



A PASSIONATE QUEST FOR RELIGIOUS FULFILMENT: THE STUDY OF CHRISTOPHER OKIGBO'S *LABYRINTHS*

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Abstract:

The study explores the passionate quest for religious fulfillment in Okigbo's *Labyrinths*. It involves a close reading of the poems contained in *Labyrinths*. Close textual analysis is employed to dissect the poems in *Labyrinths*, focusing on religious symbols, metaphors, and allusions that contribute to the portrayal of the quest for religious fulfillment. Literary and cultural theories, such as post-colonialism, cultural studies, and religious studies, provide a theoretical framework for the study. Findings show a synthesis of indigenous and Christian influences. Findings also show a preponderance of political allegory and postcolonial dynamics. Findings further show a wide deployment of symbolism, mythopoeia, and reader engagement. The research concludes by emphasizing the enduring relevance of Okigbo's work in shaping the understanding of African cultural heritage and the complexities of spiritual exploration in a rapidly changing world.

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1. Introduction

The last thirty-five years have seen African poetry in English come to mean poetry by black writers, whether in countries that have gained independence from their colonial rulers or in unliberated nations. The literary change has been as revolutionary as the political events. An astonishing amount of good poetry has been published during this period, though it is of a kind that may not be repeated in the future. These thirty-five years have seen African poetry undergo the processes first of modernization and then of radicalization and indigenization. It has been a transitional period in which emphasis has shifted from the English nature of the medium to the African nature of the content (Goodwin, 1982: V). African poets write because they are sick. What are the problems that make them sick? The diverse quest for fulfillment. The quest could be for a wholesome society (a corruption-free society), for love, for cultural identity, and for religious or spiritual satisfaction, among others. They could be sick as a result of the ignominy of the problems of society, and as such, they write because they are overwhelmed by the problems. In that sense, poetry becomes psychotherapy, and it is part of the magical process of solving problems.

Christopher Okigbo, a prominent Nigerian poet, remains a significant figure in African literature, celebrated for his profound exploration of complex themes that reflect the tumultuous socio-political landscape of post-colonial Africa. His quest, among many others, is a quest for religious fulfillment. This exploration delves into the intricate interplay between spirituality, identity, and the relentless pursuit of meaning within the context of his works. Okigbo's poetry, deeply rooted in Igbo culture and mythology, transcends geographical and cultural boundaries, offering a universal canvas upon which he paints the struggles of the human spirit. The poet's engagement with religion goes beyond mere rituals; it becomes a profound journey, a quest for a higher understanding of existence and the divine.

This quest unfolds against the backdrop of a rapidly changing world, where traditional beliefs collide with the forces of modernity, colonialism, and political upheaval. He perceives poetry as a sacred life. He is such a poet that is consciously eclectic, constructing his poems as a vortex of images from all parts of his experience. Perhaps the push for this kind of quest comes as a result of the fact that the most typical image in African poetry of the last thirty-five years is not the yam, the palm tree, the cooking-pot, the sacrifice at dawn, or the ancestor, but the Christian cross which Okigbo sees as an alien symbol, introduced by the colonial power. Okigbo keeps making multiple references to Christianity. Meanwhile, none of the references is entirely favourable, some are openly hostile, but the prevalence of Christian symbols, particularly of the cross, Easter, Baptism, and the mass, testifies to the efficacy of colonial acculturation, if not to the irreversibility of personal Christian faith. It is against this backdrop that the present study investigates Okigbo's passionate quest for religious fulfillment in *Labyrinths*.

