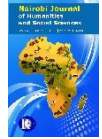




“My-house-without-a-door-an-egg”: Reading an African perspective of the chronotope in selected works of Amos Tutuola, Ben Okri and Alain Mabanckou



Review article



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Abstract

This paper argues that the fusion of time and space in the African literary world portrayed in Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and Alain Mabanckou's *Broken Glass* thickens and becomes visible to the interpretative reader through the riddle and the narrative world(s) that it structures out. Noteworthy, the respected Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin conceptualises the literary chronotope (creative fusion of time and space in the novel) as a trope for investigating the working of time and space in the European novel. However, this theory of time and space has buttressed the critical analysis of the African novel, though mostly without incorporating the African perspective, especially the important riddle-narrative trope. Nonetheless, the critical reading of the selected African novels of Tutuola, Okri and Mabanckou in this paper indicates that perhaps the riddle is at the heart of the working of time and space in the African literary imagination, particularly in African novels that address themselves to the continuities of European colonialism. The paper employs qualitative textual techniques for selecting sources of data as well as the critical processes of interpretation and analysis.

Keywords: African literary imaginary, Chronotope, Mabanckou, Okri, riddle, Tutuola.

How to Cite:

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Public Interest Statement

While acknowledging that the respected Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin makes a groundbreaking literary contribution to the world of literature evinced in the idea of the literary chronotope, this paper foregrounds African literary toposes, particularly the riddle-narrative, for it appears to have great literary sensibility for helping the African interpretive readers and academic community in reading the African novel and the African literature in general through an African perspective.

1.1 Introduction

This paper argues that the fusion of time and space in the African literary world portrayed in Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and Alain Mabanckou's *Broken Glass* thickens and becomes visible to the interpretative reader through the riddle and the narrative world(s) that it structures out. In each of the novels, the narrator poses a problem which initiates a narrative in search of the resolution. The resemblance of structure in the novels is thus in their interactive nature of problem-solution. In *Orature and Yorùbá Riddles*, Akíntúndé Akínyemí rightly observes that "the dialogic problem-solution and question-answer structure that constitutes the core of the riddle is inherently sequential and thus leads itself naturally to narrative" (129). In this light, the paper attempts to show how artistic blending of time and space becomes observable through the problem-solution and question-answer structure evinced in the narrative techniques that are employed by the narrators in Tutuola, Okri and Mabanckou's novels under discussion. Tutuola's novel begins with the narrator posing an idiosyncratic problem of being a palm-wine drinkard since he was ten years old. The search for the resolution is structured as a journey to the Deads' Town where his dead tapster has presumably gone. Then, the dead tapster gives the narrator a magic egg as the resolution to the idiosyncratic problem that is posed at the beginning of the novel. The African literary imagination is characterised by the anisotropic vision that enigmatically defines the African riddle. In Mabanckou's *Broken Glass*, the eponymous narrator initiates the adventure of problem-posing and problem-solving via a statement about the presumptuous nature of the boss of the bar *Credit Gone West* who gives him a notebook to fill for the simple reason that he likes the bottle. The narrator explains the problem in the presumptive nature of proprietor of the local bar: "he's convinced that I – Broken Glass – can turn out a book, because one day, for a laugh, I told him about this famous writer who drank like a fish ... which shows that you should not joke with your boss, he takes everything literally" (1). Here, the problem is the illogical thinking by the boss of the bar *Credit Gone West* that since the writer in question is a drunkard, Broken Glass, a regular in the bar, could also make a good writer because he has been drinking heavily lately. The literary beauty of the problem-posing

structure in the novel becomes evident when the narrator's utterance is also read as caution to the interpretive reader not to fall into the same trap of taking things literally. In Okri's *The Famished Road*, Azaro, the abiku-narrator, poses the problem as a river that was there in the beginning but it became a road and the road branched out to the whole world, "And because the road was once a river it was always hungry" (3). The narrative initiated by this riddle spins 574-page space of the novel.

