the world, in nature,
> In the heavens, from our minds.
> Turbulences rise from secret places
> ….
> Great cries and monstrous visions
> Sound from humanity's
> Forgotten oracles.
> ….
> The force of new eras
> Clashing with the old,
> Like two seas with two
> Contending powerful gods,
> Unleash things strange to behold

This prosaic poem reads like a literal interpretation of Yeats's 'The Second Coming'.

> Turning and turning in the widening gyre
> the falcon cannot hear the falconer;
> Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
> The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
> The best lack all conviction, while the worst
> Are full of passionate intensity.

The interface between the two texts is very obvious. Again, it is important to point out that Okri does not yield to despair or pessimism as modernists do. Whereas anarchy is loosed upon the world and the best

lack conviction in Yeats' 'The Second Coming,' Okri warns 'the best' to hold on to their sanity in his 'Hold on to Your Sanity.'

Okri's reference to 'Patronius' 'Satyricon' further enhances his vision. He rejects despair, pessimism and determinism. He has a humanist vision and so believes in man's innate goodness and capability to change the ugly conditions of the world. Both 'The Second Coming' and 'Satyricon' are in dialogue with Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe derives his title from 'The Second Coming,' and Okonkwo, Achebe's protagonist, commits suicide just like the noble family in 'Satyricon'. Okri is quite optimistic in his quest for 'the foundations of a new universal civilization' and mental liberation for mankind that he rejects the notion of 'the end of history', of the modernist Francis Fukuyama, which he makes intertextual reference to in 'Is Humanity Exhausted?' (*Mental Fight*). Instead of the end of history, Okri sees 'the next stage of the evolution of human consciousness. A higher history.'

This higher level of human consciousness explains the significance his direct reference to Albert Camus's discourse about 'our humiliated consciousness' which gives us 'the illusion of our lesser selves'. He wants us delivered from this illusion into the reality of what we really are: 'Magnificent and mysterious beings/Capable of creating civilizations/Out of the wild lands of the earth/And the dark places in our consciousness' ('Time to be Real', *Mental Fight*).

It is important to note that the title of Okri's book of poetry, *Mental Fight*, is incorporated from William Blake's 'And did those Feet' which goes:

> I will not cease from Mental Fight,
> Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,
> Till we have built Jerusalem (538).

The revolutionary ideology in the above text captures Okri's desire to change the present world order. This vision of transformation is not alien to the modernist tradition. In fact, some of the distinguishing elements of modernism are that it opposes established order, has a tendency towards historical discontinuity, and points to the need for improvement. This is what makes modernists create an imaginary ideal world. For example, troubled by the complexity and messiness of the industrialized world,

Yeats creates a mythical ideal world of Byzantium in his poem 'Sailing to Byzantium.' Read in relation to Yeats' explanations of what Byzantium represents for him, Byzantium does not just signify the orderliness of art or its freedom from decay and death as opposed to the messiness and decay of the natural world, it is a paradise, an ideal civilization. But like the Romantics' love of freedom, the modernists' commitment to a vision of a new world order is a burden that inevitably plunges them into despair. It is this despair that Okri creates and subverts.

Okri's engagement in *Mental Fight* is dialectical and therefore suggests his belief, like Althusser and Foucault, that ideology is constituted through social struggle. This social struggle may not be the marxist type of revolution, but it is indeed a struggle against human limitations and excesses, an affirmation that man's weaknesses and limitations are an illusion; an abiding faith in man's goodness and capabilities. Harold Bloom is right in his assertion that:

> Poems, stories, novels, plays come into
> being as a response to prior poems,
> stories, novels and plays, and the
> response depends upon acts of reading
> and interpretation by the later writers,
> acts that are identical with the new
> works.

Thus, Okri's literary and political ideologies are affirmative in some cases and negative in others in response to prior texts and the ideologies behind them. There is an obvious intertextual dialogue between Okri and Blake. Apart from the title of Okri's book of poetry, *Mental Fight*, which was borrowed from Blake's poetry, Blake's poetic imprint is strongly evident in Okri's poetry, thus validating Blake's 'influence' on Okri's poetic vision and style.

