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# ‘Clearing the Forest’: Critical Commentary on Gabriel Okara’s Postwar Ode, ‘The Dreamer’

**Chukwuma Azuonye**

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*And now the dreamer, with machete,  
Word-sharpened, is clearing the forest  
Of its macro-stench and venality  
To sow the seed that would send its roots,  
Unshaken by wind or storm, to its expected greatness.*

[Gabriel Okara, “The Dreamer,” 2006]

## Introduction

A large body of the poetry of Gabriel Okara (b. April 24, 1921) was lost in the confusion that came with the sudden end of the Biafran war of independence from Nigeria (July 6, 1967-January 12, 1970). But a slim gathering of his verse, *The Fisherman’s Invocation and Other Poems* (ed. Theo Vincent, 1978), went on to win the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1979. His second volume of poems on postwar events in Nigeria, *The Dreamer, His Vision* (2004), shared the LNG<sup>1</sup> Nigerian National Prize for Literature with *The Chants of a Minstrel* (2004) by younger poet Ezenwa-Ohaeto (1958-2005). The title poem of *The Dreamer* is dedicated to Alhaji (Chief) Moshood Kashimawo Olawale Abiola (August 24, 1937–July 7, 1998). A shrewd businessman, Abiola burst suddenly into the limelight in the early 1970’s as the topmost ranking African executive of the American multinational telecommunication corporation, ITT.<sup>2</sup> He soon became the richest man in sub-Saharan Africa, a status he maintained up till his untimely death in 1998. Born to an aristocratic family of the Egba Yoruba in Abeokuta (Ogun State), he was a southern Moslem with strong ties both with the powerful Islamic elite of Northern Nigeria (the Kaduna Mafia) and the northern-dominated Nigerian armed forces. As part of his extensive business empire, he founded the *Concord* chain of newspapers—publishers of the daily *National Concord* and the weekly *Sunday Concord* and *Concord Magazine*. But for several years, he commanded national and indeed pan-African notoriety, as a robber baron, and was despised by many as a subaltern surrogate of exploitative neocolonialist business interests in Nigeria. In the 1980’s, the radical Afro-Jazz maestro, Fela Anikulapo Kuti (15 October 1938—2 August 1997), recorded a bestselling album of satiric lyrics denouncing as a colossal scam his links with ITT under the pidgin English title, “International Thief Thief”.<sup>3</sup>

Many foreign companies dey Africa carry all our money go<sup>4</sup>  
Many foreign companies dey Africa carry all our money go  
Them go write big English for newspaper, dabaru we Africans<sup>5</sup>  
Them go write big English for newspaper, dabaru we Africans

[Chorus after each line] *International Thief Thief!*

I read about one of them inside book like that<sup>6</sup>  
Them call him name na I.T.T.<sup>7</sup>  
I read about one of them inside book like that  
Them call him name na I.T.T.  
Them go dey cause confusion (Confusion!)<sup>8</sup>  
Cause corruption (Corruption!)  
Cause oppression (Oppression!)  
Cause inflation (Inflation!)...

Them get one style wey them dey use<sup>9</sup>  
 Them go pick one African man  
 A man with low mentality  
 Them go give am million naira breads<sup>10</sup>  
 To become of high position here  
 Him go bribe some thousand naira bread  
 To become one useless chief

Like rat they do them go do from  
 Corner corner, pass-ee pass-ee  
 Under under, pass-ee pass-ee  
 Inside inside, pass-ee pass-ee<sup>11</sup>  
 In in, pass-ee pass-ee  
 Out out, pass-ee pass-ee  
 Peep peep, pass-ee pass-ee  
 Up up, pass-ee pass-ee...<sup>12</sup>

Then he gradually, gradually, gradually, gradually...  
 Then he gradually, gradually, gradually, gradually...

Them go be:  
 Friend friend to journalist  
 Friend friend to Commissioner  
 Friend friend to Permanent Secretary  
 Friend friend to Minister  
 Friend friend to Head of State

Them start start to steal money  
 Start start them corruption  
 Start start them inflation  
 Start start them oppression  
 Start start them confusion  
 Start start them oppression  
 Start start to steal money  
 Start start to steal money

Like Obasanjo and Abiola

The lyric was extremely damaging to Abiola's image and reputation. It reinforced a widespread rumor that hundreds of millions of dollars earmarked by the Military Government for the modernization of Nigerian telecommunication system, in the late 1970's and early 1980's, were corruptly pocketed by Abiola and ITT without delivering any matching services. Up to the present day, the system remains dysfunctional. But in the early 1990's, Abiola is believed to have experienced an epiphany that resulted in a personal moral and spiritual regeneration that transformed him from a greedy agent of Western neocolonialist exploitation of his country into a visionary and dedicated agent of nation-building. Gabriel Okara was deeply moved by this transformation and remains to date completely persuaded about Abiola's sincerity. Following a vigorous grassroots campaign that enabled him to weather the storms of initial skepticism over his transformation and sincerity, Abiola—as fondly recounted by Okara in my interviews with him (Azuonye, 2005 and 2011)—became the putative winner of the first relatively free and fair Presidential elections in Nigeria held on February 27, 1999, by the military government of General Abdulsalami Abubakar (born June 13, 1942).