Whether read individually or together, Tutuola, Okri and Mabanckou's novels under examination in this paper replicate the riddle-narrative with a multiplication of problem-posing and problem-solving in a way that resembles the polyphonic nature of the Gicaandi, a Kikuyu riddle-like dialogue that is performed as a poetic exchange. "On the Polyphonic Nature of the Gicaandi Genre," Kimani Njogu writes that the riddle-like dialogue "epitomize a simultaneity of cooperative competitiveness, a test of wits, problem-posing and problem-solving" (47). Perhaps, the question-answer reaction to Tutuola's first novel, as well as to Okri's *The Famished Road* and Mabanckou's *Broken Glass*, could be explicated through the polyphonic nature of the problem-posing and problem-solving structure that they employ. In the "Introduction" to *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, Soyinka avers that when the novel was published, "there was a lot of head-scratching among Tutuola's countrymen and women – was this literature? Or simply an extended folk tale in search of syntax," (v). The permanent reason for this observation is that it appeared to operate on its own rules, as the riddle does, far from those which traditionally defined the novel. In the same breath, Okri posits, in the "Foreword" to *The Famished Road*, that he has made up stories in the matrix of the ancestral mode so that the novel "became a perpetual story, into which flowed the great seas of African under-dreams, and myths and fables of the world, known and unknown" (ix). On its part, Mabanckou's *Broken Glass* is generally considered to be a puzzle because it is structured as a run-on sentence that spins 165-page space of the novel.

Three novels might not be such an expansive a sample, but the riddle-narrative trope evinced in Tutuola, Okri and Mabanckou's novels under examination indicate that while acknowledging ground-breaking literary contribution made by Mikhail Bakhtin through the idea of the literary chronotope, the African interpretive reader needs to foreground African tropes, like the riddle-narrative.

1.2 The riddle(s) in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and *The Famished Road*

Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* revolves around the riddle involving the death of the narrator's palm-wine tapster and the belief that the dead were living somewhere in this world. Likewise, in *The Famished Road*, the story is initiated by the riddle involving a river that astoundingly becomes a road. The narrator observes: "IN THE BEGINNING there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world. And

because the road was once a river it was always hungry” (3). The narrator’s observation implies that the road is a challenge, and travellers must look for resolution to avoid becoming victims of its rapacity. The narrator explains further that, “In that land of beginnings spirits mingled with the unborn. [They] could assume numerous forms. Many were birds [who] knew no boundaries” (3). The narrator’s explication of the ‘land of beginnings’ resonates with Soyinka’s perception of the African metaphysical world which has no boundaries among the worlds of the living, the dead and the unborn, existence sprouts with riddles running deep into each of the different worlds.

Subsequently, in *The Famished Road*, the narrator observes that “the world is full of riddles that only the dead can answer” (89). In their search for resolutions to the riddles, therefore, the living are obliged to cross borders to the ancestral domain in which the dead inhabits. Similarly, in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, the narrator sets out to “find out where [his] palm-wine tapster who had died was,” with the view to solving the paradox of “there [being] no palm-wine for him again, and nobody [to] tap it for [him]” (5); he has to cross borders to the town of the dead. However, in a European physical world with compartmentalized existence, the living and the dead would be thought of as closed categories with little or no possibility of intersection. It follows, then, that if Bakhtin’s idea of the literary chronotope were to be extended to the critical analysis of the working of time/ space in the African novel, regardless of the raging difference between the European and African metaphysical worlds, it may not yield desired critical results.

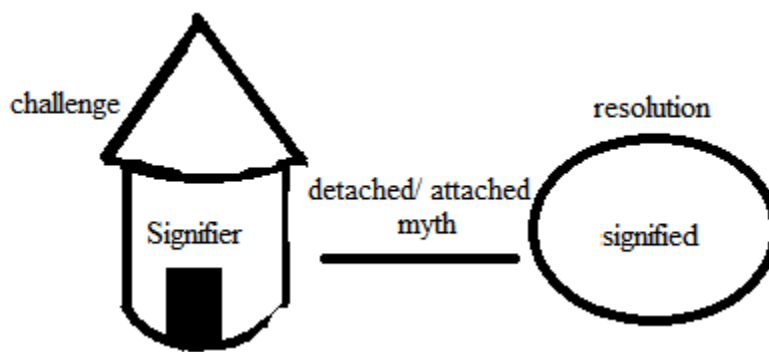
To this end, how the fusion of time and space in the interflowing worlds of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and *The Famished Road* enables the subject to cross borders life and death marks the ingenuity of the African writer in resolving paradoxes of the colonial experience. Noteworthy, a lot of scholarly works extol Tutuola and Okri’s pristine allegorical use of African mythology and Yoruba mythic order of spirits and ghosts. Nonetheless, it is the riddle that appears to be at the heart of the working of time and consciousness in both Tutuola and Okri’s literary imagination. Consequently, the riddle instantiates the working of time and consciousness in the African metaphysical as well as the symbolic worlds expressed in the novels under examination.