At a general level of interconnectedness, Okri's vision of man's goodness, the belief that man's weaknesses and excesses including his application of the words 'illusion' and 'civilization' relate his poetry to that of Blake. One would understand Okri's ideology and vision better if one reads Blake's poetry or Martin Day's (307-308) statement below as a prior text. According to Day:

> Blake insists that all man's weakness and
> baseness are self delusion. If hate and
> selfishness are discarded, it will become
> evident that evil was only an illusion. If
> the skeptical onlooker thinks that evil
> seems too easily overpowered, Blake and
> the Romantics would insist that since
> man's nature is essentially good, he has
> only to assert the fullness of his true
> nature to achieve the millennium.

This is certainly in line with our analysis of Okri's ideology and vision mentioned above. In 'The Stony Ground' (*Mental Fight*) Okri relates this illusion that hinders man's physical and spiritual wellbeing to Plato's myth of the cave in *Republic*:

> So much gold has been revealed in the
> human spirit.
> …..
> And yet we still live
> As if in Plato's cave,
> Watching the shadows
> Of sufferings go past
> As if they had nothing to do with us

In 'Time to be Real' (*Mental Fight*), he relates illusion to 'being blinded, like Paul, on the plain road to Damascus'. The reference to Paul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus originates from the Bible. Besides, Okri's 'Demolition Street: London, 83' (*An African Elegy*) evidently relates intertextually to Blake's 'London' and 'The Chimney Sweeper'. All the references to previous texts are used to reinforce meaning and Okri's perception of life.

Another modernist trait that can be found in Okri's poetry is the incorporation of classical, literary, mythological and biblical texts. 'Cassandra' (*An African Elegy*) and 'Delphis' (*Mental Fight*) in 'And If You Should Leave Me' and 'Signs from the Old Times V' respectively are incorporated from Greek mythology. In the former the poet says:

> And if you should leave me
> I would say the ghost
> Of Cassandra
> Has passed through
> My eyes

In the latter, he states:

> And there would be too many gods
> Too many Delphis
> An unholy babbling
> All over the narrow space

The references aim at connecting certain modern experiences with some classical myths. The poet wants the reader to use their knowledge of previous texts (the mythologies) to understand and interpret the current experiences being constructed in the poems. Odia Ofeimum's *The Poet Lied,* a literary text, is the precursor text of the extract from 'I see Your Face':

> What can we say
> When poets lie.

The above refers to situations where poets (artists in general) who are supposed to be the mouthpiece of the people act dishonestly and align themselves with oppressive regimes. The notion of falsehood and deceit in this text relates to the falsehood and doubt associated with the identity of Cassandra in 'And If You Should Leave Me'. In the same poem ('I See Your face'), Luke 8:33-35 is the precursor text of the extract:

> The pigs drowned yesterday
> The prophet went with them

The original text reads:

> Then the demon came out of the man and entered
> The swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank with the
> Lake and were drowned … they came to Jesus.

What Okri did was to reconstruct the original text to suit the social context of his message. Consequently, while he retains the verbal group 'drowned' as in the original text, he uses lexical substitution for 'Jesus' and 'swine'. There is a lexical cohesion between swine and pigs; Jesus and prophets; and drown and drown. This can be found in the illustration below:

Bible	**Okri**
swine	pigs
Jesus	prophet
drowned	drowned

However, Okri's text departs from the original text because Jesus (being intertextually referred to as the prophet by Okri) did not drown with the swine as in Okri's text.

The use of the interrogative as a rhetorical strategy is another major trait of the modernist tradition that is found in Okri's poetry. He raised several rhetorical questions as a strategic method of interrogating the socio-political system. In 'I See Your Face', the hopelessness of Okri's society is captured. In the poem, Okri uses lexical reiterations (when, what, can, do), structural repetitions and graphological manipulations to give rhythm and cadence to his elegy and to call his estranged society to order. According to him:

> ...we must screen clarity on chaos
> Scream simple terror on complacency
> Scream blood on blood
> Water on water ("I See Your Face").

Also, the journey motif, with its temporal setting that opens Eliot 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' is found in Okri's 'You walked Gently Towards Me' and 'I Held You in the Square' (*An African Elegy*). In fact, in the latter, Okri talks about 'The restlessness for a journey.' Eliot's opens thus:

> Let us go then, You and I. When the evening is spread out
> against the sky.