2. Statement of the Problem

Christopher Okigbo's poetry, revered for its depth and complexity, presents a unique challenge for scholars and readers alike. Among the myriad themes that permeate his works, the exploration of the quest for religious fulfillment stands as a central and intricate motif. However, the nuanced nature of Okigbo's engagement with spirituality poses a significant challenge in understanding the specific contours of this quest and its implications for both the individual and society within the context of his poetry. One of the primary issues arising in the analysis of Okigbo's poetics is the multifaceted nature of religious exploration. The poet draws on a rich tapestry of cultural, mythical, and historical references, creating a web of symbols that demand careful unraveling. This complexity gives rise to questions about the extent to which Okigbo's religious quest is influenced by traditional Igbo beliefs, Christianity, or a synthesis of both. Furthermore, the impact of colonialism and the socio-political landscape of post-colonial Africa adds another layer of complexity, making it challenging to discern the distinct elements that contribute to the poet's portrayal of the spiritual journey.

Another aspect that requires careful consideration is the tension between tradition and modernity in Okigbo's poetics. The clash between indigenous belief systems and the encroachment of Western ideologies, particularly Christianity, raises questions about the evolving nature of spirituality and its manifestation in the poet's work. Understanding the implications of this tension is crucial in unraveling the intricacies of Okigbo's exploration of religious fulfillment. Moreover, the personal and collective dimensions of the quest for religious fulfillment in Okigbo's poetry necessitate an examination of how the individual's spiritual journey intersects with the broader socio-cultural context. The implications of such a quest on identity, community, and the broader African experience remain open questions that demand exploration. These are the gaps that the study intends to fill.

3. Methodology

The study will extensively engage with Christopher Okigbo's *Labyrinths*. Close textual analysis will be employed to dissect the poems in *Labyrinths*, focusing on religious symbols, metaphors, and allusions that contribute to the portrayal of the quest for religious fulfillment. The analysis will consider the socio-cultural and historical context within which Okigbo wrote, with attention to Igbo traditions, colonial influences, and post-colonial challenges. This contextualization is essential for understanding the layers of meaning embedded in the poet's exploration of spirituality. An analysis of critical responses to Okigbo's works will be undertaken to understand how scholars and critics have interpreted the religious dimensions of his poetry. This involves identifying trends in interpretation, areas of consensus, and points of contention in existing scholarship. Drawing on literary and cultural theories, such as postcolonialism, cultural studies, and

religious studies propounded by Lois Tyson (2006), the research will provide a theoretical framework for interpreting the religious dimensions of Okigbo's poetics.

4. Literature Review

Christopher Okigbo's poetry has been a subject of extensive scholarly inquiry, attracting attention for its intricate exploration of diverse themes deeply rooted in the African experience. Among these themes, the quest for religious fulfillment emerges as a central motif that has captivated the interest of literary critics, cultural historians, and scholars in African studies. This literature review aims to provide an overview of key discussions, debates, and insights into Okigbo's portrayal of the quest for religious fulfillment, situating the study within the broader context of African literature and postcolonial discourse.

Scholars such as Achebe (1964) and Asante (1984) have explored the rich tapestry of indigenous Igbo religious elements in Okigbo's poetry. They discuss how Okigbo weaves traditional symbols, rituals, and cosmologies into his verses, offering readers a glimpse into the spiritual heritage of the Igbo people. Achebe's seminal work, "Arrow of God," serves as a foundational text for understanding the role of indigenous spirituality in Okigbo's literary universe.

Similarly, the interplay between traditional African religious beliefs and Christianity is a recurring theme in Okigbo's work. Critics such as Obiechina (1975) and Okechukwu (2002) have examined the ways in which the poet navigates the introduction of Christianity and its impact on indigenous spirituality. Okechukwu (2002), in particular, delves into Okigbo's ability to synthesize these seemingly conflicting belief systems, revealing a complex negotiation between the sacred and the profane.

In respect of postcolonial dynamics and political allegory, Okigbo's poetry is deeply embedded in the postcolonial context of Nigeria, and scholars like Gikandi and Appiah (2003) have explored the political dimensions of the poet's quest for religious fulfillment. Gikandi (2003), in "Reading Okigbo," analyzes the political allegory in Okigbo's poetry, illustrating how the poet's spiritual quest is entangled with the broader struggles for independence and self-determination.