Interestingly, in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* the dead palm-wine tapster offers a magic egg to the narrator as the resolution of the riddle. The challenge in the novel is that The Palm-Wine Drinkard has lost his social clout and, subsequently his friends do not call on him any more for he does not have palm-wine by which he could entertain. Metaphorically, his house no longer contains a door for ushering in his friends. As a literary trope, therefore, the story in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* seems to unfold through the riddling process for the African riddle **my-house-without-a-door-an-egg**. However, the riddle becomes quite complex when the resolution keeps crumbling and, the dead tapster is

called upon to supply more suitable answers: “my palm-wine tapster who gave me the first wonderful egg had sent another egg to me from the Deads’ Town, and this one was even more powerful than the first one which broke” (127). Here, the array of resolutions from the dead palm-wine tapster momentarily works magic for The Palm-Wine Drinkard, but soon crumbles down.

How is Okri’s *The Famished Road* tied to the African riddle **my-house-without-a-door-an-egg** that seems to be manifested in Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*? The story in *The Famished Road* revolves around an abiku narrator who describes his existence which he shares with other spirit-children thus: “We were the ones who kept coming and going, unwilling to come to terms with life. We had the ability to will our deaths” (4). The abiku’s nature of coming to life and going to death at will resonates with the nature of the magic egg of frequently breaking as portrayed in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. Subsequently, *The Famished Road* appears to work as the puzzle for the crumbling nature of the resolution depicted in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. Curiously, there is doubling of the African riddle **my-house-without-a-door-an-egg** in Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and Okri’s *The Famished Road*. This doubling nature of the riddle also ties the African (neo)-colonial experience to the European imperialistic tendencies as revealed in both *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and *The Famished Road*.

Generally, the riddle works by transcending the otherwise rigid boundaries which ordinarily separate objects and motives paradigmatically as well as syntactically. In the riddle **my-house-without-a-door-an-egg** that is manifest in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and *The Famished Road*, the house and the egg are two distinct objects. However, the riddle invites us to look at the two different objects with new eyes that defy ‘rigid’ compartmentalization in order to cognitively appreciate their philosophical connectivity of detachment and/ or attachment to the governing myth. Hence, the working of the riddle could be intriguingly concretized as shown in the diagram below:



Following the cue from Ljuba Tarvi’s argument that the actual idea of chronotope “as interrelated chronoi and topoi can be expressed via a total reversible conceptual metaphor – Time is Space/ Space is Time,” (211), the world of the riddle that is expressed

in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and *The Famished Road* seems to entail three major temporal/spatial categories. First, there is the challenge which bears the signifier in the 'house.' Then, the resolution, which carries the signified in the 'egg.' Finally, there is the movement along the radius of the universe in search of the resolution. Conceptually, the challenge finds expression in Tarvi's "Time is Space," since it is born through detachment and/ or attachment of time to a particular mythological space, and henceforth it appears to infer its existential connectivity to that particular space. On its part, the resolution could be expressed as "Space is Time," for it implies the impossibilities and/ or possibilities for finding out how, by whom, and to what end time is detached and/ or attached to the mythological space. The reading of the myth as detachment and/ or attachment to time offers the philosophical connectivity of the challenge and the resolution.

Interpreted within Soyinka's mythic explication of the African metaphysical world, the riddle spins out through interflowing stages characterised by birthing that brings forth the challenge and its branding (naming), the labour to resolve the challenge or paying of prizes and, finally, the resolution. Of great interest for the paper is to establish how the working of time and space in Tutuola and Okri's novels, as the different stages of the riddle unfold, characterize the road to the African literary cosmogony.

Whether the riddle is uniquely an African generic form or whether it does also exist in the European literary imaginary is not the point of focus in the paper. Nonetheless, it is obvious that the riddle is a distinct generic form which cuts across the African and the European literary imagination. Of great interest is how a particular riddle may render itself for expressing distinctive consciousness in different socio-political contexts. Since the riddle is an expression of a particular community's awareness for their social realities, the symbolic interpretation given to the spatial/ temporal working of the riddle is normally the point of departure for the narrators at the distinctive socio-political contexts. Accordingly, in the African riddle **my-house-without-a-door-an-egg**, the object of the challenge could be interpreted as the enigma of enclosed space, which is manifest in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and *The Famished Road*. In the context of European imperialism, the enclosed space may be interpreted as an opportunity for territorial expansion. However, within the African realities of economic underdevelopment, the enclosed space may be interpreted as an opportunity for re-inventing Africa's economic capabilities.

Consequently, the present riddle in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and *The Famished Road* seems to initiate a search for the 'concealed' door, which when found, would serve the narrator's purpose of fostering/ exposing the European context of imperialism or alleviating/ aggravating Africa's economic underdevelopment. In this case, the embedded verb seems to be 'find,' there must be a door somewhere that leads to the whereabouts of the dead palm-wine tapster in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and the place of origin for the

abiku, spirit-child, in *The Famished Road*. Normally, verbs could be used to express action or state of things. However, the verb 'find' that is embedded in the riddle in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and *The Famished Road* is unique because it infers three related actions that must not happen concurrently, but each presses on to the next. The first action is that of 'locating' the 'concealed' door. The action presses on to 'retrieving' of the door. Finally, 'retrieving' presses on to 'learning' that would allow the door to be opened, thus gaining entry to the enclosed mythic object of the dead palm-wine tapster and the abiku-world, which is locked in a mysterious cyclic time of coming to life and going to death.

