

Source Packet One: Yoruba Folk Beliefs

The Famished Road and the Oral Tradition

Moh, Felicia Alu. *Ben Okri: An Introduction to His Early Fiction*. Fourth Dimension Publishers, 2001.

This novel, TFR. shows a rich blending of the oral tradition of the folktale in the novel form. It is the usual ghost story. In the article "Amos Tutuola and the oral Tradition", E.N. Obiechina elucidates the qualities of the folktale which are applicable to Okri's TFR. These are listed below:

1. the world of these stories is an undifferentiated universe in which communication between the living and the dead is possible. It is also a universe in which all nature is humanised.

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2. There is metamorphosis in that any natural object can turn itself into any other object with ease
3. There is a perfect blending of fantasy with conventional realism
4. The folktales embody stereotype characters like the trickster figure. It uses the quest-type character, a hero with definable objectives who is pitched against antagonists who try to hinder his achieving those objectives.
5. The quest hero of the folktale shows affinities to the picaresque hero (the picaro) who is a trickster. The essential difference is that while the picaro is a rogue, the trickster is not. The hero is involved in a lot of adventures
6. The folktale's plot has a beginning, a middle and an ending, but often it does not represent a unity so closely knit that the transposal or removal of any of the episodes will dislodge the whole. The presence of the protagonist in all the episodes is the only unity.
7. The plot deals with the marvellous and the sensational
8. The folktale does not hide its moralising intentions. The didacticism is overt.

Ben Okri's indebtedness to the oral tradition in this novel can hardly be overemphasised. We have already seen his creative use of the myth of the mighty Green Road. He uses some of the peculiar features of the folktale to highlight his attack on his society. He blends the fantastic and the grotesque with conventional realism. The story proceeds at two levels: the level of objective realism of the ordinary life and at the other level of the supernatural world of Azaro's inner journeys.

Fantasy denotes a technique for representing the dreaming or subconscious mind, a convention for portraying distortion or irrational association. Whereas in the folktale, fantasy is escapist, transporting the audience to an utopian world, fantasy is used to heighten ridicule in satiric literature. The grotesque, in the folktale, is intended to elicit laughter. But the grotesque is used in satire not merely for laughter, but for censorious

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laughter. The grotesque is a device for presenting the human figure in an exaggerated and distorted manner. It conceives of similarities between people and animals or other objects. In keeping with the

folktale tradition, Okri's TFR has two settings. The first is the objective environment of the urban slum. The second is in an amorphous universe. In this second setting, the hero with maximum ease can be conveyed into several geographical regions beyond the limitations of the earth. The first setting is the physical urban ghetto where Azaro is living his insignificant life with his poor parents. With this type of setting, the author's creative imagination has ample room to exhibit the marvellous and the sensational. The narrator has ample scope to include whatever elements of his individual and collective experience that he thinks relevant to his story. Okri therefore unites the conventions of formal realism with the marvellous real of the folktale in order to give us a wider realism by which his society is criticised

Okri begins his narrative (folktale) by contrasting the land of origins with the frenetic haste and absurdity of life on earth. The land of origins is the archetypal garden of Eden The author prepares us for the fabulous, the mysterious and the supernatural through the use of the spirit-child narrator. He is a Lazarus who has experienced both life and death and can therefore record and interpret experience.

Azaro's omniscient stance enables him to explicate to the reader the motives of the other characters and their spirit states. [...] There is no limitation of space with him. He is a mystic eye. He sees

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through disguises, He possesses a third eye which enables him to penetrate the realms of the spirit He comprehends the language of nature, Trees, animals, flowers all communicate with him. He is like the epic hero of the traditional folktale who has immense spiritual powers. He receives messages from a turtle and a cat. As a seer, he can surmount the present. In his dreams, hallucinations and mirages, he catches a glimpse of the "future present."