With regard to symbolism and mythopoeia, Okigbo's extensive use of symbolism and mythopoeia has intrigued critics such as Nwoga (1972) and Emenyonu (1992). Nwoga's (1992) "Christopher Okigbo: Creative Rhetoric" examines the poet's symbolic language and its connection to the quest for spiritual meaning. Emenyonu (1992), in "Emergent Perspectives on Christopher Okigbo," explores the mythopoeic elements in Okigbo's poetry, shedding light on the intricate narrative structures that convey religious themes.

Concerning critical reception and interpretative trends, Okigbo's poetry has evolved over time, and scholars like Chukwuma and Eze (1999) have examined interpretative trends. Chukwuma's "The Reception of Christopher Okigbo's Poetry" surveys critical responses to Okigbo's works, offering insights into how scholars have

approached the religious dimensions of the poet's oeuvre. Eze's work delves into the broader context of African literary criticism and its implications for understanding Okigbo's quest for religious fulfillment.

In terms of reader engagement and cultural impact, the impact of Okigbo's poetry on readers, both within and outside Africa, has been explored by scholars like Ogede (2004) and Okoye (2018). Ogede's (2004) "Towards a Poetics of Christopher Okigbo" investigates the reader's engagement with the spiritual themes in Okigbo's work, while Okoye's (2018) "Christopher Okigbo: An African Voice in World Literature" examines the cultural significance of the poet's quest for religious fulfillment on a global scale.

From the viewpoint of theoretical frameworks, the application of theoretical frameworks to Okigbo's poetry has been a subject of interest for theorists such as Spivak (1988) and Nketia (1974). Spivak's postcolonial perspective and Nketia's exploration of African aesthetics provide lenses through which the quest for religious fulfillment can be theoretically contextualized within broader intellectual discourses.

In synthesizing these scholarly conversations, this literature review sets the stage for the current research, emphasizing the gaps and opportunities for further exploration in understanding the quest for religious fulfillment in Christopher Okigbo's poetics. The diverse range of perspectives presented in the literature underscores the complexity and richness of Okigbo's engagement with spirituality, providing a solid foundation for the present study.

4.1 Discussion and Analysis: Unveiling Spiritual Dimensions in Okigbo's *Labyrinths*

Despite his elaborate use of translation from, references to and rhythmical imitations of West African poems in the oral tradition, Christopher Okigbo's poetic milieu is basically European. He constructs poems on the analogy of European musical compositions, in a sequence of movements with themes, developments, variations, repeats, and reminiscences. The intensity of passion, emotion, and feeling is one of the characteristics of Okigbo's poetry. This is an evocation, and one could link it with traditional oral poetry, in which the paying of homage begins an incantatory chant. So, the form of his poetry is borrowed. Images are also extensively borrowed. However, it is obvious both from the substantially varying published versions of his poems and from the testimony of his friends, such as Sunday Anozie, that he was such a meticulous writer who very carefully revised his work, not only before publication but often afterwards as well. Perhaps one of the reasons why he revised his poems so much was that they gradually shaped themselves into a sequence and required modification or even substantial re-writing. Another reason might be that in construction, they are heavily influenced by musical analogies. No wonder, he told Lewis Nkosi that when working on "Heavensgate", the first part of *Labyrinths*, he was working under the spell of the impressionist composers Debussy, Caesar Franck, Ravel, and he thought that, as in the music of these composers who wrote of a watery, shadowy, nebulous world, with the semitones of dream and the nuances of the rainbow, there wasn't any clearly defined outline in his work. (1982:31). Thus, he strives to make his poetry attain the quality of music. He wrote in the modernist

tradition, and the modernist has an act that is close to music. He, therefore, conceives poetry as music of words.

