

1-1-2011

# 'The White Man Laughs': Commentary on the Satiric Dramatic Monologues of Gabriel Okara

Chukwuma Azuonye

*University of Massachusetts Boston, [chukwuma.azuonye@umb.edu](mailto:chukwuma.azuonye@umb.edu)*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://scholarworks.umb.edu/africana\\_faculty\\_pubs](http://scholarworks.umb.edu/africana_faculty_pubs)

 Part of the [African Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Azuonye, Chukwuma, "'The White Man Laughs': Commentary on the Satiric Dramatic Monologues of Gabriel Okara" (2011). *Africana Studies Faculty Publication Series*. Paper 3.  
[http://scholarworks.umb.edu/africana\\_faculty\\_pubs/3](http://scholarworks.umb.edu/africana_faculty_pubs/3)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Africana Studies at ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in Africana Studies Faculty Publication Series by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact [library.uasc@umb.edu](mailto:library.uasc@umb.edu).

# **‘The White Man Laughs’: Critical Commentary on the Satiric Dramatic Monologues of Gabriel Okara**

[Work In Progress]

By

**Chukwuma Azuonye**

Professor of African & African Diaspora Literatures  
University of Massachusetts Boston

*I kinda giggle when the white man laughs  
Not too long ago you had to fight for your territory  
Toe to toe and a gun was a different story  
I guess you can't squabble no mo'  
Your fist is a .44*

**King Tee, “Time to Get Out Lyrics”<sup>1</sup>**

## **1. Introduction**

In one of his most radical essays, "Colonialist Criticism," Africa's leading novelist, poet, essayist and cultural philosopher, Chinua Achebe (1988: pp. xx-xx), debunks the inability of European colonialist critics to understand and appreciate African literature and culture in their own terms. He engages in a brick-by-brick demolition of the gaudy edifice of the Eurocentrist critical establishment, unveiling the untenable myths of racial superiority and bigotry out of which it is constructed. He notes, for instance, that the colonist critic presumes that the African writer is "a somewhat unfinished European" who will grow up one day to think and write like his grown-up European cultural siblings. Chiding the colonialist critic for wallowing in the presumption that he has a god-ordained mission to civilize the African, Achebe writes:

To the colonist mind it was always of the utmost importance to be able to say: 'I know my natives,' a claim which implied two things at once: (a) The native was really quite simple; and (b) Understanding him and controlling him went hand in hand.

Achebe also rejects the colonial critic's claim that "universality" is a special preserve of the literature and thought of Europe and its Diaspora. Rejecting the notion that African artistic vision is limited to the particularities of local experience while European literature encompasses universal human experience, Achebe urges the colonist critic to purge himself of his disabling superiority complex in order to be in the proper frame of mind to understand African literature and thought.

Examined in the present article are two early satiric lyrics of Gabriel Okara—"Once Upon a Time" and "He Laughed and Laughed and Laughed"—which are the products of the postcolonial cultural war environment in which the issues of modernity, alterity (otherness or difference) and afro-authenticity implicated in Achebe's ripostes on the bigotry of the colonialist critic were central. The tone of this discourse amongst leading African intelligentsia was set in the 1930's and 1940's by four fellow south-eastern Nigerian writers in their semi-autobiographical blueprints for African cultural emancipation—*Renascent Africa* ((1937)) by Nnamdi Azikiwe (1904–1996); *British and Axis Aims in Africa* (1942) by Kingsley Ozuomba Mbadiwe (1915–1990); *Without Bitterness: Western Nations in Post-War Africa* (1944) by Nwafor Orizu ((1915–1999)); and *My Africa* (1946) by Mazi Mbonu Ojike (1914–1956). In these and related works, patterns of prevalent postcolonial alterity (otherness or difference defined in terms of race, ethnicity, nationality, class, and religion) are subjected to thoroughgoing African nationalist interrogation in terms of the extent to which they were perceived as impediments to the projection