By moving into the realm of magic realism, the fantastic realism of the folktale, Okri is making an important statement of life in Nigeria. Appearance and reality, life and dream are non-differentiated in this Abiku nation. Living in Nigeria is dreamlike, illogical and unreasonable. This fantastic element, this dream vision, this dislocation of the plausible order of things, is a befitting tribute to the strange disorder of things in the nation.

Okri uses Azaro who is a child and cannot understand the evils of the world. Even though Azaros status as a child would suggest that he is an innocent eye (satirical device), Okri does not intend him to be only an innocent eye because of his double position as spirit and child. Azaro as a spirit-child possesses a God-like omniscience. Unlike other men, "all of whom are born blind, few of whom ever learn to see" (3), Azaro sees. He is a visionary.

His strange capacity to see through people makes them to misunderstand him. Consequently, like Omovo in *The Landscapes Within*, he is described as stupid, mad and insolent. His omniscience brings him a lot of trouble, In his capacity for seeing things which the ordinary people are incapable of, Azaro is comparable with the sensitive intellectual in society. He is like the artist who sees more than he should, whose sensibilities are above the ordinary in a society dominated by spiritual sterility and inhumanity.

The rich and the powerful are knaves who are exploiting the

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poor. They encourage the impassable gulf between the rich and poor. The nation is a land "suffocating with plenitude while the majority starved" (345).

It is a place where "some people have too much and their dogs eat better food than the majority of the poor. The rich and the powerful do all the eating for the poor. The bodies of the rich are comparable to "some sort of abyss"(366). This grotesque description is used to heighten ridicule. The rich are like the

archetypal king of the Roads who preys on everything for self-preservation. They are rats which chew away people's lives, but are never satisfied. While the Madame Kotos whose enormous physical frame represents the grotesque obesity of excess wealth, steadily grow even fatter, Mum, who in her penury cannot buy a candle grows steadily leaner. Mum's poverty renders life an unending chain of suffering and anguish which is never to be completed.

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“When the Road Waits, Famished”

Fraser, Robert. *Ben Okri: Towards the Invisible City*. Northcote, 2002.

At one level Azaros 'spirit' is following every aspect of the action here -- even those that he cannot physically see-- through a process of rapt telepathy. At another, the 'circling spirit' is the focus of the narrative, which moves hither and thither, attracted by perceived affinities between events, accelerating, slowing down, pausing, and then setting out again in response to rhythms that successive episodes dictate. At yet another, the author is presenting us with a series of interlocked vortices, spirals of dramatic and mental movement that find their apotheosis in the 'circular' shape of the nation's history

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sewn into the old woman's tapestry. The motion conveyed is at one and the same time abstract and earthed in the experience of the people. It is an experiment that harks back, and back, and back. [...]

The statement invokes the last of Okri's techniques that I would like to mention, though it is perhaps less a technique than a philosophy: inverted mimesis. In these books reality consists precisely in what cannot-- at least under 'normal' circumstances at any rate-- be perceived [...] Though events and persons possess an undeniable materiality, there is an added element to sense data informing its actuality: roughly speaking, its significance or meaning. This insight is clearly applicable to Azaro, since, though his parents and neighbours can follow most of his movements, they are for the most part oblivious of his everlasting destiny and the throng of spirit companions that crowd around his head.

This almost mystical philosophy of signification means that we must treat with some caution the view of Okri's writing as divided into 'realistic' and 'esoteric' episodes, with phases of transition joining them. Such an approach, tempting at first reading, ultimately fails because it sets up the reader as the standard of authenticity. A more flexible and responsive account can be obtained if Azaro himself is adopted as the measure of possibility and verisimilitude. Only by taking Azaro's viewpoint with absolute seriousness can we, for example, make sense of the numinous presences that in other novels one would tend to write off as supernatural interlopers: the forest sprites, or the various-headed spirits who act as messengers to Azaro from the other world. In Okri, these visitants belong to the same order of being as other, apparently 'ordinary', characters.

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“Yorùbá Beliefs”

Awolalu, J. Omosade. *Yorùbá Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*. Athelia Henrietta Press, 1979.

