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### 'The Mystic Drum': Critical Commentary on Gabriel Okara's Love Lyrics

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# ‘The Mystic Drum’: Critical Commentary on Gabriel Okara’s Love Lyrics:

By

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## Introduction

In the course of reading a chapter entitled “Empty and Marvelous” in Alan Watts fascinating book, *The Way of Zen* (1957), a serendipitous key was provided, by the following statement from the teachings of Chinese Zen master,<sup>1</sup> Ch’ing Yuän Wei-hsin (1067-1120), to the structure and meaning of the experience dramatized in Gabriel Okara’s most famous love poem, “The Mystic Drum”:<sup>2</sup>

Before I had studied Zen for thirty years, I saw mountains as mountains and waters as waters. When I arrived at a more intimate knowledge, I came to the point where I saw the mountains are not mountains, and waters are not waters. But now that I have got its very substance I am at rest. For it’s just now that I see mountains once again as mountains and waters once again as waters.

What is so readily striking to anyone who has read “The Mystic Drum” is the near perfect dynamic equivalence between the words of Ch’ing Yuän and the phraseology of Okara’s lyric. In line with Ch’ing Yuän’s statement, the lyric falls into three clearly defined parts—an initial phase of “conventional knowledge,” when men are men and fishes are fishes (lines 1-15); a median phase of “more intimate knowledge,” when men are no longer men and fishes are no longer fishes (lines 16-26); and a final phase of “substantial knowledge,” when men are once again men and fishes are once again fishes, with the difference that at this phase, the beloved lady of the lyric is depicted as “standing behind a tree” with “her lips parted in her smile,” now “turned cavity belching darkness” (lines 27-41). The significance of this closing phrase will be discussed in the appropriate slot in the final section of the paper, below. But because of the complexity of the imagery and symbolism by means of which progression of the lover’s understanding of the nature of reality is developed, it seems necessary to revisit the lyric in its entirety before proceeding to a phase-by-phase analysis of its structure:

The mystic drum beat in my inside  
and fishes danced in the rivers  
and men and women danced on land  
to the rhythm of my drum

But standing behind a tree  
with leaves around her waist  
she only smiled with a shake of her head.

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<sup>1</sup> One of the major schools of Buddhism that originated in 12th-century China with current strongholds in India and Japan, Zen strongly emphasizes enlightenment through meditation and vehemently denies the value of conventional thinking in favor of an attempt to understand the paradoxes of reality by “direct pointing” unfettered by what it sees as arbitrary customary compartmentalization of phenomena. Since the middle of the twentieth-century, the exciting and fresh insights provided by Zen masters have been a source of inspiration for many non-Asian writers, artists and intellectuals throughout the world, especially in North America.

<sup>2</sup> The present commentary is a revised and updated version of a paper originally entitled “Zen in African Poetry: Gabriel Okara’s ‘The Mystic Drum’” and shared privately with several of my students and academic colleagues at Ibadan, Lagos and Nsukka (Nigeria) and Boston (Massachusetts), USA.

Still my drum continued to beat,  
rippling the air with quickened  
tempo compelling the quick  
and the dead to dance and sing  
with their shadows— 10

But standing behind a tree  
with leaves around her waist  
she only smiled with a shake of her head. 15

Then the drum beat with the rhythm  
of the things of the ground  
and invoked the eye of the sky  
the sun and the moon and the river gods and  
the trees began to dance, 20  
the fishes turned men  
and men turned fishes  
and things stopped to grow—

But standing behind a tree  
with leaves around her waist  
she only smiled with a shake of her head. 25

And then the mystic drum  
in my inside stopped to beat—  
and men became men,  
fishes became fishes 30  
and trees, the sun and the moon  
found their places, and the dead  
went to the ground and things began to grow.

And behind the tree she stood  
with roots sprouting from her  
feet and leaves growing on her head 35  
and smoke issuing from her nose  
and her lips parted in her smile  
turned cavity belching darkness.

Then, then I packed my mystic drum  
and turned away; never to beat so loud any more. 40

Ch'ing Yuän's Zen experience is epistemological—pertaining to a step-by-step initiation of the passionate lover into an understanding of the nature of reality, in particular “the foundations, scope, and validity of knowledge” (Online Encarta). It can thus be surmised that “The Mystic Drum” is not just a conventional amatory lyric, provoked by the storm and stress of Okara's passionate love for his adored and adorable second wife (an African-American with Caribbean roots, Adhiambo Carmichael, who died in Port Harcourt in 1983).<sup>3</sup> It is more decidedly a philosophical poem in which the dynamics, directions and management of “the mystic drum” of passion that beats in the poet's “inside” are dramatically reenacted, in a tripartite ritual and initiatory pattern reminiscent of Ch'ing Yuän. From a *conventional* phase, at which the lover's understanding

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<sup>3</sup> Okara's first wife, a fellow Ijo from the Niger Delta and the mother of his son, Dr. Ebi Okara—a clinical psychologist in Randolph, Massachusetts, who lives in Canton, Massachusetts—was divorced when Ebi was only two years old. There is hardly an reference to her in either Okara's lyrics or interviews. Nor do we have any information about the cause of her separation from Okara.

of the nature of knowledge conforms to socially accepted customs of behavior or style (lines 1-15), the lover's progresses through a more *intimate* phase, at which this knowledge matures from a close, thoroughgoing, personal relationship (lines 16-26), to an ultimate *substantial* phase, situated in the optimum zone of epistemological apperception, at which what the lover has come know about the nature of reality is not only solidly built but considerable in amount or importance (lines 27-41), culminating in the lover's self-imposed decision not to allow his "mystic drum" ever "to beat so loud so loud any more" (line 41). The poem concludes, in other words, with a firm decision by the lover to put strong reins on the unbridled flights of his amatory imagination, having become wizened by the knowledge and experience he has acquired.