The symbolic interpretation of the riddle's challenge in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and *The Famished Road* as an 'absence' that must be traced to the object of the resolution is the point of congruence for the African and the European. More importantly, however, the incongruence is contained in the way in which the embedded verb directs the search for the 'absence.' For the African context of economic underdevelopment, which forms the narrative imagination in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and *The Famished Road*, the 'absence' is directed through the verb 'find,' but through its doubling by the European context of imperialism, it is redirected by an overlaying of 'find' by the verb 'Gone.' Curiously, the Eurocentric linear conception of time seems to find perfect explication through the verb 'Gone' since, for this model, the arrow of time is always pointing to only one direction. The verb 'Gone,' therefore, implies an 'absence' that could be traced to a specific place which, in every case, for the lure of European modernity in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and *The Famished Road* happens to be the West. Contrastingly, for the African narrator(s) in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and *The Famished Road*, time is not linear but cyclic in nature. Subsequently, they experience the 'absence' in the entirety of what constitutes the African world rather than in a single direction. It follows, then, that for the African the search for the 'absence' stretches out in all possible directions, to the human, the non-human, the animate, the inanimate, as well as the living, the dead and the unborn.

Perceived within the context of the riddle in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and *The Famished Road*, the African sense of time is quite different from the European one. Accordingly, in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, the palm-wine tapster on whom *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* relies for palm-wine dies and is said to have 'gone' to the Deads' Town. Since there are "both white and black deads ... not a single alive" (101), in the Deads' Town, and their codes of life seem to be irreconcilable with the African's, it could be reasonably argued that the Deads' Town implies the West. To overcome the colonial experience, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, a Eurocentric label for the African, implying an idler, must 'find' the African ethos that embodies the African consciousness. However, the verb 'find' is overlain by the verb 'Gone' in the European colonizing project. Therefore, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* sets out on a confusing journey to the West which appears to hold answers to the challenge of

cultural alienation. Likewise, in Okri's *The Famished Road*, the spirit-child, abiku, has 'gone,' intermittently to the world of origin, which is symbolically interpreted as dying. In the African metaphysics, the spirit-child represents the African's potentialities of constantly being reborn in order to wake to challenges of new intriguing realities. Nonetheless, due to the colonizing verb 'Gone,' the African oscillates endlessly in a cycle of going to the Deads' Town (the West) and coming back home (Africa) to the same realization of unsustainable development and cultural alienation.

Subsequently, the real challenge in the African literary imaginary manifest in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and *The Famished Road* is the imposition of the Eurocentric linearity of time. The African writer, hence, must of necessity find a detour from the linear path of time so as to reconnect with the African riddle and its attendant cyclic consciousness of time. How the narrators in Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and Okri's *The Famished Road* endeavour to overcome the linear challenge of time with the view to revealing the true nature of the African literary imaginary is thus worth critical examination. In "African literature: Myth or Reality?" V. Y. Mudimbe observes that "When we speak of African literature we refer to both a body of texts whose authors are known and to anonymous discourses which carry on successive deposits of supposedly unknown imaginations" (60). Tutuola's and Okri's novels, therefore, represent the body of African texts with known authors while the discourses they engage, such as the riddle with its mythic objects, form what Mudimbe terms as African 'unknown imaginations.'

Indeed, Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and Okri's *The Famished Road*, as well as most African novels, could reasonably be thought of as riddles that the authors pose in a chain of riddling about the challenge of the African (neo)-colonial experience. In "Social Roles of Riddles, with reference to Kasena Society," A. K. Awedoba observes that "Two parties are required in a typical riddling session. It takes a minimum of two individuals but usually a bigger group makes for an interesting session" (38-39). Following Awedoba's observation, African authors could be perceived as a group in a riddling session in which they address themselves on the conundrum of the African colonial experience. Tutuola and Okri are, therefore, sampled in the paper to represent the African authors' riddling imaginary of published novels. In "The Text as Riddle and Death's Many Ways: Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*," Claudine Raynaud observes that "The format of the riddle with its repeated questioning of interpretation and epistemology could be said to serve metonymically as the deep structure of the production of the text," (332), on the African colonial experience.