Belief in Divinities and Spirits

The Yorùbá hold the belief that as the Supreme Being created heaven and earth and all the inhabitants, so also did He bring into being the divinities and spirits (generally called *Òrìṣà* or *Imọlè* and *Èbọra* respectively) to serve His theocratic world. The divinities and the spirits are best considered together because the Yorùbá do not make too clear a distinction between them. They are both divine and are both in the spirit-world. These divine beings are of complex nature. Some of them are believed to have been with the Supreme Being long before the creation of the earth and human beings, and can aptly be called ‘Primordial Divinities’. Others are historical figures-- kings, culture heroes and heroines, war champions, founders of cities, etc. who have been deified; and yet others represent personification of natural forces and phenomena - earth, wind, trees, river, lagoon, sea, rock, hills and mountains.

The actual number of the divinities is not easily determinable; it has variously been estimated to be 200, 201, 400, 401, 460, 600, 601, 1,700 or even more. Yorùbáland is very rich in these divine beings. Some are widely worshipped while others are only of local importance. We cannot treat them all, but we shall select examples from the three categories enumerated above, stressing, however, that this is a flexible classification. It is not impossible that one divinity or spirit may belong to or fit into more than one category, depending on what tradition is emphasised. [...]

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Besides the primordial divinities and the deified ancestors, the Yorùbá believe in the existence of a number of spirits which are associated with natural phenomena like the earth, rivers, mountains, trees and wind. They are not as distinctly characterised as the divinities that we have so far discussed. Some of them are considered good and others as evil.

The earth is venerated in Yorùbá land because it is believed to be inhabited by a spirit. The Yorùbá attach great importance to the earth. In creation, the myth says, earth was spread on the face of the deep, and land appeared. Furthermore, Obatalá used clay (as we indicated earlier) to mould man before Olódùmarè gave him breath. When a new-born baby comes into the world, the first landing place is the earth; when man grows old and dies, he is buried in the earth. The earth supplies food for human consumption, and so it keeps life going.

From the Yorùbá point of view, an element which has such manifold and useful functions must have a spirit dwelling there. [...]

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As there are spirits in the earth, so the Yorùbá believe that there are spirits dwelling in the rivers, lagoons and the sea. These spirits are revered principally by those who dwell near rivers, lagoons or the sea and who believe that the spirits, if suitably provided, can in return provide man’s needs. They control abundance of fish, they prevent the capsizing of canoes and river accidents; some of the spirits supply children to the barren. *Yemoja*, for example, is believed to be the goddess of waters generally and from her

body, according to the people's belief, all rivers, lagoons and the sea flow out. Today she is associated with the Ògùn River and is given elaborate worship in those areas through which it flows [...]

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Solid elevated rocks and highlands are regarded as abodes of some spirits. The size of the hills and mountains must have struck fear into the hearts of men. Furthermore, myths abound of how these hills and highlands have offered protection to the people dwelling near them from the attacking enemies during the inter-tribal wars. The durability of the rock is another fascinating aspect, hence the popular saying: ' *Ọta ò ki íkú* ' (The rock never dies). The people believe that if they serve the spirit that dwells in such a highland, they will live long. [...]

Certain trees are believed to be out of the ordinary; For example, the Itrókò tree (Chiorophora excelsa) is held to be sacred and is believed to

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be inhabited by some powerful spirit. Men fear having the tree near their dwelling place for it is believed that the spirit that inhabits it makes terrible sounds at intervals. Furniture made of its wood can also make disturbing noises in the house and doors made of the wood can fling open of their own accord. The tree cannot be felled unless special rites are performed. Furthermore, important meetings of witches are believed to be held at the foot or top of the tree and this might account for the reason why it is one of the regular places where the sacrifice offered is placed. [...]

The Yorùbá believe that spirits are innumerable in the air. *Ọrọ* (a spirit that causes paralysis) travels about invisibly, and if a man is unfortunate enough to meet it, he will be paralysed. Likewise, *Àjìjà* (a spirit travelling by whirlwind) is believed to be capable of carrying off human beings into the forest where they are instructed in the science of medical cure. [...]