Because the tropes ("mystic," "drum," and "inside"), two of which appear in the title of the present paper, are recurrent in all of Okara's love lyrics ("Adhiambo," "To Paveba," and "The Mystic Drum"), it seems necessary to pause awhile to reflect on their meaning and significance.

For Okara, the word "mystic" is indeed connotative of the spiritual, the numinous, the magical, the supernatural, and the shamanistic. But it is more meaningful as a poetic code for the supersensory powers that enable the human personality to tap into hidden strengths buried in the innermost recesses of the psyche.<sup>4</sup> In addition to any other signification carried over by the poet from his native Ijo, as is his wont, the "mystic inside" can be decoded from the perspective of the theories of Swiss psychiatrist and founder of Analytical Psychology, Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961), as comprising the collective unconscious—the innermost recesses of the psyche, populated by archaic or primordial images which Jung calls *archetypes* and which, as he posits, are shared in common by all humankind. See Azuonye (1981), for a more detailed discussion of the collective unconscious and its archetypes, with reference to the poetry of Okara's transnational, modernist, contemporary, Christopher Okigbo (1930-1967). This innermost level of the psyche is separated from the outermost level—the conscious mind (the seat of our everyday thoughts and emotions) —by the personal unconscious (the seat of repressed traumatic<sup>5</sup> personal experiences or complexes<sup>6</sup> which may be re-lived by the individual if and whenever memories of the original trauma that gave birth to the complex are awakened by new trauma of the same kind). In its relation to "mystic" and "inside," the word "drum," in Okara, generally refers to the vibes felt by an individual when there is an intense surge of subconscious promptings from any of the two levels of his "inside." Further research is needed to ascertain the consistency of all these with the idea of "the inside" in Okara's native Ijo language and traditional system of thought.

In "The Mystic Drum" as well as in "Adhiambo" (a lyric also provoked by Okara's love for Ms. Carmichael) and in "To Paveba" (a lyric provoked by the "fire" and "flame" of an unrequited love for a mysterious paramour about whom Okara is most reticent to say anything in interviews with him<sup>7</sup>), the intensity of these subconscious psychic pulsations often reaches fever pitch. The three lyrics are thus not only of enormous interest as conventional love lyrics, fusing the commonalities of world-wide traditions of love poetry and the peculiarities of indigenous African love songs performed as part of moonlight dances; they are also worthy of critical analysis as a windows into Okara's struggle for rapprochement with the presiding lady of his poetic inspiration, his muse.

The muse has been described as the source of inspiration that stimulates the art of a poet. In postcolonial discourse, it has been studied as an archetypal female figure (watermaid, great mother, earth goddess, water goddess, and dancer) embodying cultural nationalist affections and idealizations of the colonized earth of the poet's homeland (see Thomas, 1968, and Azuonye, in Onyerionwu, 2011). As I have stated in the later citation,

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<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of the present paper, I retain my earlier understanding of *psyche* (Azuonye, 1981: 30) as "the totality of the non-physical components of the human personality" (extrapolated from Jung, 1959).

<sup>5</sup> In this paper, I use the terms *traumatic* and *trauma* to refer to "emotional shock" or "an extremely distressing experience that causes severe emotional shock and may have long-lasting psychological effects" (online Encarta).

<sup>6</sup> Jung defines *complexes* as "psychic entities that have escaped from the control of consciousness and split from it, to lead a separate existence in the dark sphere of the psyche, whence they may at any time hinder or help the conscious performance" (see Jacobi, 1942: 37).

<sup>7</sup> See Azuonye (2006 and 2011).

The idea of the *muse* is often invoked in the scholarship on modern Nigerian literature; but it is often shrouded with a mystique that tends to reduce it to something abstract or far-fetched, or, at any rate, to a kind of African imitation of the classical muses of Graeco-Roman antiquity. But our nascent muse was not only concrete and manifest in our postcolonial practical engagement with our indigenous cultures; she was also an embodiment of the highest cultural ideals of our ancestral traditions as we perceived them in the heyday of colonialism. She appeared to each and every one of us in multifarious guises. But whatever her emanation was, she was unmistakably a personification of the earth of our ancestors—the earth goddess, *Ala*, the supreme light (*chi*) that nurtures all creation, an embodiment of the eternal bond that unites the living and the dead. When our early devotional poems to this great spirit and those of our predecessors and successors are collected and published, readers will be better able to understand the ramifications of the power of this great goddess who appeared to us, as to our predecessors in the early 1960's (Okigbo, Wonodi, Ndu, Egudu, Onyejeli, Nwaojigba, Okafor, Okwu, etc), as a dancer, spirit maiden, water maid, and other exciting feminine figures—in all cases as embodiments of our communal and individual apprehension of the superiority of our indigenous cultural heritage to every single superimposition of the postcolonial order.

Like Okigbo and other members of the Nsukka school of modern Nigerian poetry (see Thomas, 1968 and 1972; Echeruo, in Lindfors, 1973 and 1974; and Maduakor, 1980), Okara is a votary of the watermaid or mermaid, whose inspirational “songs” we hear in “The Fisherman’s Invocation” (Part II and III) as the voice of a presiding lady (or ladies) of poesy whose presence and participation are repeatedly invoked to mediate the claims of the what is passing (the Back), is passing (the Present) and to come (the Front). In Part II (The Invocation), the “water song” of an “assembly of mermaid” is linked with the “midwifemoon” that would officiate in the delivery of the Child-Front (the brave new world beyond colonialism)—rubbing “gently down/the back” of the great mother past (“Back), symbolizing age-old traditions:

O midwifemoon rub gently down  
the back of your Back  
while the sun play his play  
and the Back dance its dance  
and assembly of mermaids  
sing their bubbling water song  
beneath the river waves.