Though Tutuola and Okri are just two out of the many African writers, who engage in the riddling imaginary on (neo)-colonialism, their texts are enthused with many riddling discourses. In Okri's *The Famished Road*, for example, the narrator seems to embark on

somehow strange an odyssey for solving the African colonial riddle: “The air was full of riddles. I walked through books and mouths and forgotten histories” (353). Here, the narrator’s assertion indicates that in Okri’s novel there exists many discourses of the African written texts, oral tradition and history. Within the African text, therefore, one expects distinct literary, oral and historical voices/ characters. Ordinarily, each one of them, at an opportune time, “poses a riddle question and the other provides the subsequent answers” (Awedoba, 39). It follows, then, that in the paper, the African riddling imaginary is represented in the written, oral, and historical discourses revolving around the narrators of Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and Okri’s *The Famished Road*.

1.3 The African riddle of the written-oral signs

Mabanckou’s *Broken Glass* and *Memoirs of a Porcupine* could be thought of as having picked up the riddle on the written-oral discourses in a way that shows how European colonial philosophies of the writing tradition attempt to deface the African oral sensibilities. Fittingly, Mabanckou uses the riddle on written-oral discourses to characterize the two novels as an African literary chronotope with unique efficacy for addressing the social realities in the imagined (neo)-colonial world. In Colonial and Postcolonial context, a huge chunk of African literature seems to be controlled by Euro-centric literary executors. Noteworthy, the literary writing, be it the African novels, poems or short stories, are definitely a sign for the African social realities. Nonetheless, the sign attains meaning through the bar of signification. Curiously, the bar of signification is able to signify meaning by pointing the sign in a certain direction.

Therefore, the bar could be considered as the executor of meaning. In this light, the bar of signification for the sign in colonial and postcolonial literature becomes Euro-centric literary executors. Collaborative literature, mostly written through the lure of the Euro-centric literary executors, seems to work by embarking on the Euro-centric bar because it portrays the West as credit for the African social realities while disputing the role the West has historically played in Africa’s underdevelopment. However, African writers have become increasingly aware of the Euro-centric lure, and their writing seems to dis-embark at the bar in order to find a free footing for enabling African literature to signify without being colonized by Euro-centric literary executors.

Accordingly, Mabanckou’s *Broken Glass* and *Memoirs of a Porcupine* address themselves to the African riddle of ‘colonized’ literature, whose problematic is the persistence of Eurocentric literary executors. How African writers try to come up with germane tropes for liberating the African literary imagination from the Eurocentric executors has a protracted history. Subsequently, the African writer is always trying to dis-embark from the bar of Euro-centric literary executors. It has reasonably been

demonstrated through Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and Okri's *The Famished Road* that the literary text operates as the riddle. Interestingly, the narration of the mythic objects of the riddle's challenge and the resolution does not happen simultaneously. It could never happen concurrently for the mythic objects are essentially signs in different semiotic systems.

Outside the Deads' Town, for example, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* narrates the object of the challenge that he faces after the tapster dies. Then, there is an interlude, before the dead tapster narrates the object of the resolution. As signs, life and death belong to different semiotic systems. It is no wonder, then, that *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* searches for his dead tapster for ten years before he could locate him at the Deads' Town. Nonetheless, he shockingly discovers that the way of existence for the dead is irreconcilably different from that of the living. The apparent irreconcilability between life and death is suggestive of the character of memory as the subject disembarks at the bar of the semiotic system. Indeed, to die is to lose memory of the semiotic system that governs life but subsequently come into the other that governs death.

How, then, is disembarking at the bar symptomatic of the very nature of the (neo)-colonial literary text? In his musings about the confines of the text Jacques Derrida makes an ingenious observation about the nature of the text, which reads as a perfect recapitulation for the working of the (neo)-colonial text. For him, there seems to be two things that the text could never do. First, "the text never means what it says" (178-183). Here, the assertion is indicative of the mythic nature of the text. Logically speaking, then, the text, especially the (neo)-colonial text, seems to speak at one semiotic system while it hides its meaning in another. Second, the "text never says what it means." Again, Derrida's assertion implies that the text is a sign operating in one semiotic system while its meaning is in the other sign that must be sought from a different semiotic system. As a sign, the (neo)-colonial text, therefore, embarks at the bar of one semiotic system. Nonetheless, for the text to be read by the interpretive audience, it must dis-embark to the other semiotic system that normally hides the meaning. What this means is that the (neo)-colonial text operates by commissioning the sign to tell its story in such a particularized style that hides the meaning in another semiotic system. Then, it follows that for the narrator to dis-embark from the commissioned sign, they must be able to read it, transcribe, translate, interpret and discover the affixing of different signs within it by which meaning is monumentally born and buried.