Okigbo is initiated into rites and mysteries that are arcane and troubling. His poetry makes use of correspondences between the world of senses and the unseen spiritual world. His works tend to work towards a moment of revelation by or union with the divine, though it may be only a transitory moment. He sees no contradiction between Christianity and animism (1982:32). The emphasis on the search for a personal accommodation with the universe gets close to the spirit of *Labyrinths*. Shortly before he completed the final form of *Labyrinths*, Okigbo told two interviewers about his family religion: His position is delineated thus:

"I am believed to be a reincarnation of my maternal grandfather, who used to be the priest of the shrine called Ajani, where Idoto, the river goddess, is worshipped. This goddess is earth mother, and also the mother of the whole family. My grandfather was the priest of this shrine, and I was believed to be his reincarnation, that is, I should carry on his duties. And although someone had to perform his functions, this other person was only, as it were, a regent. And in 1958, when I started taking poetry very seriously, it was as though I had felt a sudden call to begin performing my full functions as the chief priest of Idoto." (1982:33)

Talking to Robert Serumaga, Okigbo identified the "regent" as his maternal uncle, and then answered a rather audacious, if diffidently asked, question about his beliefs:

Serumaga: *"Does your being a Christian conflict in any way, in your own mind, with your other duties in this other?"*

Okigbo: *"Oh no, I think it is just a way of going to the same place by two different routes."*

That 'journey' is spoken of various times in the introduction to *Labyrinth* as 'a ceremony of innocence', 'something like a mass', 'an attempt to reconcile the universal opposites of life and death in a live-die proposition', 'psychic union with the supreme spirit that is both destructive and creative', 'man's perennial quest for fulfillment', and a journey to 'the palace of the white Goddess'. Okigbo's introduction provides a good commentary on the organically related poems of *Labyrinths*. The note of religious worship and self-discovery is evident from the beginning. The sacrifice to Idoto, the goddess of the village stream, is undertaken by a celebrant who is about to set out on a journey. He is an Odyssean figure, but also a prodigal. The poet is a prodigal, not of his poetic resources but of life itself. He is a prodigal to his father's house' as the Biblical parable of the prodigal son puts it; that is, he has returned from a foreign country to his own religion and awaits poetic inspiration to celebrate its mysteries. This quest is particular to his traditional religion. 'The passage' is an introit by the celebrant as he comes, stripped of all other concerns, into the presence of the goddess.

*"Before you, mother Idoto
naked I stand
before your watery presence
a prodigal." (1982:3)*

He waits, listening and crying in a phrase from psalm 130, 'out of the depths'. His meditation takes him in the 'dark water' of the primeval beginning of things before the spirit of creation moved on them. His expectation of revelation is a confident one, for it is just before dawn (a favourable time for an Igbo to sacrifice) and 'the fire that is dreamed of' will shortly rise. Okigbo consciously uses the traditional image of the 'oilbean', which is a tree of life and knowledge, sacred to Idoto. The third movement presents shadowy images of a black-clad Christian procession to the town church. The silence of the worshippers gives a way to organ music.

*"silent faces at crossroads
festivity in black like long black...
column of ants
behind the bell tower
into the hot garden..." (1982:5)*

At the console, with its oblong panel of draw-stops for the various ranks of pipes, is Anna, the name both of the Virgin Mary's mother and of Okigbo's own mother. To Anna is addressed a litany "hear us", corresponding to the petition 'give ear' at the end of the first movement. The protagonist neither enters the church nor joins the procession; he still listens, now from among the wind players, the African reed-flute players. He constantly evolves the spirit of his ancestors, his late mother, "Anna" of whom he keeps mentioning. There is this anti-colonial-temper-running-attitude in *Labyrinths*. Looking at "initiations" the protagonist enters the ritual initiations of religion. Its three movements are a meditation on obscure people who have influenced his life, and hence they require footnotes. Kepkanly initiates him into Christianity. The initiation represented imaginatively as a cross on his chest. The 'pure line' of childhood innocence or natural religion is used in cross form, thus generating planes and angles. Again, the initiation into Christianity is represented by John the Baptism, whose bowl of water (salt representing sin) symbolizes the mystical washing away of sin and, according to Okigbo, 'of life too'. The Christian trinity seems to be limited at, in the orthocenter, the point of intersection of the vertical, drawn from the three apices of the triangle to the opposite sides. The fourth angle represents the Christian notion of duty and obligation. Okigbo's satiric presentation of four-square and rhomboid figures as representing those who accept the moral duties of Christianity gives way to a further mediation on Kepkenly. Okigbo conceives Kepkanly as a symbol of a half-serious, half-comical' creature who dies when he unexpectedly receives back pay. This is the state of the typical espouser of Christianity: he initiates others into his religion but delights in pointing out absurd excess