And in Part III (The Child-Front), “the mermaids” are invoked to participate in the shaping of the future as cleansing agencies that must “carry...on their songs” and “throw...away to the back” into the “abyss” of the past a “monster” (embodying some embarrassing negativities of the pre-colonial past) rearing up its ugly head from a romantically cherished past, in a situational irony reminiscent of Wole Soyinka’s early ritual drama, *Dance of the Forests* (1960):

Where are your Gods now  
Gods of the Back that have  
brought forth this monster?  
Throw it away, throw it into  
the river and let the mermaids  
carry it on their songs.  
Throw it away to the Back  
and let the Back swallow it in its abyss  
And let the Gods remember their lives are in my hands

In these lines, the “Gods of the Back (past) that have/brought forth this monster” (embarrassing negativities of Africa’s pre-colonial history) are reminded on the Ijo custom known as *orumia*, in which—as dramatized in “The Revolt of the Gods”—the fate of the gods, which are traditional in the hands of their worshippers, must be determined by humans in accordance with their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their providential conduct. In concluding, in Part IV (Birth Dance of the Child Front), the “songs of mermaids” are

given pride of place in finale of "our dance/ of the Front" (of the future), again stressing the primacy of the muse as an agency for shaping the future of a troubled land:

Let's leaven our dance  
of the Front with rhythms  
of the Back and strengthen  
the fragile songs of the new  
with songs of mermaids

Much later, in his mature post-war, political poetry set at the heart of the future envisioned in "The Fisherman's Invocation" and collected under the title *The Dreamer, His Vision* (2006), the mermaid reappears in "Mammy Water and Me" as the presiding lady of the poet's anguished cry for succor in the midst of the triumph of disorder ("embers..smouldering", "in memoriam ashes", "flames I cannot temper", "whirling vortex, helpless") in post-civil war Nigeria:

The embers are smouldering—once again—  
They've refused to die into *in memoriam* ashes.  
And have burst into flames I cannot temper.  
They draw into their whirling vortex, helpless—

Mammy-water & me.

There we stand, hand in hand,  
Like Shadrach and company, the faithfuls,  
Calmly waiting for the redeeming flames  
To do the cleansing and free us of earthly dross!  
Then we shall step out with solemn steps  
To silence offended eyebrows and daggered tongues  
and walk on calm waters—still, serene—Free!

Mammy-water & me.

Clinched by the refrain ("Mammy-water and me"), the poet expresses strong optimism that, by keeping faith (standing "hand in hand") with his muse, "redeeming flames" that would effect "the cleansing" and "free us of earthly dross" would surely come in the end.

By contrast to "Mammy-water" (a supernatural being under whose divine shadow the poet appears helpless to offer anything but total devotion), Adhiambo and Paveba are human objects of love to whom Okara, in his love lyrics, projects the archetype of the muse in an unconscious recognition of their place in his "inside" as his soul mates or psychic alter egos (representing, from the Jungian psychological perspective, his *anima*). The *anima*, for Jung, is one of the most powerful archetypes of the collective unconscious that participates in the all-important process of individuation. As summed up in my essay on Okigbo and Jung (Azuonye, 1981: 37), "the *anima* is the primordial image of woman in a man, a counterpart of the *animus*, the primordial image of man engraved on the mind of a woman. The *anima* appears in dreams, visions and fantasies as in literature and myth in the form of a mother, a loved one, a goddess, a siren, a prostitute and an enchantress, or a *femme fatale*. The impact of these latent images of woman can be as destructive to the psychic health of the man who projects them as they can be beneficent. They often give rise to an obsessive pursuit of the elusive and the intractable." Because of their appearance in the mind of the poet in forms consistent with the well-established characteristics of the archetype of the *anima*, Adhiambo and Paveba tend to feature in Okara's lyrics in patterns of relationships reminiscent of the kinds of poet-muse relationships described by Robert Graves in *The White Goddess* (1959) and exemplified in the life and poetry of Okara's contemporary, Christopher Okigbo (1930-1967). As Okigbo learned from his reading of Graves, and as parsed by Nwoga (1972), "one phase in the relationship between the muse-poet and his goddess-woman is that in which the poet becomes more consciously aware of cruelty." This lesson, also learnt by Okara and

embodied in the mythos of "The Mystic Drum," "Adhiambo," and "To Paveba," is writ large in the imagery and symbolism of Okigbo's second sequence, *Limits*, especially *Limits IV* in which the beloved female figure metamorphoses into a ferocious lioness that gores the over-excited lover to death or, at any rate, tranquilizes him into an unconscious state from which he would awake to complete the writing of the poem at hand with a mature mind truly informed by experience:

An image insists  
From flag pole of the heart;  
Her image distracts  
With the cruelty of the rose...

Oblong-headed lioness—  
No shield is proof against her—  
Wound me, O sea-weed  
Face, blinded like a strong-room—

Distances of her armpit-fragrance  
Turn chloroform enough for my patience—

When you have finished  
& done up my stitches,  
Wake me near the altar,  
& this poem will be finished...  
(*Limits IV*, lines 71-84)

Thus, as stated in *The White Goddess*, "Being in love does not and should not, blind the poet to the cruel side of woman's nature—and many muse-poems are written in helpless attestation of this by men whose love is not longer returned" (Graves, 1959: 191). As stated above, this archetypal pattern is amply reenacted in Okara's "To Paveba," "Adhiambo," and "The Mystic Drum." In "To Paveba," the "fire" and "flames" of passion reduce everything between the lover and the beloved into "ashes":

And as before the fire smoulders in water,  
continually smouldering beneath  
the ashes with things I dare not tell  
erupting from the hackneyed lore  
of the beginning. For they die in the telling.