Subsequently, there is constant disembarking at the bar from one semiotic system to another for the commissioned manuscript to slide to the narrator and for the narrator to be able to tell the story for an interpretive audience. Curiously, the nature of disembarking at the bar that is revealed in *Broken Glass* seems to buttress the European

imagined tension between the written sign and counterpart oral chronicles. The narrator in *Broken Glass* is amused by the boss of the bar Credit Gone West at his dismissal of the oral sign as deathly while praising the written one as the time of life for humanity: “people in this country have no sense of the importance of memory, that the days when grandmothers reminisced from their deathbeds was gone now, this is the age of the written word, that’s all that’s left, the spoken word’s just black smoke” (1). Here, disembarking at the bar is assigned some historicity since the boss of the bar Credit Gone West labels the oral sign as the dwindling time/space for the dying-old while he accentuates the written one as the vibrant time/space for the present-day. However, in Okri’s *The Famished Road* the abiku-narrator experiences shifting memories: “The air was full of riddles. I walked through books and mouths and forgotten histories,” (353). He, thus, raises the question of memory not only for the oral but also the written sign. For the African interpretive audience, hence, the forgotten histories would be texts that have once found fetishes in both the oral and the written signs.

Nevertheless, the Eurocentric boss of the bar Credit Gone West in *Broken Glass* appears to push the oral sign from the body politic of vibrant modern life into the space/time of scatology in a way that shows spite for the African oral tradition. The narrator, Broken Glass, accordingly observes that the boss always says that the spoken word is, “wild cat’s piss,” and that, “[he] doesn’t like ready-made phrases like ‘in Africa, when an old person dies, a library burns’, every time he hears that worn-out cliché he gets mad, he’ll say ‘depends which old person, don’t talk crap, I only trust what’s written down’ ...” (1). Broken Glass’s observation indicates that for the westernized boss of the bar Credit Gone West, the African subject appears to be locked up in underdevelopment because they are still operating through the oral sign. For him, the oral sign slides from the narrative clout but the written one rightly assumes the reign. Therefore, he does not only assign the written sign prominence over speech but also a greater sense of permanency. He considers the oral sign as a cliché suggesting that it has lost its clout for speaking for the text. For him, then, the oral sign has the scatological value of ‘wild cat’s piss’ and must be excreted from the body politic.

The Stubborn Snail’s modernistic deification of the written sign and devaluation of the oral is typical of the fragmentation of the oral and written sign in modern times especially with the rise of the novel. In “The Postcolonial Wizard: A Review of Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s *Wizard of the Crow*,” Simon Gikandi argues that in the modernistic view “What differentiated the novel from other forms of prose fiction was that it neither came from oral tradition nor went into it” (156). Gikandi’s argument implies that for the modernist writer the novel seems to thrive entirely on the written sign and has no place for the oral. The Stubborn Snail could thus be considered as a modernistic literary executor. However,

Gikandi observes that for the postcolonial writer, whom he exemplifies using Ngugi Wa Thiongo's authorship of *Wizard of the Crow*, the novel is "the culmination of a long process by the novelist to simulate the art of the oral storyteller in writing, and thus to overcome the ostensible gap between orality and writing" (156). Accordingly, in *Broken Glass* Mabanckou creates a postcolonial wizard in the eponymous narrator who simulates the art of the oral storyteller in the writing of the modernistic novel that is commissioned by the Stubborn Snail.

As an oral storyteller in writing, *Broken Glass* seems to be aware that if he disembarks at the bar from the oral sign into the written plane as commissioned by the Stubborn Snail he would be playing into the historicized opposition by which the boss of the bar Credit Gone West engenders a binary of oral and written signs for Africa and the West. The binary seems to operate as the signifier and the signified for the myth of memory. The spoken word is impoverished, emptied of memory, while the written word is loaded not only with memory but permanency. In "Myth Today," Roland Barthes asserts that "The signifier of myth presents itself in an ambiguous way: it is at the same time meaning and form, full on one side and empty on the other" (79). Perceived from Barthes assertion, the boss of the bar Credit Gone West's notion of the written and oral words forms the two parts of the signifier of the myth of memory. The signifier is the notion of memory as held by the boss of the bar Credit Gone West. However, as Barthes further observes, "As meaning, the signifier already postulates a reading, [the interpretive audience] grasp it through [their] eyes, it has a sensory reality" (79). Accordingly, the narrator in *Broken Glass* appears to be conscious of the sensory reality for the reading of the myth of memory that is commissioned by the boss of the bar Credit Gone West. It seems to be tilted toward the written word but pitched against the oral. Therefore, the narrator acts as an interpretive audience to the seemingly warped reading: "so I thought I'd jot a few things down here from time to time, just to make him happy," (1) about his fetish of the written word. By jotting down 'a few things,' in the notebook *Broken Glass* initiates a partial memory for the commissioned sign.