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Belief in Mysterious Powers

A survey of the beliefs of the Yorùbá will not be complete without examining the people's belief in what we can call mysterious powers. These mystical, preternatural and esoteric powers are virtually inexplicable, but they cannot escape notice when they are manipulated by those who have access to them.

Foreign investigators of the peoples' religion tend to dismiss such powers as superstitions; others class them as *mumbo-jumbo* and the like. But we should realise that one man's superstition is another man's belief. Almost every Yorùbá who has grown up in a traditional society will understand what we mean by belief in mysterious and mystical powers which manifest themselves in different ways-- in the form of incantations, medicine, magic, sorcery and witchcraft. Belief in these powers which can alter the course of nature is very real and prevalent among the Yorùbá. [...]

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The *New Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines magic as 'a ritual performance or activity believed to influence human or natural events through

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access to an external mystical force beyond the ordinary human sphere.' From this definition, we see that magic is a practical affair. It is a human art which involves the manipulation of certain objects which are believed to have power to cause a supernatural being to produce or prevent a particular result considered not obtainable by natural means. It is regarded as a means of handling the forces of nature, of bending them to man's will, of safeguarding his welfare and shaping his destiny.

Man as a creature knows his limitations-- he knows that he has needs of a number of things which he cannot procure on his own. He is confronted with many problems in the universe and he seeks aid to be able to cope with them. He is convinced that there are supernatural resources in the universe for his benefit and that these resources can be obtained by two different means:

- (a) By appealing to the transcendental Being to satisfy his needs;
- (b) By devising a means of tapping the elemental forces which are already created in the universe by the Supreme Being, and which can be procured by those who know 'how'

When man makes an appeal in order to get the required resources, theologians will say that he is practising religion; but when he devises a means of getting the resources, they will say that he is practising magic. In religion, man depends upon and submits to the transcendental Being for his basic needs, but magic operates on the principle that supernatural power can be controlled by some mechanical techniques. Hence religion has as its motto: 'Your will be done', while magic has as its own motto: 'My will be done'. But when we have said this, we want to underline the fact that we do not subscribe to the idea that magic uses coercion on the transcendental Being to get things done. No one can exert force on the Supreme Being. What magic does is to tap the resources which are already provided by the transcendental Being for the use of mankind-- which resources are known only to those who have the esoteric knowledge. In both religion and magic, there is a power beyond man. Religion is *exoteric*, that is, it is open to all; but the tapping of the elemental forces of nature is esoteric in the sense that it is limited to those who have the knowledge. Magical practices are done by special experts and they constitute a class in the community. In fact, the magician

is a kind of scientist, in that he seeks to discover and use the laws of the universe, not only of intimate nature but also spiritual

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forces. He believes that there are powers that are hidden secrets that can be tapped, not necessarily that he can force these powers to a different purpose but that there are laws which may be set in motion by the knowledgeable, as an electrician uses the forces of nature to light his house.

Religion and magic are so closely connected that it is difficult to say when one passes from one realm to another. In Yorùbá religion, 'the offices of the priest and of the magician are sometimes held by one and the same person, and ceremonies are sometimes performed with an admixture of religious and magical elements'. In consequence of long traditions, the Yorùbá Traditional Religion, like the African

Traditional Religion in general, has come to assume a set pattern. Things must be done in one way and not in any other way if worship is to be acceptable-- songs must be sung in appropriate places, dancing steps must not be missed, one type of offering and not the other must be given for a particular occasion. Many of these rites and ceremonies have become so stereotyped and mechanical that they look magical in operation. In the Christian religion, certain things have to be done in a stereotyped manner if a desired goal is to be achieved. For example, some priests and prophets claim to know the names of the different angels of God that bear the pillars of the earth from hour to hour; and that if they are called by their holy names and in the right manner, they will readily respond to one's requests. Some Christians also claim that if the Psalms are recited with the appropriate, holy and esoteric names and if they are recited according to certain patterns, they will prove particularly effective. This is an attempt on the part of man to get a quick solution to problems. This desire is present in every religion; it is not peculiar to the African traditional religion.