The present essay will attempt a close study of Gabriel Okara's ode, "The Dreamer" (the lead poem of *The Dreamer, His Vision*, 2004). A complex lyrical poem celebrating the personal, moral and spiritual

transformation of Abiola, the poem is also of interest for the light it casts on several other aspects of the decadent politics of Nigeria under military rule after the Biafran war. The dedication speaks volumes:

*To all those who are on the list of disappearances known and unknown; all those who were murdered for holding aloft the banner of Truth under the ephemeral arrogance of the military dictators; to those who dared and survived, sustained by the hope of the inevitable emergence of democratic government out of the chaos and eventual nobler role for the country in the affairs of a rapidly contracting world, and lastly, but not the least, to the masses who suffered most, whose heads were made stepping stones to the tyrants thrones, I dedicate these poems.*

*And to Chief M. K. Abiola who inspired me to write the lead poem by what he said at one of his Campaign/TV appearances—"You the people of this country made me what I am today and I will give you back when I am President of this country."*



**Alhaji Moshood Kashimawo Olawale Abiola**  
(August 24, 1937–July 7, 1998).

Readers of Okara's war poems will recall that, in "Leave Us Alone" (December 1967), he accurately prophesied that Nigeria would pay a heavy price of self-destruction for its "unholy war" against Biafrans—the victims of the ethnic cleansing of July through October 1966 in Northern and Western Nigeria, at the behest of Western Neocolonialist interests that led to the war:

So stop this war, this unholy war  
Which serves naught but vanity,  
Your consuming vanity, vanity  
That battens on fresh blood of youth  
You send to death by our reluctant hands;  
Youth we knew by name and loved as kins.  
Each such youth that dies is a bloody shroud  
You are winding round your bewildered self,  
You will be your own assassin

Since the surrender of Biafra on January 12, 1970, Nigeria has been in an ever-deepening state of degeneration arising from arbitrary decisions often rooted in "blind hate" reflecting the patterns of alterity (otherness, difference, etc) by which the country has been divided along ethnic, religious and class lines since its creation by the British at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Several of the poems collected in Okara's *The Dreamer, His Vision* (2004) bear witness to the anarchy and confusion of the post-civil war era in Nigeria. The titles, as repackaged in the forthcoming *Collected Poems* (Okara, 2012) are in themselves

most revealing. In Part VI (The Dreamer, His Vision), the catch titles include: "The Dreamer," "Bent Double With Weight," "Darkness," "The Precipice," "Taps Are Dry," "Self-Preservation (To Ken Saro Wiwa)," "Morbidity," "We Live To Kill and Kill to Live," "Ovation Seeker," "Contractors," and "Civil Servants." In Part VI (Prayers and Tributes), the catch titles include "Give Us Good Leaders," "Talking Nonsense," "A Prayer (In Tribute to Sister Mary)," and "Rise and Shine." There is an overwhelming sense of crisis and desperation behind these titles. Even from a cursory glance at the words of randomly sampled texts, one can easily see why:

Like unguarded cattle running wild  
Away from the slaughter house!

We are now in darkness  
And we are peering to see through  
Darkness, listening and perceiving ("Darkness")

I do not know what to say  
(Unlike our humble martyrs)  
This yawning precipice  
At this point in timeless time  
Threatening to swallow faith  
In fellow men and women,  
This dark cloud threatening.  
I do not know what to say ("The Precipice")

Hopes long drawn thin, long gone  
For taps and faucets to hiss with water,  
Of the times there were, when no thoughts were spared  
To keep running water running from taps  
In houses and squares to rid  
Us of lingering thirst and intimidating dirt  
In hearts for human dignity ("Taps Are Dry").

It is against the background of this terrain of anarchy and confusion that Okara, in "The Dreamer," paints a glowing picture of the unlikely hero Abiola's entry into the Nigerian political leadership arena as a burst of refreshing sunrise.

Structurally, "The Dreamer" evinces a three-part plot that is reminiscent of the classical *ode* ("a lyric poem, usually expressing exalted emotion in a complex scheme of rhyme and meter")<sup>13</sup> as established in ancient Greece and Rome and developed across the centuries in the works of latter-day European Renaissance poets like John Milton (9 December 1608–8 November 1674). This three-part structure is essentially initiatory. It moves from an initial lyrical moment (the *strophe*), through an antithetical and balancing median moment (the *antistrophe*), to a final celebrative dance (the *epode*). Needless to say, in appropriating these lyrical conventions of the European imperium, the impact of the forces of postcolonial hybridity would have been inevitable. A full account of the extent to which Okara has drawn from the lyrical repertoire of his native Ijo oral tradition or the oral traditions of the proximate Igbo and other south-eastern Nigerian peoples, in the making of his ode, will however remain matter for further research.