When the boss of the bar Credit Gone West reads the written word as the full, and the oral as the empty part of the signifier of the myth of memory, he suggests that the time of life for humanity has disembarked at the oral system and mounted the written one. In *Readings in Textual Studies*, Patricia A. Moody draws our attention to the 'oral-written' battles that have animated the Western mind for a long time. She rightly notes that, "For Derrida the oppositions between speech and writing are thus among the most basic determinants of Western philosophical tradition" (178). Moody's observation suggests that for Derrida writing appears to define Western philosophical tradition. Therefore, the boss of the bar Credit Gone West could be described as a westernized person as he seems

to ascribe to the Western philosophical tradition that deifies writing while desecrating the oral tradition. Contrastingly, the narrator, Broken Glass, appears to be an African whose history is a composite of both oral and written traditions. The boss of the bar Credit Gone West commissions him to write a manuscript about the greatness of the bar. However, the commissioning opens a problematic for Broken Glass since, unlike, the boss of the Credit Gone West, he does not appear to subscribe to the West's philosophical tradition.

The problematic of filling the notebook, subsequently, and by extension of writing African literature, is not tied to the African metaphysical world, but it seems to be tied to the imposition of the Western philosophy that creates a dichotomy of the oral and the written. In *African Images*, Garritano observes that for Tutuola to write *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, he “Translates an oral into a written text and constructs something on the border of an oral performance and a novel; [and that] several critics [including] Chantal Zabus ... label *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* a ‘folk-novel’ which precariously straddles the world of orature and that of literature” (158). Garritano observation suggests that the European dichotomy of the oral and the written words appears to permeate the Eurocentric definition of literature. Genealogically, the spoken word is, thus, said to constitute ‘orature’ as its text while the written word gives birth to the text of ‘literature.’

Nonetheless, contentious as this dichotomy might be, it seems to single out an important observation: that what the text is for the European is not necessarily true for the African. The main argument being that the text seems be tied to the history of metaphysics that governs a people's world. Moody further argues that “Perhaps [Derrida's] greatest contribution has been to challenge the complacency of criticism, insisting with persistent and relentless energy that the problems of the linguistic sign are fundamentally tied to the history of metaphysics itself” (178). If the text could be thought of as a linguistic sign, then, for it signifies meaning, the distinction between the African and the European texts lies in their variance of narrative consciousness. The European text is characterized by a linearity that dichotomises the time of life for humans into histories of debit and credit. Contrastingly, the project for the African text appears to be reversing the West's linear time, hitherto imposed on African literature, so that the African cyclic time is allowed to flourish via memoirs of disembarking.

Soyinka explicates the African metaphysical world through the interflowing categories of the unborn, the living and the dead. Following the cue in Derrida's argument, the problematic of the African sign must be tied to the problematic of the African metaphysics. Therefore, the African sign, like the African metaphysics, involves interflowing categories of mythic objects. However, due to the colonial experience, the African metaphysics as well as the sign are overlain by the West's imperialist overtones. Subsequently, the African sign is an embodiment of histories of both the spoken and

written words. The African thus experiences the text as a myth of memory which is initiated by an alternating succession of the written and oral signs. Importantly, the matrix of the written and oral signs manifests a scrambled narrator. The historical perspective of the scrambled narrator seems to find ontology in the 1492 to 1797 colonial relationship between imperialistic Europe and the Caribbeans. In *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Caribbean, 1492-1797*, Peter Hulme translates his writing about the historical relationship between Europe and the Caribbeans with an epigraph drawn from Edward Braithwaite's 1969 poem, 'Islands': "Looking through a map of the Islands, you see/ that history teaches/ that when hope/ splinters, when the pieces/ of broken glass lie/ in the sunlight/ ... iron's travelling flame that teaches/ us pain will never be/ extinguished" (viii). Through Braithwaite's poem, Hulme seems to aptly communicate the idea of the scrambled narrator in the Caribbean Islands. For him, the narrator is broken through a culture of pain that is initiated in the Caribbeans by European imperialistic tendencies. In Braithwaite's poem, the narrator's scrambled nature is curiously expressed as 'broken glass' lying in the sunlight. Interestingly, Mabanckou's *Broken Glass* revolves around the trope of the scrambled narrator suggesting that perhaps the author draws his inspiration for assigning his novel the title *Broken Glass* from Braithwaite's literary-commanding poem 'Islands' and Hulme's spectacular writing on colonial encounters.