So let them be. Let them smoulder.  
Let them smoulder in the living fire beneath the ashes.

Through the infusion of the mythos of "the hackneyed lore / of the beginning" (evoking the sexual overtones of the relationship between Adam and Eve in "Eden's farm," as subtly recreated by Michael Echeruo in his early lyric, "Sophia" (see Azuonye, 2011) his personal story, Okara's "To Paveba" is transformed into an archetypal tale of poet-muse relationship as predicted in Graves theory of poetry. Not surprisingly, in "Adhiambo," the poet-spouse-and-lover presents itself as one in which the artist is possessed by the *divine afflatus*, theorized in his treatise, *On the Sublime*, as the primary source of inspiration for poets, by the Greek teacher of rhetoric and literary critic, Longinus (ca. 1st or 3rd century AD). Akin to the notion of "spirit arrest," in transatlantic African communities in the Caribbean and the Americas, the idea of the *divine afflatus* is common among the Ijo and elsewhere in Africa where artistic and professional creativity is often attributed to possession by a deity of madness and creativity such as Agwu (the patron of medicine-men), among the Igbo (See Ume, 2009). The speaker in "Adhiambo" is not only maddened by his love but clearly possessed by the Ijo congener of the Igbo deity of creative madness, Agwu:

I hear many voices  
like it's said a madman hears;  
I hear trees talking  
like it's said a medicine man hears.

Like Ahab, the hero of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, he is not just maddened by his monomaniac complex (or neurotic fixation of on a single passion), he is indeed "madness maddened." But Okara's wife-muse is imbued with the kind of tortuous coyness that has provoked, in global amatory poetry, some of the most sublime evocations of the "cruelty of the rose" (in other words, the cruelty of the alluring object of love, as depicted in Okigbo's *Limits IV*, quoted above). She is singularly unyielding:

And I raised my hand—  
my trembling hand, gripping  
my heart as handkerchief  
and waved and waved-and waved but  
she turned her eyes away.

The reader who turns to "The Mystic Drum" from "Adhiambo" and "To Paveba" will immediately recognize the reification of the tension between the lover and the beloved as an extended metaphor for the exploration of something that lies in the pits of epistemology, already defined above as the branch of philosophy that studies the nature of knowledge, in particular its foundations, scope, and validity. Far beyond the realms of the tremulous stirrings of the love-struck heart, the lyric takes us into the highest cerebral realms of abstruse philosophy. As the poet's muse, the beloved is not only the presiding lady of the poet's art but his link to the ultimate source all knowledge of reality—his link to the world beyond the quotidian, the well-spring of true knowledge of the essence of reality.

From a deep structure analysis of the meaning of the poem, it seems evident that the epistemological underpinnings of "The Mystic Drum" go well beyond the culture wars of African postcolonial nationalist search for identity through such ideologies as Negritude, Pan Africanism, the search for the African Personality, the African Renascent Movement, and the like. The deft modernist deployment of tropes in the poem is one that cuts across cultural and national boundaries, inviting comparison with systems of thought which Okara himself may not have ever even contemplated, including the statement from the Zen philosopher Ch'ing Yuän, with which the present commentary begins.

There is, of course, no intention here to suggest that Okara was directly influenced by the oriental philosophy of Zen or that he was schooled under any Zen master. Although I have enjoyed close personal friendship with Okara since 1967 and have elsewhere remarked on the Zen mode of apperception in his poetry (Azuonye, 1991), it never occurred to me to ask him about any contact he may have had with Zen philosophy as I did not think that it was necessarily of any value to establish any such a contact, until my most recent interview with him at the University of Massachusetts, Boston (August, 2011). After listening attentively to my reading of Zen master. Ch'ing Yuän's statement with which the present article begins, Okara readily agreed that it applies very well to his intention and the structure of the experience of the experience dramatized in "The Mystic Drum." While Zen is both a philosophical and religious system of thought in China, Japan and India, leading Zen masters are emphatic in their belief that Zen apperception of reality is not only universal but can also be automatically cultivated by any individual in any culture who makes a studied effort at detaching himself from conventional modes of perception, allowing himself to become lost in the free flux of existence. Zen is often described as a way of liberation that enables us to detach ourselves from conventional objects and to soar with spiritual freedom above the arbitrary compartmentalization of reality. I therefore see the congruence between Okara's speaker's Zen illumination as an attestation of the Zen masters' claim with regard to the universality and naturalness of the Zen mode of apperception. Furthermore, and as a corollary to these claims, it would appear that, on closer examination, Zen modes of apperception are not alien to indigenous Ijo, Igbo, Efik-Ibibio, Ekoi, Edo, Yoruba, Hausa-Fulani, or other African thought-patterns and belief systems. It seems to me that we can work our way back from the words on the page of Okara's

poem to indigenous modes of Zen perception clearly evident, not only in "The Mystic Drum" (as admitted by Okara himself) but also in "Adhiambo" and "To Paveba," along with the implications of the surprising conclusion of "The Mystic Drum" and final fabulous darkness that forces the speaker to pack his "mystic drum," turning away, "never to beat so loud anymore"

### Phase I: Conventional Knowledge

At the initial level of *conventional knowledge* (lines 1-7), the speaker sees people as people and fishes as fishes. At this level, the love relationship between the lover and his beloved is still at a primary, phenomenal and mundane level of innocent physical and sexual attraction:

The mystic drum beat in my inside  
and fishes danced in the rivers  
and men and women danced on land  
to the rhythm of my drum

But standing behind a tree  
with leaves around her waist  
she only smiled with a shake of her head  
(“The Mystic Drum,” lines 1-7).