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Okri's reads:

> You walked gently towards me.
> In the evening light
> Similarly, 'I Held You in the Square' opens:
> I held you in the square
> And felt the evening
> ……………………..
> I could feel in your spirit.
> The restlessness for a journey.

The nominal group 'the evening' with its temporal connotation in Eliot's poem can also be seen in Okri's poems. Any reader of Okri that is familiar with Eliot can easily connect the origin of Okri's search journey motif and temporality.

Intertextual Dialogue with Christopher Okigbo
The African poet from whom Okri seems to have drawn extensively is Christopher Okigbo. A careful reading of Okri's poetry reveals this assertion. The lyrical lamentations, the striking images and symbols, the stylistic designs and patterns, the allusions, and the evocative power of Okigbo's poetry are all evident in Okri's. There are instances where Okri's poetry echoes, almost verbatim or in reformulated forms, certain lexical items, phrases or scenic descriptions from Okigbo.

In the first instance, Okri's poetry is a search journey like Okigbo's. It covers the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Africa. It highlights, as Okigbo does, the religious and cultural values of the African people before the advent of colonialism. It also traces the fragmentation of these cultural and religious imperatives by colonial forces. From that point, Okri's poetry laments the socio-political situations in post-colonial Africa as Okigbo does. Thus, the poetry assumes the structure of a journey that takes the poet-persona from one stage of historical experience to another in a manner of *via-dolorosa.* A careful reader will notice the commonality of Okri's thematic concerns with Okigbo's.

The tone of lyrical lamentation in Okigbo can be found in Okri's 'Lament of the Images' (*An African Elegy*) where he bewails the despoliation of African masks and images by European powers:

> They took the painted bones
> The stools of motten kings
> The sacred bronze leopards
> The images charged with blood
> And they burned what
> They could not
> Understand.

Similarly, Okigbo in 'Limits VI' laments:

> And they took the key off
> And they hid the key of...
> That none may enter
> ………………………..
> And they took the hot spoils off the battle,
> And they shared the hot spoils among them:
> Estates, among themselves;
> ....

We can see the exact incorporation of Okigbo's words, 'And they took...' in Okri's poem. Also evident in Okri's poem is the metaphor of war and subjugation framed in the lexical items 'burned' and 'blood' which are the main concerns in Okigbo's. Both Okigbo and Okri adopt a euphemising strategy in their use of the phrase 'And they took...' where 'took' stands for 'stole.'

In 'Limits XI', Okigbo laments the cultural disruption and complete abandonment of traditional rituals and gods as a result of colonial contact. In the same vein, Okri in 'Lament of the Images' (*An African Elegy),* complains about the effects of this abandonment on both the spirits and the people. Thus, Okri shares the same ideological concern with Okigbo on the negative effects of colonialism on Africa, its people and its culture.

References to classical, biblical, historical, mythological and contemporary persons, entities, events and situations in Okigbo's poetry

are also found in Okri's (*An African Elegy*). Okri also borrows images from the African world like Okigbo. He talks about mermaids, masks, images, ancestors, and so on as Okigbo. The image of the mermaid in Okri's poetry is borrowed from Okigbo's 'Idoto'. The silk shadow and the watery presence of the lady in 'You Walked Gently Towards Me' intertextually connects with Okigbo's mermaid or 'mother Idoto' in 'Heavensgate'. In 'Little Girl' Okri laments the desecration of the altar of the river goddess, while in 'The Cross is Gone', he laments the '…white mermaids/corrupted beyond their time.'

Again, 'Kepkanly' in 'Initiations' and 'Flannagan' in 'Limits VII' are akin to the 'Irish Priest' in Okri's 'The Cross is Gone'. The 'Three Kites' in 'The Cross is Gone' draws the reader's attention to Okigbo's kite in the market place in 'Limits VII'.