authentic African personality in the face of the perceived depredations of European modernity. In *Renascent Africa*, Azikiwe (popularly known as Zik of Africa) places the interrogation at the center of his advocacy of "mental emancipation" (decolonization of the mind) as a *sine qua non* prerequisite for postcolonial African liberation and progress. As loyal disciples of the great Zik, both Orizu and Mbadiwe present arguments for mental freedom that are often extrapolations and amplifications of the basic thesis of Azikiwe's vision of a renascent Africa, free of colonial mentality and proud of its precolonial heritage. In both of these works, the best insights are informed by the authors' confident anticipations of some of the most challenging claims of latter-day radical Afrocentrism about the anteriority of ancient African civilizations. Mbadiwe's arguments in *British and Axis Aims in Africa* are however sometimes compromised by streaks of Zikist pragmatism while in Orizu's *Without Bitterness*, the major pitfall is the author's proselytic apologia for the most extreme of dogma of the Ethiopianism of the day, hence his favorite nickname, "Abyssinia."

It is however in Mazi Mbonu Ojike's *My Africa* that a truly original vision of renascent Africa emerges, one rooted in what became the agenda for a popular movement in Nigeria in the 1950's powered by Ojike's slogan, "boycott all boycottables," for which he earned the nickname "Boycott king of Nigeria." Eschewing the mythical fantasies of Ethiopianism and other precursors of today's romantic or extreme Afrocentrism, the organizing argument of Ojike's cultural nationalist movement is that, because of its antiquity and anteriority to several (if not all) colonizing European cultures, indigenous precolonial African cultures of the kind portrayed in his book, *My Africa*, embody all that is necessary for civilized coexistence with the rest of humanity without pandering to the lure of defection to European modes of life. Because of the pressures of modernity, the postcolonial African may be under pressure to adopt and adapt some aspects of the colonizing European imperium; but cultural freedom dictates that he boycotts all boycottables, in other words everything else that does not run counter to the necessity for survival in a modern, Europeanized African world.

In the two satiric lyrics ("Once Upon a Time" and "You Laugh and Laugh and Laugh") examined in the present article, Okara repackages the main tenets of these argument in compendious dramatic and affective statements that have been long overdue for focused critical attention.

The phrase, "The White Man Laughs," which appears as the title of this paper has been found in many different languages in both African and transatlantic African vernaculars as well as in contemporary global popular culture and the Internet. It sums up an attitude at the very root of 19<sup>th</sup> century racist anthropology and its reinventions of Africa, including the patterns of colonialist criticism critiqued by Achebe. We can hear the white man grinning, smirking and laughing loudly at African culture in both Okara's "Once Upon a Time" and "You Laugh and Laugh and Laugh." But the laughter in these two lyrics is by no means one-directional. It is rather three-directional. Playing three roles in the drama of the monologue, the speaker is, first and foremost, the white man (the European colonialist) laughing at African cultural values out of racist bigotry and ignorance. Secondly, he is the renascent African laughing at himself for its own calamitous folly of accepting, by dint of colonial mentality, Eurocentrist colonialist myths as gospel truth. Thirdly, he is the renascent African laughing back at the European imperium, appropriating the literary signs of the empire to deflate its arrogance and expose the moral, spiritual and aesthetic nullity of its bigotry.

By subjecting both poems to thoroughgoing close reading, an attempt will be made in the present article to explore the roots, sources and ramifications of Gabriel Okara's contribution as a poet and public intellectual one of the major twentieth-century debates in modern African letters.

## 2. 'Once Upon a Time'

In this oft-discussed lyric, the speaker looks back in anger and with deep regret to the good old days when people were more transparently honest and natural in their relationships with one another than in the present time. It is implied throughout that the changes about which the speaker complains are owing to the ravages of European, specifically British, colonialism. Comparing the present postcolonial time with the past, the speaker expresses the feeling that people have lost the innocence and openness of their indigenous pre-colonial culture and etiquette. But, looking at the face of his young son, to whom the lyric is addressed in the mode of a homily, the speaker can see this lost innocence and openness in its pristine

naturalness. The lyric concludes with an expression of a strong yearning to regain the innocence that has been destroyed by the colonial experience.