A simple paraphrase of the first stanza of the above excerpt underscores the phenomenological normalcy of the lover's perceptions. The "mystic drum" of passion that beats in his "inside" has no effect whatsoever his perception of external reality. Neither the complexes of the personal unconscious nor the archetypes of the collective unconscious have been activated to shape his conscious processing of his sensory perceptions. He sees everything around him in themselves as they really are, or—at any rate—as they are commonly perceived. His attraction to the beloved is born of the normal biological sexual instincts that have repeatedly calls into being, and sustains, the dance of life of all living beings, both plants and animals. It stems from libido, defined in psychoanalytical theories, as the psychic and emotional energy in people's psychological makeup that is related to the basic human instincts, especially the sex drive. The beloved, "standing behind a tree/with leaves around her waist," is nothing more than any and every female entity in the eternal biological cycle of reproduction. She is the stigma of a flowering flora inviting with her bloom ("smile" and "shake of her head") the agencies of pollination and fertilization, "instinct guiding" (to quote from "The Spirit of the Wind" on the primacy of instinct in Okara's early lyrics).

The first phase of "The Mystic Drum" is then a phase of innocence—of natural instincts and primal apperceptions of reality uncomplicated by intimacy and experience. Parallel phases of innocence can also be seen in the structures of both "Adhiambo" and "To Paveba."

### Phase II: More Intimate Knowledge

At the median level of *more intimate knowledge* (lines 16-26), people are no longer people and fishes are no longer fishes. At this stage, the storm and stress of love relationships have set in, infusing violence, anger, distrust, hate and other unexpected negativities into the affair, awakening the lovers' awareness of the inner realities beneath the surface of things, and enabling him to understand that things are not always what they appear to be.

The prelude to this phase is the intensification of the "tempo" of "the mystic drum" in lines 8-15:

Still my drum continued to beat,  
rippling the air with quickened  
tempo compelling the quick  
and the dead to dance and sing  
with their shadows—

But standing behind a tree  
with leaves around her waist  
she only smiled with a shake of her head.

15

The imagery clearly suggests that the “quickened tempo” of the drum has the effect of “compelling the quick/and the dead to dance and sing/ with their shadows” to the beat of the poet’s passion. The cliché, “the quick/and the dead” is an idiom that first appeared in the 1549 Anglican Book of Common Prayer and was later used in King James translation of Acts 10:42, which speaks of Jesus as judge “of quick and dead,” a phrase which has since been retained in the Apostle’s Creed, and has most recently been adopted as the title of several novels (by Ellery Queen, 1943; Louis L’Amour, 1973; Zebulon Vance Wilson, 1986; and Joy Williams, 2000), a collection of short stories (by Vincent Starrett, 1965), and films (including feature films directed by Robert Totten and starring Victor French and Majel Barrett, 1963, and directed by Sam Raimi, 1995; a racing documentary by Claude Du Boc, 1978; a TV movie directed by Robert Day, and a film adaptation of the L’Amour novel, 1987). The association of the word “quick” with “alive” comes from Older English usage in which the first perception of the movement of a baby in its mother’s womb was called “quickening,” suggesting that the coming to life of the baby. It has been suggested that “People who use this phrase to imply that speed is involved—liveliness rather than aliveness—sometimes get credit for creating a clever pun but more often come off as ignorant.” Okara is well-known for his habit of expropriating clichés for diverse rhetorical purposes. Further research may be necessary to hone the wider rhetorical value of the key phrase, “the quick and the dead.” Does it say more than simply suggest an archetypal pattern of behavior common to the all humanity, both living and the dead? Are we thus faced with a situation in which, at the heart of the initiation into “more intimate knowledge” (lines 16-26), all conventional apperceptions of the facts of experience are suspended and the “shadows” (reminiscent of one of the major archetypes of the collective unconscious) which are awakened by the quickened tempo of the drums in the prelude (line 12), appear to take over the stage, throwing up the anomalies we see before us:

Then the drum beat with the rhythm  
of the things of the ground  
and invoked the eye of the sky  
the sun and the moon and the river gods and  
the trees began to dance,  
the fishes turned men  
and men turned fishes  
and things stopped to grow—

20

But standing behind a tree  
with leaves around her waist  
she only smiled with a shake of her head.

25

The complex imagery of these lines can be simply paraphrased in one simple sentence. In the heat of the closest possible intimacy between lovers, things are no longer what they seemed to be at first. Both the lover and the beloved are transformed much to the annoyance of each other. The surface appearances at first presented by each party disappear, revealing strange, weird or outlandish patterns of behavior. At this stage of intimacy, to see is as painful as to hear one another. Notwithstanding other significations derived from the poet’s native Ijo thought-patterns and beliefs, the archetypal “shadows” by which the above anomalies have been thrown up can be understood from the perspective of the analytical psychology of Carl Gustav Jung. From this perspective, the beloved in the lyric (like every woman in love) is at first projecting a *mask* or *persona* which makes her acceptable and desirable by her lover as his *anima* or soul mate—the inborn and archetypal feminine aspect of a man’s personality that defines, from the depths of his collective unconscious, his choice of a woman on whom to invest his love and devotion. But with more intimate knowledge, the mask is torn asunder, exposing the shadow or the darker aspect of the beloved personality which lies behind the mask and makes her seem to conform to the image of the lover’s soul mate.