In "The Dreamer," the *strophe* (Stanza's 1-6) may be subtitled "The Existentialist Circuit." This opening part of the ode paints a picture of the utter hopelessness of post-civil war Nigeria. Trapped in what is decidedly an existential circuit, the country is stymied by extreme forms of venality (bribery, corruption, graft, greed, etc) and the populace ("the marching masses" of the ode) seems disempowered by its situation from finding a way out of its utterly meaningless and purposeless existence. Comparable to the *thesis* in the Hegelian historiographic dialectic,<sup>14</sup> the *strophe* locates the action of the ode in a specific terrain of inertia that calls for the application of an appropriate type of force to set things in motion once again.

The *antistrophe* (Stanzas 7-12), by which the *strophe* is counterbalanced, may be subtitled “The Regeneration.” This segment is an exploration in three parts—here described as *Epiphany*, *Resistance* and *Dialogue* (akin to the three part structure of the ode as a whole) —of the possibilities and modalities for regenerative change. The *Epiphany* (Stanzas 7-8) paints a picture of a sudden intuitive leap of understanding, through an ordinary but striking occurrence (a series of rhetorical questions that visit the hero’s mind, resulting in his determination to make a change). In the *Resistance* (Stanzas 9-12), the hero’s transformation is ignored and even resisted by peers who carry on business as usual, oblivious of the angst of the masses. But this resistance is countered by a grassroots movement of greater moment and force. In *Dialogue* (Stanza 13-14), the hero’s commitment leads to the much-desired national dialogue that results in the free and fair elections celebrated at the end of the ode. Parallel to the *antithesis* in the Hegelian historiographic dialectic, some of the specific motifs of the antistrophe may be understood in terms of the structure of the archetypal heroic monomyth (Separation or Departure; Trials and Victories; and Return) as set out in Joseph Campbell’s early mythological treatise, *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949).

The *epode* (Stanzas 15-16)—the concluding part of the ode—may be subtitled “The Boon.” This segment is a dance of joy celebrating the ultimate blessing or benefit (boon) that arises from beatific transformation of the hero.

### The Strophe: Existential Circuit (Stanzas 1-6)

In the first six stanzas of “The Dreamer,” the scenario of the emergence of Abiola as an exemplary national leader is set by dint of a montage of oxymorons (paradoxes) that paint a picture of an existentialist circuit—a world in which the inhabitants (“the marching masses” of the Nigerian populace) seem trapped in an utterly meaningless and hopeless existence. It is however noteworthy that, while stressing meaninglessness of human life on earth, Okara’s existentialism, in contradistinction to the existential philosophy of the French School, recognizes the possibility of providential intervention in the interest of humanity. In “The Dreamer,” this providential intervention is associated with the emergence of Abiola as a messianic leader “seeking good in our collective good”—an archetypal champion of his people wearing “the mask of God”:

He was seeking good in our collective good  
 As he stood aside, not apart, watching  
 Helpless stream of mankind passing-slowly by;  
 Cheerless mankind with dying hopes of flickering flames  
 And sightless eyes staring at senseless toes, asking why?  
 Toes gnarled, twisted by dusty brown years of marching, waiting!

They took weary step by weary step and now skeptical steps,  
 Short steps cut short by fading visions of promised plenty;  
 But nudged on by limping hope they trudged forward,  
 Forward they trudged in timeless stream of time in seriatim  
 Without dreams of coming obstacles of twist and turns untoward,

On they trudged even as dreams turned malignant nightmares  
 Of waterless taps, empty pots, fireless fireplaces,  
 Of powerless power, authority overpowered by inch-thick darkness,  
 Yielded power to insistent generators to proclaim aggressive  
 Arrogance of wealth, snoring frog-like, in fear fortified homes.

So darkness their insidious mate became—the marching masses;  
 Sleepless heat their nightly fare became—the marching masses;  
 Worthless naira their bane became—the marching masses;

Sweat soaked pariah naira made pariah by crafty shovel-hand

Of masked greed and lurid bags and pockets in gaudy world display!  
 Now rejected, shunned, it roams pariah regions, valueless,  
 Lying in pools of crumpled hopes in highway potholes, floating away

Tossed up or down in macro-fiscal turbulence by former peers,  
 Left million hearts beating fast in hope or slowly in despair, hopeless.

Oxymoron—the dominant figure of speech in the above excerpt—is a type of paradox in which two words with contradictory meanings are juxtaposed for special effect: “sightless eyes”; “senseless toes”; “dreams turned malignant nightmares”; “waterless taps”; “empty pots”; “fireless fireplaces”; “powerless power” and “fear fortified homes.” These running paradoxes aptly recapture the existential unreality and contradictions of Nigerian life under the military dictatorships of the post-civil war era, from 1970. The overriding impression conveyed by the proliferation of these figures is that of an environment of negativity and conflict in which nothing works as it should.