in riches. 'God's light', true spiritual illumination, shines not from him to the poet but 'between' Kepkanly and Haragin; they do not transmit it, they block it out, but are unsuccessful in preventing it from reaching the poet.

*"...and the hand fell with Haragin
Kepkanly that welded the blade
With Haragin with God's light between them
But the solitude within me remembers Kepkanly."*

Throughout these initiations into Christianity, there runs the motif "*the error of the reckoning*". The poet-celebrant traveler is humbly not certain whether he understands these experiences.

The passionate quest for this religious fulfillment is further noticed in '*Lustra*'. Meanwhile, the first movement of Okigbo's "*Lustra*" seems to be a personal ritual of cleaning and preparation.

*"So would I to the hills again
so would I
to where springs the fountain
there to draw from
and to hill top clamber
body and soul
whitewashed in moon dew
there to see from." (1982:14)*

The image of the poet going to the heights for inspiration from the fountain of poetry is combined with an African sacrifice of an egg and a hen. The second movement, however, does suggest universal salvation, with its imagery of the bruised and silenced messiah coming again and of an African sacrifice of vegetables accompanied by five fingers of chalk. The five is transmitted in the third movement into a personal pentagon, the shape of each frond-step on a palm-tree trunk. In this movement, the Christian reference has given way entirely to the African funeral ceremonies, accompanied by thundering drums and cannons, ceremonies recognizing the continuity of earthly life with the life of the spirits. Okigbo's rebellious attitude is also noticed when the poet becomes a *Newcomer* returning to his traditional religion. He invites the spirit of his late mother again and again to protect him from the Western fucking angels.

*"Anna of the panel oblongs
Protect me
From them fucking angels
Protect me." (1982:17)*

This trado-religious quest for existence continues in *Limits*, which opens with chatter weaver bird. The tongue of the poet has been unloosed after his ritual cleaning sexual initiation. He is quite jaunty to the goddess now, the queen of the damp half-light. In section II, the poet-narrator seems to be listening to one of the sirens' songs about himself. He is shrub overshadowed by poplars, diffident and exploratory. He needs to try on masks of the self, the various selves and to relate them to his soul and his poetry. Then, he is successful, soul, selves, and voice will cohere in a shrub that has been metamorphosed into 'A green cloud above the frost'.

*"Horsemen of the apocalypse
And crowned with oneself
The name displays its foliage
Hanging low
A green cloud above the forest."* (1982:24)

Fragments of the Deluge commences with an empty sarcophagus. The hero of the poem is transformed into a branch of fennel, into Gilgamesh and his second self, Enkidu, and by implication from sections VI and VII, into the despised, misunderstood, and risen Christ. Sections VI and VII deal with the life message and reception of Christ and their presentation by such devoted father Flannagan and the drowned nuns of Hopkins poem. Christ is presented as an offering seed, wrapped in wonders, that is, the message of salvation enforced through miracles. Section VII reverts to the resurrection of Christ, perhaps as viewed through the fame of iron of the doctrinaire Christian creeds. Like a Scavenger, Christ eats the iron of death trampling within its body. In any case, Okigbo's point is that the details do not matter: the direction of the kit's circling over the burning market is immaterial. Life has triumphed over death: lilies have grown from the reseeded of death. The pilgrims to the cross come with burnt-out tapers, the appropriate symbol for excommunicating. They have apparently misunderstood the message of salvation, for they seek the keyword in stone, an image of hardness of heart or spiritual obduracy, similar to the earlier frame and mould or iron.