The didactic interplay between the motifs of mask, anima and shadow is one of the constants of the oral traditional stories of the Ijo and the proximate Igbo and Efik-Ibibio peoples of south-eastern Nigeria. In a tale-type ("The Proud Beautiful Girl that Rejects All Suitors and Ends Up Marrying a Monster Disguised as a Complete Gentleman) common to several West African peoples, including the Yoruba—as can be seen from weaving of variant of the tale-type into the early romance, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1954) of Amos Tutuola (1920-1997)—a proud beautiful girl, more beautiful than all her peers in her community and beyond, is adamant in her refusal to accept the hands all eligible suitors from far and wide. At last a nauseous monster (smelly ghost, half-bodied incubus, cannibalistic satyr, animate skull, fish, or other animal) borrows human body parts and rich garments and presents his masked self before the arrogant lady, who instantly accepts his proposal and marries him against all advice, only to discover, after a long journey to gate of the groom's homeland that she has married an obnoxious monster! Of particular significance as the possible source of the fish and river imagery in Okara's poem is the Igbo variant of the tale, with several Ijo analogues, "Onwuero and the Three Fishes," in the collection, *Ikolo the Wrestler and Other Ibo Tales* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1954) by Nigerian popular novelist, Cyprain Ekwensi (1921–2007). At the gory climax of "Onwuero and the Three Fishes" (discussed in Pandey, 2004: 113-138, with reference to linguistic gendering and patriarchal ideology in West African fiction), the bitterly disillusioned girl, Onwuero, watches with horror as her charming prince and his two companions turn into fishes and disappear into the river, leaving her marooned in a strange land. Clearly the imagery of phase II of "The Mystic Drum" ("the fishes turned men/and men turned fishes") derives from the putative Ijo analogue of this tale-type (yet to be ascertained and documented). But in "The Mystic Drum," the tropes are reversed, and the transformations are projected to the personality of the beloved, who acquires extraordinary powers that effectively transform her into a supernatural being, indeed a goddess, invested with the powers "of the things of the ground" (earth) of the "the eye of the sky/ the sun and the moon" (heaven), and of "the river gods" (water)<sup>8</sup> At this stage, in "Adhiambo," the disoriented lover, confused by the strange transformations he perceives in the behavior of his beloved, is forced to wonder at his own sanity:

I hear many voices  
like it's said a madman hears;  
I hear trees talking  
like it's said a medicine man hears.

Maybe I'm a madman  
I'm a medicine man.  
Maybe I'm mad,  
for the voices are luring me,  
urging me from the midnight  
moon and the silence of my desk  
to walk on wave crests across a sea.

Maybe I'm a medicine man  
hearing talking saps,  
seeing behind trees;  
but who's lost his powers  
of invocation.

But the voices and the trees  
are now a name-spelling and one figure  
silence-etched across

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<sup>8</sup> The imagery of "things of the ground", "the eye of the sky," and "the water gods" is evidently drawn from an Ijo idiom or idioms for "the entire visible universe." The "eye of the sky" refers specifically to the sun. In the equivalent Igbo idiom, the sun, anyanwu, is represented as elliptically as "eye" (anya) "that does not die" (anwu), in other words, the immortal eye of the sky.

the moon face is walking, stepping  
over continents and seas.

It cannot be gainsaid—as already stated—that love is a species of madness. The imagery of these four stanzas is informed by much the same kind of rhetorical exaggeration or hyperbole—arising from the over-excited or maddened imagination of the lover—as in one that informs the well-known amatory offerings “To His Coy Mistress” by English Metaphysical poet, Andrew Marvell (1621–1678):

I would  
Love you ten years before the Flood:  
And you should if you please refuse  
Till the Conversation of the Jews.  
My vegetable Love should grow  
Vaster than Empires, and more slow.  
And hundred years should go to praise  
Thine Eyes, and on thy Forehead Gaze.  
Two hundred to adore each Breast  
But thirty thousand to the rest.  
An age at least to every part,  
And the last Age should show your Heart.  
For Lady you deserve this State  
Nor would I love at a lower rate.

In paraphrase, the immeasurable scale of the running hyperbole is suggestive of what only the sick mind of a mad man can imagine: “ten years before the Flood” refers to Noah’s flood and parallel flood myths in other world religions which can today be interpreted as folk memories of the glaciations that followed the great Ice Ages of prehistoric antiquity, scores and perhaps hundreds of thousands of years ago; “Till the Conversation of the Jews” is a superlative image of an impossibility, arising from the firm belief in Marvell’s time that it is absolutely impossible to convert any Jew to any other faith, even till the end of the world; “Vaster than Empires” suggests a time line longer than the millennia covered by the rise and fall of all the empires known to human history, from the dawn of human civilization in the Nile Valley of Africa and the fertile crescent of the Middle East; while “an Age,” though defined as “a relatively short division of recent geologic time, shorter than an epoch,” spans hundreds of thousands or millions of years. Okara’s imagery of maddened self, in “Adhiambo,” as a lonely figure “across/the moon face is walking” (the mythical moon man), “stepping/over continents and seas.” is perhaps no less extravagantly hyperbolic as Marvell’s tropes. In his fits of superlative madness, the lover, in “The Mystic Drum,” sees the most fantastic transformations of the beloved (albeit under the influence of folktale fantasy). Passion boils over with these transformations of all reality and “and things stopped to grow” as the lover reaches the still-point of passion. For the basis for the implied comparison here of the moment when “things stopped to grow” in Okara’s dance of life in “The Mystic Drum” and the idea of “the still point” in T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, see Susan Jones’s article, “At the still point”: T. S. Eliot, Dance, and Modernism” (2009, pp. 31-51). According to Jones, Eliot, in “Burnt Norton” (*The Four Quartets*),

embarked on a sustained exploration of time and transcendence. In a striking invocation of this theme, the speaker alludes to dance as representative of the human experience of timelessness:

At the still point of the turning world  
Neither flesh nor fleshless;  
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,  
But neither arrest nor movement.  
And do not call it fixity,/Where past and future are...