Associated with this montage of oxymorons is a poetic vocabulary dominated by words whose meanings are defined by the negativizing morpheme “-less.” The cumulative effect of the recurrence and repetition of words of this kind (“waterless”; “helpless”; “cheerless”; “sightless”; “senseless”; “powerless”; “sleepless”; “worthless”; “valueless”; and “hopeless”) is an overriding image of an arid existential landspace in which everything is “less” than one would expect in a normal order of things. In the literature of existentialism, the word “listlessness” (with the implications of lethargy, tiredness, lack of energy, slowness, sloth, and apathy) is often used to describe this kind of abnormal world order. This listlessness is further underlined by the Okara’s strings of action verbs, adverbials, gerunds and participles that are connotative of retarding movement: “passing-slowly by”, “staring”, “marching”, “waiting”, “weary step by weary step”, “limping”, and “slowly in despair.” This sense of listlessness is honed by rhyming soft- or slow-action verbs such as “nudged” (transitive verb to push or poke somebody gently, usually with a motion of the elbow) and “trudged” (to walk, or walk a particular path or distance, with slow heavy weary steps).

Okara’s verb-derived adjectives are also noteworthy as signifiers referring to “obstacles of twist and turns awkward,” untoward carrying the implications of inappropriate, unfitting, annoying, unpleasant, troublesome, problematic, unseemly, troublesome, and improper. These adjectives include words like “gnarled” (misshapen, or weather-beaten because of age, hard work, or illness); “twisted” (having one part or end turned in the opposite direction to the other; severely distorted in shape or form); and “crumpled” (showing many folds or creases, especially after being crushed or folded into a smaller shape). The existential space of the post-civil war Nigerian politics that shored up the reformed Abiola the dreamer and visionary is one of severe distortions of reality.

In Stanza 3, the words “darkness,” “heat,” and “Worthless Naira” (Nigerian currency which was introduced in 1973 as a replacement for the Pound Sterling inherited from the British colonial imperium) are piled on with the noise of “marching masses” to evoke an image of an existential space akin to hell, an image intensified by stylistic repetition and parallelism of the order of anaphora coupled with the personification of “darkness” as an “insidious mate” or a slowly and subtly destructive forces of evil by which the “masses” seem possessed:

So darkness their insidious mate became—the marching masses;  
 Sleepless heat their nightly fare became—the marching masses;  
 Worthless naira their bane became—the marching masses;

One is here reminded of T. S. Eliot’s existential image of a crowd flowing over the hell-like deadland of London bridge in *The Waste Land* (1922) and its major classical source, the *Inferno* (*The Divine Comedy*, 1308 -1321) of Dante Alighieri (1265–1321):

Unreal City,  
 Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
I had not thought death had undone so many.  
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,  
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.

Just as in Dante's *Inferno*, the denizen's of hell,

...had their faces twisted toward their haunches  
and found it necessary to walk backward,  
because they could not see ahead of them.  
... and since he wanted so to see ahead,  
he looks behind and walks a backward path

Okara's image of "the waste land" of Nigeria under military rule is even more reminiscent of the "darkness visible" of hell, in its representation as "pandemonium" (a terrain characterized by wild uproar and chaos), in the epic, *Paradise Lost* (Book 1: 61-66) by John Milton (9 December 1608–8 November 1674):

A Dungeon horrible, on all sides round  
As one great Furnace flam'd, yet from those flames  
No light, but rather darkness visible  
Serv'd only to discover sights of woe,  
Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace  
And rest can never dwell....

The strophe ends with a litany of insidious social and economic problems associated with patterns of venality that have become synonymous with the name of Nigeria's national currency, Naira:

Sweat soaked pariah naira made pariah by crafty shovel-hand  
Of masked greed and lurid bags and pockets in gaudy world display!  
Now rejected, shunned, it roams pariah regions, valueless,  
Lying in pools of crumpled hopes in highway potholes, floating away

Tossed up or down in macro-fiscal turbulence by former peers,  
Left million hearts beating fast in hope or slowly in despair, hopeless.

In these closing stanzas of the strophe, Okara engages in verbal fireworks or rap of the kind perfected through his civil war lyrics such as "Suddenly the Air Cracks." The keywords have been carefully selected and deployed for maximum diminution of the global image of Nigeria under military rule in the global comity of nations. Taken together with the words "rejected" (discarded, cast off, unwanted, abandoned), "shunned" (snubbed, avoided), "valueless" (worthless); the most recurrent word, "pariah" (somebody who is despised and avoided) is betoken of the isolation of Nigeria in respectable circles across the world.