## 2.1. Sources and Influences

"Once Upon a Time" is in the form of *dramatic monologue*—a type of lyrical poetry in the form of a soliloquy spoken by a character against the background of a specific situation or situations in which he is one of the major actants. Three defining characteristics of the dramatic monologue have been outlined by W. H. Abrams in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (2005: 70-71):

1. A single person, who is patently *not* the poet, utters the speech that makes up the whole of the poem, in a specific situation at a critical moment.
2. This person addresses and interacts with one or more other people; but we know of the auditors' presence, and what they say and do, only from clues in the discourse of the single speaker.
3. The main principle controlling the poet's choice and formulation of what the lyric speaker says is to reveal to the reader, in a way that enhances its interest, the speaker's temperament and character.

In the tradition of English literature in which Gabriel Okara was schooled at Government College, Umuahia, one of the most important influences on the development of the dramatic monologue are the Romantic poets of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries—William Blake (1757–1827), William Wordsworth (1770 – 1850), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772 - 1834), Lord Byron—George Gordon Byron, 6th Baron Byron, later George Gordon Noel (1788–1824), Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822), and John Keats (1795–1821). Although the long, mythopeic, often narrative and dramatic, personal lyrics that are considered by many critics as a generic hallmark of the English Romantic period were not conceived or designed as dramatic monologues, they seem to have affected the evolution of some of the distinctive features of the genre. Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" and Shelley's "Mont Blanc" are often cited as "a model for the close psychological observation and philosophical inquiry described in a specific setting" in the dramatic monologue. The flowering of the dramatic monologue in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (especially during the Victorian period) is perhaps not unrelated to the coming of age of the English novel during this period. Drawing from both techniques of characterization through dialogue without narration in both play and novels the use of soliloquies for psychoanalytical characterization in drama going back to the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, "Ulysses" by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, 1st Baron Tennyson, FRS (1809–1892), a favorite of literature classes in Okara's school days, appeared in 1842 as "the first true dramatic monologue" in English letters, paving the way for the supreme artistic triumphs in the genre by Robert Browning (1812–1889) in the finest dramatic monologues of the 19<sup>th</sup> century such as "Porphyria's Lover" (1836), "My Last Duchess" (1842), "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" (1842), "Fra Lippo Lippi" (1855), and "Caliban upon Setebos" (1864), some of which made their way into the literature syllabi of Government College Umuahia and similar institutions in Nigeria during Gabriel Okara's high school days.

Against the foregoing background, "Once Upon a Time" represents a significant appropriation of one of the signs of empire by Okara as a vehicle of satire against the deleterious effect of European hegemonic inroads on the African mind and space. But the genre has not adopted these signs of empire without appropriate adaptations to its new African environment. The forces of postcolonial hybridity can be observed at work in the making of the monologue. Infused into the appropriated European form are thus several readily recognizable conventions of the indigenous oral literatures of south-eastern Nigerian peoples, specifically those of Gabriel Okara's native Ijo culture of the Niger Delta.

The first set of oral traditional conventions are from traditional rhetoric and oratory, specifically from the folk homily—a speech with a moralizing theme usually addressed by a father or mother to a child. The conception and design of "Once Upon a Time" as a homily is clearly evident from the predominance in its diction of such common homiletic formulae (in all probability transliterated from the poet's native Ijo) as "Once upon a time, son" (Stanza 1, Line 1), "but that's gone, son" (Stanza 1, Line 3), "So I have learned many things, son" (Stanza 4, Line 1), "But believe me, son" (Stanza 6, Line 1), and "So show me, son" (Stanza 7, Line 1).

The second set of oral traditional conventions are from the art of oral storytelling. These include the title and the first words of the poem, "once upon a time" and similar storytelling formulas such as "There

was a time” and the closing convention of drawing a moral lesson from the story told: “So I have learned many things, son/ I have learned to wear many faces /like dresses.”

But the art of the dramatic monologue is by no means alien to the oral traditions of the Ijo and other south-eastern Nigerian peoples. Further research will probably confirm that the form of many varieties of children's songs in these traditions belong to one of the innumerable roots of the genre across the world, traditional roots which may be as deep as the lyrical impulse of primeval antiquity. In several examples of these folk lyrics, we can hear the voice of a self-dramatizing soliloquist in a specific situation at a critical moment, addressing and interacting with one or more other people whose presence, actions and utterances we can deduce from the words of the single speaker whose temperament and character are revealed by his words. But beyond these minimal manifestations of the mode of dramatic monologue are more complex forms best realized in traditional toasts or poetry of self-praise exemplified by Igbo masquerade chants and the heroic recitations of the Bahima of Ankole, in Uganda.