The point the paper is striving to make is that the African text is not only different from the European one, but it embodies a distinct narrative consciousness whose character of disembarking at the bar resists the linearity imposed by the West. Subsequently, ingenious as Bakhtin's literary chronotope could be as theorized for the European novel, applying it to the African text might never guide us to the true nature of African literature. The critical reading *Broken Glass* and *Memoirs of a Porcupine* in this paper indicates that the African writer is increasingly coming up with typical African texts that defy literary definition from the European perspective. In the two novels, Mabanckou appears to present the authoring of the African colonial experience through typical African artists/ narrators with composite knowledge of both the oral and written traditions. Through the unique capabilities for evoking the composite potentialities of the oral and written signs in the African literary imaginary, the narrators seem bent on ingeniously demystifying Eurocentric written memoirs that support dichotomies of the oral and the written traditions. Subsequently, for the African artists, the riddle of the oral word does not stop in order to give way for the written one, but it presses on to the written the way the challenge does to the resolution. Therefore, the narrators portray both the oral and the written words as 'cogs' of the same conundrum rather than distinct and irreconcilable compartmentalization.

Interestingly, therefore, the African artist appears to perform their roles in the

imaginary world of the African colonial experience, not by creating dichotomies, but by unscrambling the existing Eurocentric ones through the persistent inquisitive nature of the African riddle. In “The Text as Riddle and Death’s Many Ways: Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*,” Claudine Raynaud observes that “The format of the riddle with its repeated questioning of interpretation and epistemology could be said to serve metonymically as the deep structure of the production of the text,” (332), that is distinctively African. Raynaud’s acknowledgement of the African text as the riddle is worthwhile. However, there is need to investigate how this kind of characterisation sets the African authorship apart from the European counterpart. Importantly, how the oral and written texts are experienced in terms of the ambivalent consciousness of absence/presence that describes the colonial polity for inclusion or exclusion from existence. The chief method of disembarking at the bar of the colonial memoirs for the African narrator’s speech to come forth appears to be the African riddle’s character of repeated reading and (re-)interpretation of the West’s epistemological foundations.

It is no wonder, then, that the contents of *Broken Glass* and *Memoirs of a Porcupine* appear to resist the colonizing element of the English grammar. Surprisingly, Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, many generations apart from Mabanckou’s, is dismissed by most Westernized Africans, immediately after its publication, as a folktale in search of syntax. Noteworthy, the connection between Tutuola and Mabanckou’s novels appears to be their unique characterization of the African literary text as the African riddle and their spellbound resistance to be galvanized by the linguistic rhythms and ethos of the West. In “Userfriendliness and Virtual Reality: a Hypertextual Reading of Alain Mabanckou’s *Verre Cassé*,” Jason Herbeck aptly observes that in *Broken Glass*, “[T]he narrative’s linearity [is built on] one run-on sentence,” (51), made possible by the author’s pristine placement of the comma even at the end of sentences where the full stop would be more natural, especially in the Western metaphysical tradition. Herbeck’s observation implies that African texts, whether written or oral, constitute the body of the African riddling imaginary. Each of the texts, then, could be perceived as representations of the African literary endeavour to retrieve the ‘absences’ that bedevil the African consciousness. Naturally, the African experiences the ‘absences’ as cultural alienation and economic subjugation whose genealogy is the colonial riddle.

Conclusion

How the riddles in Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, Okri’s *The Famished Road*, and Mabanckou’s *Broken Glass* and *Memoirs of a Porcupine* fit together as cogs in a riddling session in the foregoing critical analysis strongly implies that the riddle is at the heart of the working of time and space in the African literary cosmogony. The main riddle in the

African literary imagination is that of enclosed space due to the colonial experience and its continuities in the African epistemologies. Tutuola effortlessly uses the social riddle of a palm-wine drinkard who has lost clout with his friends due to the death of his palm-wine tapster to address himself to Africa's defeatist psychology of being dependent on the former colonial masters. On his part, Okri readily uses the riddle of crossing borders of life and death, through the mythic abiku motif, to address himself to the vicious cycle of going to the West for socio-economic and political solutions but returning to Africa to new harsh realities of existence. Likewise, Mabanckou easily addresses himself to the riddle of 'colonised' African literature through the motif of the bar, a westernized proprietor, and an African teacher who has become a drunkard after being dismissed from his job of teaching. The subject of writing is so well blended with the goings-on of the bar such that the proprietor is assigned the role of the literary executor, the drunkard serves as the commissioned writer while the other patrons compete to have their stories included in the notebook. In short, the critical analysis of these African books illustrates the way the African narrator foregrounds the African literary trope, the riddle-narrative in this case.

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