Other key words locate the action of the ode in specific domains of the dysfunctional existential domain of post-civil war Nigeria. The phrases "Sweat soaked pariah naira," "crafty shovel-hand" and "pools of crumpled hopes in highway potholes" conjure up the image of the characteristically dirty and smelly Naira in the hands of petty traders apt to pitch their trading shacks in any space no matter how dinghy and squalid in a desperate effort to eke out bare substance, sometimes by "masked greed"; at other times, by stealth of hand ("lurid bags and pockets"), and at other times by open deception ("gaudy world display"). In deconstructing, the reader must account for all the semantic implications of the key words—"masked" (with the face covered in order to prevent recognition), "greed" ("an overwhelming desire to have more of something such as money than is actually needed"), "lurid" ("of a sickeningly intense brightness or boldness of color"), "gaudy" ("brightly colored or showily decorated to an unpleasant or



vulgar degree”), and “world display” (“in the eyes of the world”)— in the environment in which they have been deployed. The image of the Naira “rejected, shunned” and “floating away” is by the same token an appropriate trope for the dwindling respect for the image of Nigeria in a global community in which the national identity of the country has taken such a decisive clobbering by its totally undisciplined elite. And no visitor to Nigeria can fail to feel the existential ennui arising from the “frog-like” snoring of “insistent generators” that “proclaim aggressive/Arrogance of wealth,” in “fear fortified homes.”

### **The Antistrophe: Regeneration (Stanza's 7-12)**

As has been posited, the *antistrophe* of Okara's ode (Stanza's 7-12), by which the *strophe* is counterbalanced, is an exploration in three parts—here described as *Epiphany*, *Resistance* and *Dialogue* (akin to the three part structure of the ode as a whole)—of the possibilities and modalities for regenerative change.

The first part (Stanza 7-8) is the epiphany (or moment of sudden intuitive understanding) at which the hero of the ode (Abiola) hears “the anguished voice of humanity” ringing out with a series of questions that awaken him to his decision to assume the mantle of messianic leadership in his traumatized nation:

As he stood, the dreamer weighed, surveyed, tramping stamping  
 Mass of feet carrying bodies sapped by SAP to the bones  
 Like long trekking starving cattle with only skin hanging on bones  
 Led by swagger-stick babanriga cowherds in shining crushing boots,  
 A voice, the anguished voice of humanity rang out a questioning

Where's our common soul placed in your hands?  
 Where's our common laughter kept in vaults, silos of our land?  
 Where's our essence you pledged to guard uphold and enhance?

These two stanzas are remarkable for the effectiveness of the interweaving of archetypal, historical-journalistic and sociological elements in its mythopoeia structure.

Throughout the antistrophe, the archetype or primordial image of the messiah (“seeking good in our collective good”) from the human collective unconscious is unmistakable. No longer the rich and desolate aristocrat, Abiola, in his transfiguration is pictured standing transcendently “aside, not apart” from the masses. With this transfiguration, he has acquired “the mask God”—the persona of the redeemer, for “As he stood, the dreamer weighed, surveyed, tramping stamping,” like Christ intermingling with the poor and diverse humanity of all walks of life, gender, faiths and ethnicities. He would be rejected, shunned, despised like the Christ archetype; but, in the end, he will bring the ultimate boon—hope and fulfillment—to the people by “clearing the forest/ Of its macro-stench and venality.” Other features of the Christ-archetype in the ode will emerge in discussions below linking the key motifs of the ode to the heroic monomyth.

The historical and journalistic elements are located in Nigerian affairs of the 1990's, specifically during the military administration of General Babangida. One of the most irresponsible acts of the Babangida military government is its acquiescence to the extreme devaluation of the Nigerian Naira by the IMF (International Monetary Fund) in the name of a neocolonialist program of fiscal manipulation of the economies of former colonial nations called Structural Adjustment Program (SAP). With the acquiescence to the terms of SAP (whose acronym, in popular and journalistic parlance, came to be equated with the various connotations of the word *sap*, such as weaken, drain, undermine, deplete, eat away, and debilitate), the value of the Nigerian Naira quickly plummeted by as much as 1000%. Imported commodities became impossible to obtain and with no program for the local production of such goods, the country was soon overwhelmed by the scarcity of essential life-sustaining goods. The image of “Mass of feet carrying bodies sapped by SAP to the bones” is clearly located in the harsh realities of the social milieu.

The sociological dimension of the mythos turns on the imagery of the “cowherds in shining crushing boots” and their “long trekking starving cattle with only skin hanging on bones” This imagery refers to