Against this background, it may rightly be asserted that the mode of dramatic monologue in Okara, represented by “Once Upon a Time” and “You Laugh and Laugh and Laugh” is not so much an appropriation of the signs of empire as the rediscovery in response to the strictures of imperial cultural arrogance of a system of signs that vouchsafes effective means

## 2.2. Close Reading

**Stanza 1:** The poem begins with the well-known storytelling opening formula, "Once upon a time" (lines 1, 9, 19, 40, 43):

Once upon a time, son,  
they used to laugh with their hearts  
and laugh with their eyes;  
but now they only laugh with their teeth,  
while their ice-block-cold eyes  
search behind my shadow.

Some readers might be led by this opening to believe that what the speaker is going to present is a fairy tale. But in reality, the storytelling code, “which refers to an unnamed fantasy land, full of well-known fairy tale characters,<sup>2</sup> helps to set the tone of folksy intimacy that runs through the lyric. It supports the intergenerational code of the traditional father-to-son homily with a claim to familiar territory. The “son” to whom the homily is addressed is the poet's only son, Dr. Ebi Okara, born of his first wife of Ijo origins. A clinical psychologist in Randolph, Massachusetts, Dr. Okara lives with his African-American wife (the Honorable Barbara A. Dortch-Okara, a Superior Court Judge of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts) and their son, Tonye Okara, in Canton, Massachusetts, the poet's second home over the past twenty years.

The predominant theme of alterity (otherness, difference) that runs through the lyric is established in this first stanza (lines 2-4) through the agency of the second third person personal pronoun, “they...their” which recurs in lines 8-11 and 14: Transliteration from Ijo idiom: a plural personal with the same implication as in English usage, of (1) people or things already mentioned or identified, or understood by both the speaker and hearer/ belonging to or relating to a specific group of people or things, or (2) people in general when making statements about the things people do, think, or say

In line 2, the phrase, “laugh with...hearts” is a direct transliteration from Ijo idiom that carries much the same meanings as those found in other natural, human languages across the world: to laugh with heart-felt joy or pleasure; to laugh as an honest expression of gladness or joy; and to laugh with unabashed sincerity and openness. In Ijo and proximate languages such as Igbo, the heart is not only the seat of passion or feeling but of the moral sense or the conscience, hence of goodness and evil. The depth the heart's sincerity is often observable in body language, especially in the eyes and the teeth. Thus, in line 3, the phrase (“laugh...with eyes”) transliterated from Ijo idiom (meaning to laugh with eyes glittering with joy or pleasure; to laugh as an honest expression of gladness or joy clearly writ in one's eyes), contrasts well-meaning and friendly demeanor with maleficent evil eye—a look of strong dislike or a piercing look that conveys strong feelings of hatred, disapproval, jealousy, or malice, or that supposedly can cause harm or the magical gaze imbued with supernatural or magical power that some people believe

can bring harm or cause bad luck. See also the implied reference to evil magic in line 11. In line 4, the third parallel phrase transliterated from Ijo idiom ("laugh with...teeth" is suggestive of a grin or baring of one's teeth in a broad smile that carries no emotion. The phrase can also mean to smirk or bare one's teeth in an insolent smile expressing feelings such as superiority, self-satisfaction, or conceit; in other words, or to smile mirthlessly in an insolent, smug, or contemptuous way.

Another transliteration from Ijo idiom, in line 5, is "ice-block-cold eyes" Icy or frigid (arrogant and demeaning) gaze. In a sense this metaphor anticipates the colonial or postcolonial gaze or one of the distancing tropes or conventions for the representation of the other, especially the subaltern in postcolonial literature. The derogatory or distancing effect of this kind of gaze is the subject of Okara's related satire, "You Laughed and Laughed and Laughed."

Another transliteration from Ijo idiom, in line 6, is "search behind my shadow." In Okara's prose and poetry, "shadow," the darkened shape on a surface that falls behind somebody or something blocking the light, is a reflection of the inner spirit self of the individual. To search behind a person's shadow is to search for lethal means of destroying the personality of the individual. The frigid, emotionless grin from "ice-block-cold eyes" can be as penetratingly lethal.