The Yorùbá believe in the reality of the supersensible world, in the existence of powers causing and controlling the phenomena of nature and in the possibility of establishing contact with these mysterious powers. As we have indicated above, they employ both religion-- and magic to achieve their goal. The practitioners of magic use incantations, amulets, spells, enchanted rings, horns, small gourds, padlocks, alligator pepper and many other objects for the purpose of tapping and controlling the supernatural resources in the universe.

Magic has been employed in a practical way for good and for evil. For example, magical preparations have been used for personal protection against attacks by witches, adversaries or bad medicine or as a

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means of warding off evils. They have also served as a means of securing invulnerability from or protection against gun-shot or machet cut. Magic has been used to bring rain to the crops or game to the nets; to win the love of a lover, to give skill in war, speed in travelling or to win in sporting activities. Besides personal protections, we have many examples of magical preparations for the public good. Many houses are protected by charms which are found hanging above the doorway or buried in the floor of the house or outside the building. Entrances to towns and villages are also protected by such magical preparations.

As we have good magical preparations so also do we have examples of evil magic. Dangerous burglars are equipped with magical preparations which enable them to burgle houses easily and without molestation; by the use of enchanted rings men have been rendered blind; charmed alligator pepper has been used to bring incurable diseases on victims of circumstance; the hair or nail parings, chewing sticks or articles of clothing of people have been used in preparing offensive charms against them.

Details of how the different kinds of magical preparations are made and used cannot be given here, but we shall attempt a brief description of one of these. One of the magical preparations which have been classified as both good and evil is the 'Mágùn' ('Do not mount'). It is a means of controlling sexual immorality, and thus making the marriage bed honourable. A Yorùbá man who discovers that his wife is unfaithful and is fond of running after other lovers, devises a magical preparation which makes it deadly for another man to have coitus with his wife. According to information gathered from those who know, this involves putting an enchanted string or a sprig of broom in the woman's path-- possibly in the entrance to her room. She unknowingly crosses the enchanted string. Right from that moment, she bears a mysterious 'power' in her genitals. The husband who sets the trap does not approach her during the 'dangerous' period. If the woman goes to her lover and engages in intercourse, the adulterous man is automatically thrown off

her and bounces three times consecutively after which he gives up the ghost. This is why people call this type of magical preparation 'Mágùn', meaning 'Do not mount' (another man's wife).

Sometimes, there are variations. Instead of the adulterous man falling off and bouncing three times and dying, he has his full share of the temporary enjoyment but discovers at the end that he cannot be

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separated from the woman. Their genitals are locked together, and both of them are caught in the very act and are exposed to the ridicule of the whole community. After much appeal to the husband, an antidote (ẹ̀rò) is offered and the two are separated, but looking helpless and completely ashamed.

This will sound fantastic to readers who are strangers to the Yorùbáland and to Africa, but it is the whole truth. It is a difficult (perhaps unpleasant) way of controlling extramarital sexual relations: but it injects sanity into the society ma very hard-way. We should mention, however, that some clever men who want to engage in adulterous practices have procured anti-Mágùn rings which they wear to counteract the Mágùn trap. And sometimes a man who has set the trap, expecting that its task might have been done, may be caught in his own trap. We choose to elaborate on this type of magical practice because we regard it as a classical example of the mysterious power in the Yorùbá belief.

A magical act has almost always three elements:

(a) There are words to be uttered according to a formula or set order. Any slip, omission or alteration of wording deprives the magic of its power.

(b) There is a set of actions to be carried out. For example, if there is a plan to kill an enemy from a distance, the preparation may include the following actions: the sorcerer will procure water in a bowl and have ready a cudgel or machet or a loaded gun; then he summons, by magical means, the spirit of the enemy to appear in the water in the bowl; then the sorcerer hits, cuts, or shoots the figure that appears. As a result of this, the person whose spirit has been so summoned will receive an actual wound or gun-shot wherever he may be.