the Fulani, a dominant West African people with a strong Islamic heritage, who are well-known for both their cattle-herding professionalism and for their aristocratic grip on the instruments of hegemonic and imperial power. In many respects, the Fulani epitomize the major patterns of the polarities of power and powerlessness in West Africa, especially in Nigeria. The cattle-rearing Fulani (often called the Cattle Fulani) are among the poorest of the poor in Nigeria. A nomadic people, they can be seen all over the country trekking long distances with herds of cattle aptly described by Okara as "starving cattle with only skin hanging on bones." The aristocratic Fulani, on the other hand (whose members include Clerics, Imams, Marabouts, Malams, Alhajis or people who have performed the pilgrimage to Mecca, Emirs, Sultans and other categories of religious and political leaders) are among the richest of the rich in Nigeria. By dint of mythopoetic subterfuge, Okara conflates the Cattle Fulani and the Aristocratic Fulani in the image of "swagger-stick babanriga cowherds in shining crushing boots" leading "long trekking starving cattle with only skin hanging on bones." The purpose the conflation is clearly not verisimilitude or fidelity to historical reality but affective fallacy or fictional representation informed by emotion associated with an idea or action. The association of the poor Cattle Fulani herdsman with "babaringa" (voluminous aristocratic robe), "swagger-stick" (a short stick often carried by an army officer) and "shining crushing boots" (conspicuously excellent and admirable boots or boots having a bright or radiant quality or) is, in terms of history, fallacious. *Babanriga* is not part of any Cattle Fulani herdsman's accoutrement. Described as "a voluminous floor-length robe with sleeves so long they have to be folded back twice to free the hands, the robe itself is made of fine blue damask, sort of like a fancy tablecloth. It has a V-neck, and around the collar, descending both front and back, is a large swatch of heavier cotton worked with an intricate floral pattern, some of it done in gold thread"<sup>15</sup> The affective intent is rather the contrast that emerges between the affluence of the ruling class of Nigeria (predominantly Northern, Islamic and babanriga-wearing oligarchy) and the poor masses sapped by SAP under the post-civil war military dictatorships of Nigeria. Against this background, Abiola's transfiguration is also portrayed as one in which the hero is forced to contend with and overcome the demons of his erstwhile venality as a corrupt businessman linked by faith and camaraderie with the aristocratic Fulani, in answer to three carefully constructed questions:

Where's our common soul placed in your hands?  
 Where's our common laughter kept in vaults, silos of our land?  
 Where's our essence you pledged to guard uphold and enhance?

Summed up in these questions are the fundamental democratic ideals of life ("soul"), liberty ("essence") and the pursuit of happiness ("laughter"), which the true champion of a "common" agenda of purposive nation-building must "guard, uphold and enhance."

In the third part of the antistrophe, the hero's transformation is questioned, ignored and even resisted by his peers ("swagger-stick babanriga demagogues in terminal narcissism") who carry on business as usual, ignoring the angst of the masses. But this resistance is countered by a grassroots movement of greater moment and force. Throughout these three stanzas, volume, sound, intensity, speed and velocity of collective emotion and action are represented by adjectives in the comparable degree: "bigger and bigger" (lines 3; 5, 6); "nearer and nearer" (line 4); "hotter and hotter" (line 10); "faster and faster" (line 12); "faster, faster and faster" (line 16); and "louder and louder" (line 17):

But swagger-stick babanriga demagogues in terminal narcissism  
 These questions ignored in double chinned silence  
 As bubbles of air rising in river grow bigger and bigger,  
 As the bursting point comes nearer and nearer  
 So bigger and bigger grew their heaving stomachs  
 And bigger and bigger grew their insatiate greed,

And stoked people's anger long cooped in distending balloons,  
 Of colored slogans, multicolored slogans, of unkept promises

Like coming rainstorm-dark clouds over darkening horizon spreading!

So hotter and hotter grew glowing embers of resolute anger  
 As danger drums began to send lightning messages,  
 Slowly, slowly faster and faster sounded the drums  
 Blowing to flaming embers of defiance, and awakening  
 And massive feet of indomitable resolve moved forward as one  
 Impregnable march with souls in bruised emotions!

Slowly, slowly faster, faster and faster they ran, the people ran,  
 As louder and louder sounded the drums, the danger drums  
 Silencing countering syncopated praise drums of sycophants  
 And unmasked swagger-stick babanriga demagogues in smiling masks!

Using his familiar envelope pattern, the content of this part of the ode begins and ends with two essentially synonymous lines ("swagger-stick babanriga demagogues in terminal narcissism" and "unmasked swagger-stick babanriga demagogues in smiling masks") which help to keep the focus of the ode on the villains of the piece—the rich-robed rabble-rousing soldier-politicians whose narcissism (self-admiration) constitutes the central obstacle to progress in Nigerian politics.

The first part of the antistrophe (Stanzas 13-14) focuses on the necessity for a national dialogue as a way to resolve the impasse in the nation. Prior to the Presidential elections of February 1999, various Heads of the Federal Military Government of Nigeria and their interim civilian successors deceptively floated the idea of a "national debate" or "dialogue" at every opportunity. Calling for the renewal of the culture of political debate, Babangida made his infamous call for the creation of two major political parties—"one a little to the left, the other a little to the right." His successors—Shonekan, Abacha, and Abubakar— added their own offerings of "gilded dialogues", "patchwork dialogues", and "juggling dialogues", in "the dribbling fiesta" of deceptive "ambiguities and paradoxes," the emptiness of which is the subject of the satirical barbs in Stanza 13-14 of Okara's "The Dreamer":

Thus exposed they made an offering of gilded dialogues,  
 Patchwork dialogues, in dribbling fiesta to dazzle  
 The land with tinsel brilliance in ambiguities and paradoxes  
 To dazzle, stupefy it once more into stupor languor as before.