There are also phrases and descriptions in Okri that seem to have come directly from Okigbo and connote the same meaning with Okigbo's. For instance, in 'Little Girl', Okri talks about 'the green river', 'ripples of the water's cruelty', and 'the savage river' which signify the pristine nature of the water and the abode of the goddess. Okigbo's 'The Passage' talks about 'DARK WATERS of the beginning', which ties with Okri's in sameness of meaning. The synaesthetic metaphors: 'Yellow Spirit' and 'Yellow music' in Okri's 'The Cross is Gone' reminds one of the 'Yellow images' and 'Yellow melodies' in Okigbo's 'Lament of the Silent Sister V'. The emphatic 'NO' in Okri's 'Memories Break':

> And smother us
> Into a people who could not say NO

Echoes Okigbo's dilemma in 'Lament of the Silent Sister V' - 'How does one say No in Thunder?' Similarly, the evocative statement in Okri's 'Stammerings on Bedrock' – 'Save us from our resourceful/Damnation' sounds very much like a rephrase of Okigbo's prayer in 'Lament of the Drums I'- 'Hide us; deliver us from our nakedness….'

Okri's poetry toes the same thematic landscape with Okigbo's. It touches, as Okigbo does, on the influence of colonial contact on African culture and politics. Okri's poetry as a work on social criticism and national reconstruction is an idea he picked from Okigbo. Ngara (200)

says that 'The case of Okigbo is an example to those involved in writing liberation poetry and poetry of social criticism and national reconstruction.' Thus, Ngara expects poets like Okri not just to be critics of the society but to be characters in the drama of effecting the desired social change.

Intertextual links with African Mythologies
This part of the paper examines Okri's reliance on the resources of African mythology and world view in reconstructing contemporary experiences.

(i). The *Abiku* Myth

African oral tradition is the origin of the poem 'Political Abiku'. Abiku is a Yoruba word for a stubborn spirit-child that maintains a cycle of dying and being reborn. The *abiku* phenomenon exists also in other Nigerian and African cultures. It is known as *Ogbanje* in the Igbo society. The spirit child, *abiku*, is not destined to live hence the poet uses the *abiku* myth to reconstruction the frequent disruptions of the democratic process by the military. Okri wants the reader to understand Nigeria's political situation using the knowledge frame they have about the *abiku* phenomenon. Thus, Okri uses the *abiku* phenomenon to represent the image of the nation. Okri's text is also intertextually indebted to the patriarchs of modern African literary tradition who have explored the man-spirit ambivalence in their works. Wole Soyinka and J. P. Clark have written poems titled 'Abiku', while Chinua Achebe and Elechi Amadi have also presented the phenomenon in their prose works.

(ii). The 'Mammy-Water' Myth

Folk tradition is also the source of the myth of the river goddess – mermaid, popularly called 'Mammy Water' in Nigeria found in Okri's text. Okri's reference to and recreation of the myth in his poetry attests to his attachment to the African world and Okigbo, who is one of the earliest African writers to explore the myth of the mermaids in his poetry. We have images of the mermaid in poems like 'Little Girl', 'The Cross is Gone' and 'You walked Gently Towards Me'.

(iii).   **Myth of Reincarnation and Ancestral Spirits**

The African belief in reincarnation and the interference of the dead in the affairs of the living is evident in Okri's poetry. This can be found in 'An Underserved Sweetness' and 'The Cross is Gone'. In the former, the poet talks about the:

> Solitude of trees who nightly
> Whisper of re-invading the world

While in the latter, he mentions that the dead are 'Breaking lamentations on the unforgiving earth into which they will not be reborn.' The poet in 'Stammerings on Bedrock' talks about the betrayal of our destiny by 'Our lilly-headed ancestors' while in 'An African Elegy' he says:

> I too have heard the dead singing
> And they tell me that
> This life is good….

In 'Lament of the Images', Okri shows that communal masks and masquerades are not mere art or artefact but symbolise the presence of the dead in the world of the living. They are semiotic codification of African culture and worldview. Okri's text validates the African belief in the perpetual intercourse between the worlds of the living and the dead. The masks and masquerades, thus, help the living to 'reconnect/the land of the spirits'. The references reveal that Okri draws extensively from the oral traditions of his people as a veritable source of inspiration. The text therefore signifies a resistance to hegemonic ideologies that devalued and downgraded African peoples and culture.

Textual and Ideological Incorporations from Okri's Own Works

The poems under consideration reveal that Okri also draws from his own works to enrich his poetic vision. Okri's attempt to incorporate texts and styles from his previous works is an indication of an effort to reiterate major ideas, patterns and styles, and to establish the interconnectedness between his present work and previous ones. This will enable the reader to compare the consistencies or deviations (or shifts) in style and ideology.