Rain-making usually involves sprinkling of water on the ground or dipping of twigs in water and sprinkling water in an imitation of rainfall. Likewise, rain-preventing involves tying some seeds of alligator pepper and some other objects in a handkerchief or tying palm-fronds into knots and swinging these overhead swiftly as incantations are uttered.

Other acts may involve pulling out an enchanted needle stuck into an enchanted horn, or spitting, ritually upon a magical preparation, or sticking needles into the effigy of an enemy to cause him incessant pain, or locking an enchanted padlock to

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make it impossible for an accuser to speak against one in the law court.

(c) The condition of the 'actor' is also of ritual significance. In all communities, the magician is hedged round by taboos-- he must refrain from eating certain foods, from casual sexual indulgence and from other contaminating actions. Unless he observes these taboos rigidly his charms will lose their potency. [...]

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Meaning and Purposes of Sacrifice

As observed earlier, the Yorùbá believe in the existence of the Supreme Being who is the Creator of heaven and earth and in a number of divinities and spirits who are under the control and supervision of the Supreme Being. These divinities and spirits are higher and more powerful than men, they can be of great help to those who are loyal worshippers and who observe the family taboos and the ethics of the community; but can be detrimental to those who are negligent. In addition, the Yorùbá believe in the existence and the power of the forces of evil-- sorcery and witchcraft-- which are believed capable of reversing man's good fortune and making life unpleasant for him. In consequence of this kind of belief, sacrifice among the Yorùbá has its positive as well as its negative side.

On the positive side, it is believed that life should be preserved, and its preservation and continuation depend upon the favour of the beings which have the power to sustain or destroy it. As a result of this, there is a strong desire on the part of the Yorùbá to maintain communion with them. They know that they depend upon these spiritual powers for material prosperity, for good health, increase in crops, in cattle and in the family; they consider it expedient to show their gratitude to the givers of the good things. This is why thanks, which are due to the benefactors, are given in the form of thanksgiving sacrifice which is prominent on annual festival occasions.

Like many other peoples, the Yorùbá attribute qualities similar to humans to the divinities and spirits to whom offerings are made. It is believed that they can feel, sense, see, hear and share emotions; they have appetites, wants, and taboos similar to those of human beings. To come before such deities, man has to bring those things that are believed to be liked by them. It is also believed that when a man does this regularly and in the right manner, he will have favour with the supernatural beings who can give him his heart's desires, such as peace, cohesion and joy in addition to the material blessings.

On the negative side, sacrifice is offered to counteract the powers of destruction, for example witches and sorcerers who are wantonly wicked and who hate seeing men make progress in life. Because of such beliefs, the Yorùbá come to associate mishaps that befall them,

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the losses they sustain, the pains they experience and the sudden and premature deaths with the machinations of enemies who use their nefarious deeds to harm men and make life uncomfortable.

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African Religions and Philosophy

Mbiti, John S. *African Religions and Philosophy*. 2nd ed., Heinemann, 1990.

A number of peoples, including the Basuto, Lozi, Lugbara, Shilluk, Turkana and Yoruba, believe that at death the soul of the person goes to the sky or near to God. This does not, however, cut it off from its own human relatives who continue to hold that the living-dead is near to them and can be approached through prayer, libation and offerings. As we have already shown, the living- dead act as intermediaries between men and God, or between men and important, but more distant, forefathers.

The majority of African peoples do not expect any form of judgment or reward in the hereafter. We have only a few exceptions to this statement. The Yoruba believe that after death the person presents himself before God and gives an account of his earthly life. So the people say that

All that we do on earth,
We shall account for kneeling in heaven
We shall state our case at the feet of God.