But this frenzied hypnotic fiesta of juggling dialogues  
 Was dance of death, of tyranny, sneaky tyranny  
 Foisted in stealth on gullible land, an emasculated land!

Here, as elsewhere in "The Dreamer," Okara's choice and deployment of words is as economical as it is strategically astute.

The first set of images that have arisen from this choice and deployment of words are vivid visual images of gilded or gold-plated entities. They include "gilded dialogues" (gold-plated dialogues) designed "to dazzle/The Land with tinsel brilliance (in other words, to amaze with brilliance or skill or with a wonderful spectacle or display with something worthless that appears glamorous). To be clear, Okara lampoon is amplified by the repetition of his key word: "To dazzle, stupefy" (to amaze or astonish somebody; to make somebody unable to think clearly because of boredom, tiredness, or amazement); "stupor" (an acute lack of mental alertness brought on, e.g. by shock or lack of sleep; a state of near-unconsciousness induced by, e.g. drugs or alcohol) languor (a pleasant feeling of weariness or weakness) sneaky tyranny (done, doing something, or in the habit of behaving in an underhanded and unfair way); and "Foisted in stealth" (foist = to force somebody to accept something undesirable; by stealth = the action of doing something slowly, quietly, and covertly, in order to avoid detection). The overriding effect of the repetition of words of these kinds is an overwhelming sense of governance as a gargantuan scheme of trickery, cunning, and cruel deception.

The second set of images are also visual, but in this case, what we see evoked is the juggling in the air of concatenations of disparate materials with no interconnection whatsoever. Thus Okara speaks of "patchwork dialogues" (ill-conceived dialogues that are made up of many different parts, like needlework in which pieces of fabric are sewn together in a decorative but not necessarily unified way); "ambiguities and paradoxes" (expressions or statements that have more than one meaning or statements, propositions, or situations that seem to be absurd or contradictory, but in fact may be true); "juggling dialogues" (with reference to attempts by manipulative Nigerian military rulers to keep the idea of dialogue going in much the same way that a juggler throws several objects in motion in the air at the same time and catches them in quick succession). A comedy of errors, Nigerian politics emerges from Okara's eye as the epitome of the failure of government in the postcolonial world on account of the mastery of the brinkmanship by the key actants.

The third set of images are gustatory images that appeal to the sense of taste, reflecting a much-discussed postcolonial obsession governance as sharing the national cake or getting a cut of the pie. Thus Okara speaks of "dribbling" (the production of saliva out of desire to eat); "fiesta" (an elaborate feast); and "gullible" (from the same roots as gustatory—with reference to the tendency to trust and believe people, and therefore to be easily tricked or deceived). The accumulation of eating images, such as the above, paints an accurate picture of what is decidedly an Epicurean and hedonistic culture of conspicuous consumption by which Nigeria today is overwhelmed. Nothing else seems to matter in this cultural milieu beyond sensual pleasures and luxury, especially good food and drinks. In this culture of abject sensual depravity, legacies are neither cherished nor even known by the elite. A self-indulgent devotion to pleasure and happiness as a way of life (that pleasure is the highest good or the source of moral values) seems to be the unifying philosophical doctrine of all.

The fourth set of images are kinetic (relating to, caused by, or producing motion). Thus Okara speaks of "dance of death, of tyranny," in other words of wily-dealing carefully designed to entrench tyranny albeit with the unintended but inescapable consequence of self-destruction. A recurrent trope in postcolonial African poetry, "dance of death" (with its implications of mortality consequent upon, possession, ecstasy and trance) is suggestive of the deprivation of effectiveness, spirit, or force, pointing squarely to the unflattering but accurate image of Nigeria as an "emasculated land"—a land deprived of its natural reproductive potentials.

Needless to say, further insight into the creative unconscious underpinnings of Okara's ode can be gained by subjecting it to analysis in terms of the three-part structure of the archetypal heroic monomyth: I: Separation or Departure; 2: Trials and Victories; and 3: Return. As summed up by Thury and Devinney (2005: 137),

The first step, the separation or departure "consists in a radical transfer of emphasis from the external to the internal world." The hero must "retreat from the world to the realm of the unconscious. It is here that he will find the resolution of his conflicts and fears. This part of the hero's adventure contains the following five elements: "The Call to Adventure," the "Refusal of the Call," "Supernatural Aid," "Crossing the First Threshold," and "In the Belly of the Whale."

The second part of the hero's path is called the trials and victories of initiation. Here the hero proves his merit, is tempted by evil, and learns the secrets of the gods. This stage contains the following six elements: "The Road of Trials," "The Meeting with the Goddess," "Woman as the Temptress," "Atonement with the Father," "Apotheosis," and "The Ultimate Boon."

The third part of the hero's journey is **the return and reintegration with society**. After his trials, **the hero returns**, "transfigured, [to] teach the lesson he has learned of life renewed" to make a difference in the everyday world. The six parts of this stage are "Refusal of the Return," "The Magic Flight," "Rescue from Without," "Crossing the Return Threshold," "Master of the Two Worlds," and "Freedom to Live."