The modernist/postmodernist technique of surrealism which characterizes most of Okri's fiction is self-consciously deployed in some of his poems. 'An Underserved Sweetness' and 'The Cross is Gone', for example, are the dream-like illogicality and absurd connections of dreams. This technique is even more pronounced in the title poem, 'An African Elegy'. The text is a versification of a prosaic rendition from his award winning novel, *The Famished Road* (338). In *The Famished Road,* Azaro's father (Dad) tells him:

> We are the miracles that God made to taste the bitter fruits of time. We are precious, and one day our suffering will turn into wonders of the earth. The sky is not our enemy. There are things that burn me now which turn golden when I am happy. Do you not see the mystery of our pain? That we bear poverty, are able to sing and dream sweet things, and that we never curse the air when it is warm, or the fruit when it tastes so good, or the lights that bounce gently on the waters. We bless things even in our pain. We bless them in silence. That is why our music is sweet. It makes the air remember…

In its poetic form as 'An African Elegy' the same narrative is restructured thus:

> We are the miracles the God made
> To taste the bitter fruit of Time
> We are precious.
> And one day our suffering
> Will turn into the wonders of the earth.
>
> There are things that burn me now
> Which turn golden when I am happy.
> Do you see the mystery of our pain?
> That we bear poverty
> And are able to sing and dream sweet things
>
> And that we never curse the air when it is warm
> Or the fruit when it tastes so good
> Or the lights that bounce gently on the water?

> We bless things even in our pain.
> We bless them in silence.
> That is why our music is so sweet.
> It makes the air remember
> …………………

The conferring of the semantic feature of /+animate + human/ on trees and other non-human entities which is a dominant feature of Okri's 'abiku fiction' can be found in a poem like 'The Cross is Gone' where he says 'We strayed past trees that bore/ the features of dying men.' He also observes that 'All around us the trees were heaving/ Their comrades had fallen.' Similarly, in *The Famished Road* (237, 243) he says he could hear trees 'groaning as they crashed on their neighours', 'groaning before they fell.' The same element is found in 'An Underserved Sweetness' where 'Flowers sing with the voice of absent bees.'

The interpenetration of spaces – the worlds of the living and the dead, the ancestors, ancestral masks and images are dominant in 'Lament of the Images', while 'An Underserved Sweetness' talks about reincarnation as '…trees…nightly/whisper of re-invading the world.' These are prominent features of the novels on *abiku*. The dominant use of synaesthetic metaphors like 'Yellow music' and 'Yellow spirits' in 'The Cross is Gone' also occurs in the novels on *abiku*, where Okri talks of 'Yellow angels' (*Infinite Riches*, 192), 'Green spirits' (*The Famished Road*, 88). Again, the text 'Our spirits are going mad…We no longer communicate with them' (*Infinite Riches*, 134-5) is drawn from the poem 'Lament of the Images', where Okri says that 'And the spirits/ Hunger/ For our touch/The spirits/ In their loneliness/ Have begun/To go insane/'. This signifies Okri's effort at reinscribing religion and spirituality into the discourse on nationhood. He seems to be worried with the secularization of his society as a result of colonialism and globalization. Thus, he employs the medium of art to raise national consciousness on the fading glories of his culture and religion. It is pertinent to note that Okri's novels on *abiku* are the sources of his poem 'Political Abiku.'

Okri uses phrases like ancestors, *abiku*, mermaid, the evening, yellow music, yellow spirit and so on to link his poetry with a chain of related texts and experiences that exist outside the immediate setting of

the events of the poems but whose meanings will assist the reader to interpret the text in context.

Conclusion

This study has tried to explore the intertextual and ideological features of Okri's two books of poetry: *An African Elegy* and *Mental Fight*. The study reveals that Okri extensively but creatively borrowed textual materials from diverse sources such as the modernist/postmodernist literary tradition, the African folk tradition, Christopher Okigbo, and so on to enrich his poetic vision and style. This suggests that for the reader to fully understand Okri's poetic vision, they must possess a broad knowledge of other texts because Okri draws from diverse ideological, stylistic, cultural and philosophical provenances. Okri had to draw from these sources to enable him affirm or contest certain ideologies emerging from the community of voices around him.

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