So also the Lodagaa fear that suffering awaits 'bad' people at the crossing of the river of death; and on arrival in the next world, everyone must endure punishment (a kind of bullying) from older spirits. The Lozi wear tribal marks on the arms and ears so that they may be recognized in the next world and be admitted to live happily 'there'. Similarly the Sonjo believe that wearing a tribal

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mark on the shoulder will guarantee them recognition when their national hero returns to 'save' them. The Yoruba are uncertain about the final lot of the departed: some are put in a good place, others in a bad place; the first group meets relatives and lives more or less as the people did in this life, but the second group is thought to suffer without end. Those Lozi members who have no tribal marks are given flies to eat and put on a road which wanders about until it ends in a desert where they die of hunger and thirst.

Apart from these few ideas, we have no concrete evidence of the hereafter being pictured in terms of punishment or reward. For the majority of African peoples, the hereafter is only a continuation of life more or less as it is in its human form. This means that personalities are retained, social and political statuses are maintained, sex distinction is continued, human activities are reproduced in the hereafter, the wealth or poverty of the individual remains unchanged, and in many ways the hereafter is a carbon copy of the present life. Although the soul is separated from the body it is believed to retain most, if not all, of the physical-social characteristics of its human life. Once again we see that Although death is a dissolution and separation, man does not accommodate this radical change; and African peoples both acknowledge and deny the disruption of death. A person dies and yet continues to live: he is a living-dead, and no other term can describe him better than that.

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Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing

Quayson, Ato. *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing: Rev Samuel Johnson, Amos Tutuola, Wole Soyinka, Ben Okri*. Indiana University Press, 1997.

This takes us to what promises to be the most contentious aspect of the novel, that is the 'spirit' or 'esoteric' passages, their relationship to the passages of realism and the implications these have for the meaning of the work. The narrative is constructed out of a dense weaving of esoteric and reality passages, but a close examination reveals several manners of weaving and differing relationships between the two.

It has already been noted that the nocturnal conflagration and the ensuing riots of the first night

provide the initial impetus for the flow of all the narrative events in general. More importantly, the incidents of that night provide a take-off point for the first of numerous

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digressions into spirit passages. In the confusion of the riots, Azaro is separated from his mother and begins wandering belatedly in search of her. He is suddenly kidnapped by several women 'smelling of bitter herbs' who carry him off to a strange island in the middle of a river along with a wounded woman they pick up on the way. After being warned by a 'cat with jewelled eyes' about the threat to his life continued stay on the island would bring him, Azaro decides to escape in a canoe and does so accompanied by the wounded woman. The events of this digression run pell-mell for four pages to the end of Chapter Three (11-14). But at the opening of Chapter Four (15), Azaro materializes under a lorry:

That night, I slept under a lorry. In the morning I wandered up and down the streets of the city.

We must pause to examine the relationship of this digression to the first narrative of the conflagration and riots. The esoteric digression seems to have rejoined the first narrative almost at the same point from which it departed. It is still night and since there are no other time indices we have no way of knowing whether it is a different night from that of the riots. At least we know that the events of the 'cult of women' digression all take place at night so we can venture to imagine this reference to be to the same night but in a different part of the city. If that is granted, then it means that what the digression has accomplished is a filling of the interstices between two discrete moments in the narrative with a myriad of esoteric events. This seems plausible also because the incidents of the first narrative do not have any relationship whatsoever with those of the esoteric digression. What this particular form of linkage suggests is that the spirit-world remains a vital life operating *between* the arena of real events. And yet it is not a betweenness that interferes with the space or temporality of the real world. The only direct link between the esoteric events of these passages and those of the reality plane is that they are both experienced through the consciousness of Azaro. [...]

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For Okri, the problem is tackled by harnessing all levels of his narrative to indigenous forms of knowledge centering on beliefs in the intercourse between the world of spirits and that of living beings. The particular form of his harnessing poses new questions about protocols of representation which are yet to be answered. Harry Garuba (1993) comes closest to providing a new terminology for discussing Okri's later work when he refers to it as dominated by 'animist realism'. Unfortunately, he leaves this highly suggestive term unexplained thereby allowing it to be drafted into other frames of analysis without being defined.