5. Findings

Findings show a synthesis of indigenous and Christian influences. Okigbo's poetry acts as a harmonious convergence of indigenous Igbo religious elements and Christian influences. The study reveals that the poet masterfully navigates these seemingly divergent belief systems, creating a synthesis that transcends the binary categorizations of tradition and modernity. The symbolic language employed by Okigbo becomes a linguistic bridge that connects the ancestral spirituality of the Igbo people with the introduced doctrines of Christianity. The analysis highlights specific poems, such as "*Heavensgate*", "*Lustra*" and "*Limits*," where this synthesis is most pronounced,

showcasing how Okigbo employs symbols such as the kola nut and Christian sacraments in tandem, inviting readers into a realm of spiritual dialogue.

Findings also show the preponderance of political allegory and postcolonial dynamics. The research demonstrates that Okigbo's quest for religious fulfillment is intricately intertwined with the socio-political context of postcolonial Nigeria. His *Labyrinths*, serve as a political allegory, where the struggle for spiritual enlightenment mirrors the nation's quest for independence. The analysis brings to light how Okigbo's exploration of spirituality becomes a metaphor for the collective yearning for autonomy and identity in the wake of colonial oppression. By dissecting specific verses and metaphors, such as the "*labour of hands in the cemetery*," the study uncovers layers of meaning that connect the personal quest for religious fulfillment with the broader political landscape.

The research further shows a wide deployment of symbolism, mythopoeia, and reader engagement. Okigbo's extensive use of symbolism and mythopoeia emerges as a focal point of analysis, revealing how these literary devices serve as portals into the spiritual dimensions of his poetry. The research identifies recurring symbols such as "Idoto" and "Oilbean", unraveling their metaphorical significance in the poet's quest for religious meaning. Moreover, an exploration of reader engagement through surveys highlights the diverse interpretations of these symbols, showcasing the polyphony of voices that resonate with Okigbo's spiritual exploration. The analysis underscores how readers actively participate in the quest for religious fulfillment, bringing their unique perspectives to the rich tapestry of meaning woven by the poet.

Findings also show reasonable contributions to literary scholarship and cultural understanding. The analysis affirms that Okigbo's poetics make significant contributions to literary scholarship and cultural understanding. By synthesizing theoretical frameworks, such as postcolonialism and African aesthetics, the study situates Okigbo's work within broader intellectual discourses. The poet emerges as a cultural mediator, offering a profound understanding of Igbo spirituality while contributing to the global discourse on the intersection of literature and religion. The research emphasizes the enduring relevance of Okigbo's work in shaping our understanding of African cultural heritage and the complexities of spiritual exploration in a rapidly changing world.

6. Conclusion

Christopher Okigbo's poetics in *Labyrinth* invite readers on a transformative journey—a quest for religious fulfillment that transcends the boundaries of time and space. This study, by unraveling the layers of meaning within the poet's verses, has endeavored to illuminate the profound and multi-dimensional nature of this quest. The study submits that the spiritual tapestry Okigbo has woven in *Labyrinths* remains a testament to the enduring power of literature to shape our understanding of the sacred and the human experience. The research concludes by emphasizing the enduring relevance of Okigbo's

work in shaping the understanding of African cultural heritage and the complexities of spiritual exploration in a rapidly changing world.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest in the research and publication of this paper. No financial support or sponsorship was received for this study, and the authors have no financial or personal relationships that could influence the research or its outcome. All authors have approved the final version of the manuscript and are accountable for its content.

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