Transliteration from Ijo idiom The people only 'search behind' the speaker's shadow. Okara means to say that every action is analyzed and every motive criticized. Also, they are satisfied with the shadow of the person in question, and do not seek the identity of the persona. This points to the current media policy that project the shells of various personalities without delving to their depth. They fail to comprehend the enigma behind each unique individual.

**Stanza 2:** Continuing in the narrative, homiletic mode signaled by another storytelling formula, "There was a time," the speaker pursues the same attitudinal shifts in his society with reference to hand-shaking:

There was a time indeed  
they used to shake hands with their hearts;  
but that's gone, son.  
Now they shake hands without hearts  
while their left hands search  
my empty pockets.

Okara's opening storytelling formula ("There was a time indeed") embodies the conventional *ubi sunt* motif that locates the drama of the lyric in the past perfect time of the lost mythical good old days. *Ubi sunt* is a phrase that established itself in the English literary tradition through medieval Latin poems such as "De Brevitate Vitae" (Lite. "of life's brevity," also known as "Gaudeamus Igitur"). Derived from the Latin clause, *Ubi sunt qui ante nos fuerunt?* ("Where are those who were before us?"), the *Ubi sunt* formula and its common variant—*Ubi nunc...?* ("Where now?")—feature prominently in many pre-20<sup>th</sup> century English lyrics in the school anthologies read by Okara at Umuahia Government College, not only as lyrical codes for nostalgia but as vehicles for meditation on mortality and life's transience. In lines 8-12, these contrasts are amplified, with reference to the presence or absence of genuine emotion ("with...hearts" or "without hearts") in the folk gesture of hand-shaking.

While, in lines 8-9, the variants of the *ubi sunt* formula ("they used to" and "but that's gone, son") refer to a past perfect time when people "used to shake hands with their hearts," the antonymous formula, "now" (Latin *Nunc*), signals the gloomy new age portrayed in lines 10-12 when "they shake hands without hearts." These contrasts turn on a traditional left-and-right-hand symbolism on which I have written at some length in a close reading of Okara's contemporary, Michael Echeruo's early lyric, "Sophia." Not only do the displaced generation of the decadent time "shake hands without hearts," they are portrayed as criminals whose "left hands search/my empty pockets" (lines 11-12).

Among the Ijo, as among the neighboring Igbo, the left hand is the wrong or abominable hand: *aka èkpè* (evil hand),<sup>3</sup> *aka ibitè* (unclean hand),<sup>4</sup> or, more explicitly, *aka ojòḡ* (bad hand). The hand of forgetfulness, carelessness, insolence, rudeness, etc, it is traditionally regarded by the Igbo with the same negative connotations with which the left hand is associated in several other African languages and systems of thought. Thus, Smith (1952: 22) notes with special reference to the BaSotho of South Africa and the Mandinka of West Africa, "Many Africans draw a distinction between the right and left sides of

the body: the right is a symbol and seat of strength and virility, the left of weakness and femininity. A candidate for chieftainship may be rejected on the ground that he is left-handed. "To take but a few more examples, the Kaguru, a Bantu people of Tanzania, East Africa, "call the right hand or right side, *kulume*; the left, *kumoso*"; and they "consider the right hand to be clean and strong, and the left to be unclean and weak. Masculine qualities are thought to be of the right, feminine of the left" (Beidelman, 1961: 252). Furthermore, "The left hand is used to handle unclean material or to perform unpleasant tasks" (Beidelman, 1961: 253). Similarly, among the Nuer of Sudan (Evans-Pritchard, 1953: 5), "The left side symbolizes evil as well as femininity, and there is here a double association, for the female principle is also associated with evil directly, as it were, and not merely through the convergence of femininity and evil in the concept of the left side. Thus we have two opposites, the one comprising the left side, weakness, femininity, and evil, and the other comprising the right side, strength, masculinity, and goodness." In a study of the pre-Islamic customary folklore of the pastoral Fulani, Stenning (1959: 39-40, 104-5, 106-8) examines the paradigms (left = east, back, north, feminine, junior homestead, and genealogical junior; right = west, front, south, masculine, senior homestead and genealogical senior), suggesting the preeminence of the right.