**Destiny calls the hero**, and transfers his "spiritual center of gravity" from his own world to an unknown zone, a world which fascinates and challenges him. The land of adventure is full of danger, and treasure.

**The Epode: The Boon (Stanzas 15-16)**

The poem concludes on a tone of optimism and confidence in the regeneration of Nigeria through visionary and purposive leadership of the kind identified with the stifled promise of the elections of June 1999:

So the Dreamer, with popular steps, strode forth,  
Quickly merged with the massive march—a flag, an ensign  
Of corporate will and might and claimed the right of our land!

And now the dreamer, with machete,  
Word-sharpened, is clearing the forest  
Of its macro-stench and venality  
To sow the seed that would send its roots,  
Unshaken by wind or storm, to its expected greatness.

In effect, the *epode* of the Okara's ode coincides with the stage of "Apotheosis" and "The Ultimate Boon" in the second segment of the archetypal heroic monomyth. The hero attains the highest point of glory, power, or importance. Wearing the mask of God, he is discovered "clearing the forest/ Of its macro-stench and venality" and paving the way for the "expected greatness" of his traumatized nation.

**Conclusion**

The present essay is essentially a preliminary exploration of a previously unexplored territory of postcolonial, modernist African poetics—Gabriel Okara's venture into the appropriation of the signs of the classical and latter-day European ode as a vehicle for both a satirical interrogation of the performance of the postcolonial civilian and military elite the dysfunctional Nigerian federation after its war against Biafra and for an understanding of the possibility of heroic regeneration in the face of the depth of , bordering on existentialist , into which the nation has been reduced by the post-civil war triumph of disorder in the hands of a succession of corrupt and visionless elite. Needless to say, several of the assumptions underlying the key statements in the essay about the modalities of Okara's appropriation of the conventions of the ode need to be verified through further studies. So too are matters of postcolonial hybridity, in particular the extent to which Okara has engaged in aesthetic transfer from this native Ijo and proximate Igbo and other south-eastern Nigerian oral traditions into the appropriated form of the ode. In close reading, an attempt has been made to eschew obfuscating theory in favor detailed analysis of Okara's diction, imagery, symbolism, tone, and formal-structural strategies. This application of age-old principles of practical criticism not only confirms the well-established subtlety and economy of Okara's husbandry of words on account of which he is widely recognized as Africa's truest voice of feeling and the incontestable father of modern African lyrical poetry.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> LNG: Liquefied Natural Gas.

<sup>2</sup>ITT (International Telephone & Telegraph) is a diversified leading manufacturer of highly engineered critical components and customized technology solutions for growing industrial end-markets in energy infrastructure, electronics, aerospace and transportation Founded in 1920, it is headquartered in White Plains, NY, with employees in more than 15 countries and sales in more than 125 countries

<sup>3</sup> In Nigerian Pidgin English, the reduplication of words, is used—as in all West African languages of the Niger-Congo family—for emphasis. Thus “International Thief Thief” means a large international thieving business. To See for the complete text of this lyric, see <http://www.songmeanings.net/songs/view/3530822107858727854/>.

<sup>4</sup> Lit. Many foreign companies are in Africa merely to take all our money go.

<sup>5</sup> Lit. They often write pompous English in newspapers, to impugn the integrity of Africans

<sup>6</sup> Lit. I read something of this kind in a book.

<sup>7</sup> Lit. They call it I.T.T

<sup>8</sup> Lit. They keep on causing confusion (Confusion!).

<sup>9</sup> Lit. There is one common tactic they often employ.

<sup>10</sup> Lit. They will give him one million naira (breads=currency notes or money)

<sup>11</sup> Lit (lines 1-4): Just like rats, they slip from/ One corner to another corner / Slip stealthily under/ Pass through from inside.

<sup>12</sup> Repetition of the idea of slipping stealthily from one corner to another.

<sup>13</sup> This and most other glosses in the present article are from the Online Encarta.

<sup>14</sup> In the historiographic philosophy of German idealist, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (August 27, 1770–November 14, 1831). history is seen as a cyclical movement comprising recurrent patterns of *theses*, *antitheses* and *syntheses*. The *thesis* represents state of affairs in any historical period, be it an age concentration or an age expansion (to borrow the terms from *Culture and Anarchy* by 19<sup>th</sup> century British essayist, Matthew Arnold (24 December 1822–15 April 1888). Essentially a state of inertia, the thesis invites an equal and opposite force of history events (the *antithesis*) to move things forward. But the antithesis does not result in catastrophic destruction. It rather gives rise to a selection and fusion of the best in the two colliding historical forces, a resolution which Hegel calls a *synthesis*, a phenomenon manifested in the patterns of postcolonial hybridity we find the works of Okara and his generation of African modernists.

<sup>15</sup> See: (<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2002/05/03/DD9136.DTL#ixzz1nQzLQ7PS>).