But despite the changes in the loci of the lover, the beloved remains unmoved, standing still “behind a tree/ with leaves around her waist,” continuing to smile alluringly “with a shake of her head.” The constancy

of the beloved's position is by no means novel to amatory poetry. It is in many ways reminiscent of the changing loci of love in another English metaphysical poem, "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" (1633)<sup>9</sup> by John Donne (1572-1631), poet, satirist, lawyer, and priest, who is considered to be the master of the metaphysical conceit among the 17<sup>th</sup> century metaphysical poets. Comprising metaphors, similes, hyperboles and other analogical tropes in the form of the clever yoking together of heterogeneous entities, the metaphysical conceit often comes with startling, oxymoronic or paradoxical outcomes. Thus, in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," Donne uses the geometrical conceit of a drafting compass to trace the trajectory and strength of the spiritual love between the lover the beloved (another coy mistress):

And though it in the center sit,  
Yet when the other far doth rome,  
It leans, and hearkens after it,  
And growes erect, as that comes home.

The beloved is, in other words, the fixed foot of a compass<sup>10</sup> that is pinned at a central point (like a foot of a pair of compasses in the hands of a draftsman). But the moment the other foot (representing the lover) begins to move far away from the fixed foot (away from the beloved), the beloved—while remaining in one spot—must incline or move to a position that is at an angle to the vertical, thus paying attention willy-nilly to the lover. As the lover moves away from the beloved lady, the lady—in spite of her coyness (or annoying reluctance to make a commitment or provocative pretence to be reserved or modest)—will still “hearken after” him and will still be there for him when he comes back. We can see the same inclination towards the lover in “The Mystic Drum,” despite the coy lady's image of standing still in the same pose as that in which she stands in the first phase of the relationship:

But standing behind a tree  
with leaves around her waist  
she only smiled with a shake of her head.  
(“The Mystic Drum,” lines 24-26).

There are indeed many other parallels between Okara's poetry and the amatory lyrics of the English metaphysical poetry; and there are many reasons why Okara can be rightly considered as a twentieth-century modernist, metaphysical poet. At the core of the aesthetic of the metaphysical poetry of John Donne, Andrew Marvell, George Herbert, Robert Herrick and other English metaphysical poets is the metaphysical conceit. But as Helen Gardner has observed, a conceit is “a comparison whose ingenuity is more striking than its justness.” It exists only when comparisons “are made to concede likeness while being strongly conscious of unlikeness.” Thus, for example, in George Herbert's poem, "Praise," the God's kindness is depicted metaphorically as a bottle which, "As we have boxes for the poor," will take in an infinite amount of the lover's tears. One of the most widely known examples of the metaphysical conceit is from John Donne's lyric, "The Flea." This metaphorical conceit offers the image of a flea that bites both the lover and his beloved. In concluding, the lover pleads with the beloved that that they are indeed more than married; she therefore has no reason to deny him sex, since their bloods are intermingled the body of the flea making the flea a sacred marriage chamber:

Oh stay! three lives in one flea spare  
Where we almost, yea more than married are.

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<sup>9</sup>First published in *Songs and Sonnets* (1633), two years after Donne's death, this poem was composed, according to Donne's biographer Izaak Walton, for his wife, Anne More, in 1611.

<sup>10</sup> A compass is a geometrical instrument, consisting of two rods or feet, used by draftsmen, architects, cartographers and other professionals for drawing circles or measuring distances, as on a map. One foot is pointed while the other is often joined by an adjustable hinge used for holding a pencil.

This flea is you and I, and this

Our marriage-bed and marriage-temple is.

In the light of these examples, the extravagant imagery for the complications of "more intimate knowledge" in a love relationship in Okara's "The Mystic Drum" can be understood as a species of metaphysical conceit:

Then the drum beat with the rhythm  
of the things of the ground  
and invoked the eye of the sky  
the sun and the moon and the river gods and  
the trees began to dance,  
the fishes turned men  
and men turned fishes  
and things stopped to grow

20

In paraphrase, Okara's lover is saying that, as the vibes ("drum") of life repeatedly strike ("beat"), its changes in a pattern and volume ("rhythm") invariably imitate the unpredictable patterns of change inherent in the order of nature—of the earth ("the things of the ground"), the sky ("the eye of the sky/ the sun and the moon"), and of the waters ("the river gods"). Against this background the metamorphoses of fishes into men and men into fishes are not just a fantasy derived from a folktale motif. The behavior of the beloved in the crises of love can take several unexpected turns that are as surprising as they can be disorientating. This is a theme that dominates the Petrarchan conceit, the precursor of the metaphysical conceit that was much used in the love poetry of the Renascent Italian scholar and poet, Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374), who is well-known for exploiting various image-sets for comparing the despairing lover and his un pitying but idolized mistress. In one example, the lover is a ship on a stormy sea, and his mistress "a cloud of dark disdain"; in another example, the lady is a sun whose beauty and virtue shine on her lover from a distance. The paradoxical pain and pleasure of lovesickness is often described using oxymoron, as is commonly the case in Okara's lyrics, for instance uniting peace and war, burning and freezing, and so forth. But images which were novel in the sonnets of Petrarch became clichés in the poetry of later imitators. Romeo uses hackneyed Petrarchan conceits when describing his love for Rosaline as "bright smoke, cold fire, sick health." By contrast, there is nothing hackneyed in Okara's conceits; and this seems to be because, while driven by sensibilities akin to those at the root of the Petrarchan and the metaphysical conceits, they seem to have sprung from another poetic ancestry—that of the moonlight love songs of the Ijo, the proximate Igbo and Efik-Ibibio peoples of south-eastern Nigeria and other African peoples.<sup>11</sup>