**Stanza 3:** This stanza is an indictment of the artificiality, pretentiousness and deceptiveness of the social etiquette (manners, protocol, custom, or decorum) that came to Africa with European colonialism, focusing on the absence of any correlation between words and intent:

'Feel at home!' 'Come again';  
they say, and when I come  
again and feel  
at home, once, twice,  
there will be no thrice—  
for then I find doors shut on me.

The phrases in line 13 ('Feel at home!' 'Come again') exemplify codes for social nicety or playing up to appearances that have degenerated into clichés, having lost their original effectiveness or power from overuse. In lines 14-18 ("when I come/ again and feel/at home, once, twice,/there will be no thrice—/for then I find doors shut on me..), Okara offers a sarcastic re-memory of a popular butt of postcolonial African "laughter" or humor in which an African, not schooled in European manners, takes these clichés literally only to suffer the rude embarrassment of having doors on him. The shut door also stands for patterns of social insularity that came with the Europeanization of African social attitudes. Postcolonial African "laughter" is also full of anecdotes in which doors are shut on mothers and fathers who visit their sons or daughters without formal notice. The clichés lampooned by Okara foregrounds the alienation of the individual from the traditional etiquette of his indigenous ethnicity and clan.

**Stanza 4:** In the opening lines (19-20) of this stanza, with parallels or repetitions in lines 1, 9, 19, 40, 43, the speaker tells us that he has learnt to deal with this hard, insincere world by becoming just like all the other people; he too hides his real emotions and speaks words he clearly does not mean. He describes his behaviour in an interesting way, saying that he has learnt "to wear many faces / Like dresses"—like dresses, he changes his 'face', taking one off and exchanging it for something more suitable: "homeface / officeface / streetface" and so on:

So I have learned many things, son.  
I have learned to wear many faces  
like dresses—homeface,  
officeface, streetface, hostface,  
cocktailface, with all their conforming smiles  
like a fixed portrait smile.

In lines 20-23, the simile, "wear many faces/like dresses," can also be deconstructed both as common parlance and from the point of view of Jungian psychology. In common parlance, it refers to playing up to appearances by assuming a demeanor appropriate to every social situation, just like style of speech (social register) appropriate for a social situation. From the point of view of the psychological theories of Carl

Gustav Jung, each of these faces (homeface, officeface, streetface, hostface,/ cocktailface) is essentially a manifestation of the social mask or persona—one of the archetypes of the collective unconscious, defined as “the mask we wear to make a particular impression on others; it may reveal and conceal our real nature. It is called an artificial personality that is a compromise between a person's real individuality and society's expectations—usually society's demands take precedence. It is made up of things like professional titles, roles, habits of social behavior, etc. It serves to both guarantee social order and to protect the individual's private life” (<http://www.religiousworlds.com/fondarosa/jung03.html>).

The value of the simile in lines 23-24 (“conforming smiles/like a fixed portrait smile”) is two-fold. First, from the point of view of analytical psychology—especially of the schools Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung—it underscores some aspects of the category of the archetype of the collective unconscious identified and studied as a survivalist mask of social conformity (i.e. of behavior that is socially acceptable or expected. Secondly, with particular reference to the “fixed portrait smile,” it stresses the lifelessness of the posture despite the fixed glamor captured in the painting, photograph, or drawing of somebody's smiling face. The allusion is thus simultaneously diachronically archival and synchronically socio-psychological.

In discussing the image of “the fixed portrait smile” in Okara's lyric, it may perhaps not be too far-fetched to evoke the image of the world's most famous smile of this kind—that of the *Mona Lisa* (also known as *La Gioconda* or *La Joconde*, or *Portrait of Lisa Gherardini, wife of Francesco del Giocondo*) is a portrait by the Italian artist Leonardo da Vinci. A painting in oil on a poplar panel, completed circa 1503–1519 and bought by king Francis I of France, it is now the property of the French Republic and it is on permanent display at the Musée du Louvre in Paris. The painting is a half-length portrait and depicts a seated woman, Lisa del Giocondo, whose facial expression has been frequently described as enigmatic. The ambiguity of the subject's expression, the monumentality of the composition, and the subtle modeling of forms and atmospheric illusionism were novel qualities that have contributed to the continuing fascination and study of the work. The image is widely recognised, caricatured, and sought out by visitors to the Louvre, and it is considered the most famous painting in the world.