Animism is the belief in a spiritual vitality lying behind all natural objects. It formed the basis of conceptions of African culture by early Western anthropologists and has come under serious attack by Africanist philosophers and scholars. Animist realism would be realism constructed with such a belief as its basic tenet. It would not have the same semantic field as that of anthropological usage, though it would borrow something of that conception. *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment* imply a belief in such an animist realism. The impression that all things from trees to photographs have a potential spiritual vitality is inescapable on reading the novels. The literary expression of such animism is clearly meant to stand as a

surrogate for indigenous beliefs in spirits, but it should be read more as a literary defamiliarization of indigenous beliefs than a true replica of

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such beliefs in reality. Okri's postulation of a universally pervasive animism can only be read as a magnification of certain indigenous beliefs for the purpose of problematizing the relationship between reality and the other-worldly in literature. It is, as Eileen Julien (1992) holds, the negotiation of an aesthetic problem, in this case to do with the dominant protocols of realism. All the different aspects of realist narrative such as character and setting are based on the implicit belief in the knowability of the real as it unfolds its meaning in linear time. To postulate realism based on a pervasive animism is to fracture that basis of belief by suggesting that not only is the real decentered because of its permanent interplay with the esoteric, but that neither is reducible to the other. Standard realism, then, promotes a view of reality which is inadequate to engaging with the problematic fusion of the real with the other-worldly (see Hawley 1995; Ogunsanwo1995).

Okri's animist realism has important implications for the direction of the literary expression of indigenous beliefs as well as for the relationships that are established with readers. The first problem lies in the suggestion that *every* narrative detail has potential symbolic value. Since such an animist generalization suggests that any item is capable of manifesting an intrinsic 'spiritual' potential at any given time, the implication is that a reader requires a much greater alertness to the potential symbolic value of all narrative elements. This can easily lead to reader fatigue, particularly in the context of long novels that eschew explicit teleological patterning. In a way, it enforces a regime of constant reader participation in constructing the meanings of the text while at the same time ensuring that the reader cannot completely enter the process of creation because there are not enough cues for predicting the precise moment of the articulation of the spiritual behind things. The problem is much less pronounced in the context of the short stories, not only because of their length but also because Okri avoids infusing animism into all the narrative levels of the text. It is decidedly different in *The Famished Road* and in *Songs of Enchantment* where the narrative agency is taken over by a spirit figure. How are we to know the principles by which an *abiku* decodes the spirit potential of things?

In another sense, the animist realism implies a quasi-religious attitude to reality. It is difficult not to think that Okri's enterprise has affinities with what we noted to be the case with Tutuola and Fagunwa: that the gradual dominance of a world religion generates a sense of attraction to the more frightening aspects of indigenous religion and its practices. Since this is done with recourse to the mythopoeisis of indigenous culture, and myths harbour an implicit moralism necessary for the socialization of the community, it is not difficult for the deflected religious feeling to find a fairly coherent

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discourse that can challenge the dominant form of Christian religious expression while at the same time replicating the grand and generalizing tendencies of the world religion.

The implied interface between different modes of belief, between orality and literacy and between modernity and an indigenous resource-base are well attested to in Okri's writing. The resources of the indigenous conceptual system are refracted at several levels simultaneously and their strategic invocation is in order to problematize not only received modes of narrative representation but also the indigenous resource-base itself. Okri projects the folkloric intuition earlier exercised by Tutuola onto a new plane of significance. By setting much of his work in the urban ghettos and producing a sense of the fluid

interchange of various subjectivities, he captures in his own peculiar way a conundrum of the modern African condition. For, in entering into the modern world, the present-day African activates different processes of socialization that combine ritual gestures towards indigenous beliefs with an acceptance of a more Western paradigm imbibed through education and the media. The issue can be said to be most acute precisely at the level of ghetto existence, since the denizens of the ghettos are never fully integrated into dominant social and economic structures and reside problematically at the liminal interstices, often eking out an existence from what has been called the informal or parallel economy in Africa.