Such intimate relationships with a beloved woman brings the lover face to face with the ugly realities of life. After the lover has learnt the lesson of love from the transformations of reality, he reaches a still point of passion and is at rest. He now knows that the reality beneath the veneer of appearances can be unfathomable. Things are not what they seem to be. Beneath the surface of a beautiful woman beckoning with a smile and "a shake of her head," we may be confronted with unpredictable mannerisms and idiosyncrasies. Failure to learn these lessons will doom a lover to the pain of the kind of rejection which the lover suffers at the end of "Adhiambo";

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<sup>11</sup> Thus Love songs performed in the context of African moonlight play underscore the cross-cultural link implicit in the English word, lunacy (from L. *luna*, moon), between madness and the moon. One such song from the Ohaukabi (Isuikwuato) Igbo of Abia State depicts lovers oddly carrying lanterns as the moon shines in a desperate effort to find avenues of committing abortion:

Onwa tiwe achowa otoniko,  
Achow a otoniko,  
Achow a otoniko,  
Eji aga isi ime o,  
Onwa tiwe achowa otoniko,

When the moon shines, they search for lanterns,  
They search for lanterns,  
They search for lanterns,  
With which, o, to go cook abortion,  
When the moon shines, they search for lanterns,

And I raised my hand—  
 my trembling hand, gripping  
 my heart as handkerchief  
 and waved and waved-and waved but  
 she turned her eyes away.

**Phase 3: Substantial Knowledge**

In the final phase of *substantial knowledge* (lines 27-41), the lover has learned the lessons of love and of life, and though he now sees people once again as people and fishes once again as fishes, it is with a deep understanding borne of experience. He is now fully aware of the fact that beneath the outward appearances of things may lurk monstrosities of behavioral patterns. In this phase, normal physical and sexual love have become strengthened by the deeper awareness of the spiritual and emotional complexities of human life, and the lover has learned to accept even the most usual behavior from the beloved as normal and consistent with the realities of life:

And then the mystic drum  
 in my inside stopped to beat—  
 and men became men,  
 fishes became fishes 30  
 and trees, the sun and the moon  
 found their places, and the dead  
 went to the ground and things began to grow.

And behind the tree she stood  
 with roots sprouting from her 35  
 feet and leaves growing on her head  
 and smoke issuing from her nose  
 and her lips parted in her smile  
 turned cavity belching darkness.

Then, then I packed my mystic drum 40  
 and turned away; never to beat so loud any more.

As at the end of the first and second phases, the beloved is no longer simply “standing behind a tree/with leaves around her waist ,” only smiling “with a shake of her head” (lines 13-15 and 24-27). She is no longer silent but active, combusive, mysterious, and even ominous. She is now a personification of the abyss (a chasm or gorge so deep that its extent is not visible, an endless space or something that is immeasurably deep or infinite, situation of apparently unending awfulness, with her “lips parted in her smile” opening up as a bottomless pit—a “cavity belching darkness.”

At a glance, one is here reminded of the common English idiom, “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned,” an apparent misquotation of “Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned / Nor hell a fury like a woman scorned” from the play, *The Morning Bride* (1697) by William Congreve (1670-1729). This may well be applicable to the present scenario in Okara's persona's love affair. But the trope of an abyss “belching darkness” may not necessarily pertain to “hell” as it would appear from the perspective of Judeo-Christian belief system. From the indigenous religious belief system of the poet's native Ijo and proximate Igbo and Efik-Ibibio peoples of south-eastern Nigeria, the abyss is a well-known mystery of the traditional religion often worshipped as a deity. The worship of the abyss, known as *Ogwugwu*, is particularly well-developed among the Igbo as the deity often described by such phrases as *amacha amacha* (that which can never known completely), *ama ama amacha amacha* (that which is known but never known completely), or simply as *ama ama* (the unknown).

At this climax of his emotional and epistemological initiation, the lover finally decides to “pack” his “mystic drum,” turning away from an over-excited involvement in love relationships, determined “never to beat so loud anymore.”

### **Conclusion**

Structurally, Okara's love lyric, “The Mystic Drum,” evinces a tripartite ritual pattern of initiation from *innocence* through *intimacy* to *experience*. By comparison to the way of Zen as manifested in the experience of Zen Master, Ch'ing Yuän Wei-hsin, this pattern resolves itself into an emotional and epistemological journey from conventional knowledge (born of innocence) through more intimate knowledge (born of closer apperception of reality) to substantial knowledge (born of experience). The substantial knowledge born of experience empowers the lover to understand that beneath the surface attractiveness of what we know very well (such as the women we love) may lie an abyss (“a cavity”) of the unknown and unknowable “belching darkness.” But experience teaches us, at this stage of substantial knowledge, not to expose ourselves to the dangers of being beholden to this unknown and unknowable reality by keeping our passions under strict control, including the prudent decision to “pack” the “mystic drum” of our innocence and juvenescence, making sure that it does not “beat so loud anymore.”

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