**Stanza 5:** In this stanza, the speaker moves from expression to action. Now they shake hands 'without hearts' as their left hand probes the speakers' pockets. People do not go out of their way to help others now-a-days. Instead, influenced by the Western formula of success, they take advantage of others to reach their end. The poet asserts that immersed in the crowd, he has also become a cog in the wheel of society. Like Kamala Das echoes in her poem "Fancy-Dress Show", the poet claims that he has learnt to adorn different faces to suit the situation:

And I have learned, too,  
to laugh with only my teeth  
and shake hands without my heart.  
I have also learned to say, 'Goodbye',  
when I mean 'Good-riddance';  
to say 'Glad to meet you',  
without being glad; and to say 'It's been  
nice talking to you', after being bored.

Recalling lines 2 and 10 above, lines 25-27 (“And I have learned, too/ to laugh with only my teeth/shake hands without my heart”) expounds on the poem's central theme of postcolonial “learning” shortly to be counterbalanced with the necessity for “unlearning” and “relearning.” Because this kind of learning necessitates “unlearning” what was learning and “relearning” what was lost, denigrated or distorted, it is clear that it is a toxic type of “learning.” What we have here is thus an indictment of colonial education and acculturation processes as cultural deterministic systems of indoctrination and brainwashing. Cultural determinism is entailed because, at emotional and behavioral levels, the culture of the colonizing Eutopian imperium is so deeply entrenched and its influence is so overwhelming that it determines how we are raised and who we become. The outcome of this determinism is colonial mentality, the mind-set that underlines the speaker's willy-nilly acquiescence to the necessity of learning what he knows is toxic/

In lines 28-32, the speaker nails the hypocrisy of the disabling repertoire of clichés bubbling in his head through a litany of oxymoron: "'Goodbye',/when I mean 'Good-riddance'"; "'Glad to meet you',/without being glad"; and "'It's been /nice talking to you', after being bored." Irony, sarcasm, innuendo, litotes, and other lessening figures are deftly packed, as vehicles of satire, by the power of Okara's poetic logistics into this arresting selection and deployment of worn English clichés of social nicety.

**Stanza 6:** In this stanza, the speaker wants to be as innocently sincere as his young son. He wants to "unlearn all these muting things"; this suggests that he has learnt how to behave in a way which "mutes" or silences his real emotions..

But believe me, son.  
I want to be what I used to be  
when I was like you. I want  
to unlearn all these muting things.  
Most of all, I want to relearn  
how to laugh, for my laugh in the mirror  
shows only my teeth like a snake's bare fangs!

In lines 33-35 ("But believe me, son./ I want to be what I used to be/when I was like you"), the speaker, echoing the words of English Romantic poet, William Wordsworth ("Child is the father of man") in his *Tintern Abbey*, opines that unpolluted simplicity and innocence can only be found in childhood, and relived in the same. "The Call of the River Nun" is a similar celebration of lost innocence.

In lines 35-39, Okara introduces the words "unlearn" and "relearn" into the vocabulary the mental emancipation urged as a sine qua non for true postcolonial decolonization of the mind in the cultural nationalist blueprints of Azikiwe (1937), Mbadiwe (1942), Orizu (1944), and Ojike (1946). The "muting things" targeted for unlearning in lines 35-36 ("I want /to unlearn all these muting things") refers to ideas and precepts in colonialist education and extracurricular acculturation machinery perceived to have muted (silenced, subdued and understated) the voice of indigenous African traditions. In lines 37-38 ("Most of all, I want to relearn/ how to laugh"), the speaker suggests that even more important dimension of the mental emancipation process is the retrieval of patterns of natural and sincere emotional expression deemed to have to the ruts of postcolonial artificiality

The simile in lines 38-39 ("for my laugh in the mirror/shows only my teeth like a snake's bare fangs!") is not only startlingly picturesque and gory but redolent with myth. The man distrusts even his mirror image, his reflection. He wants to get rid of his false laugh which "shows only my teeth like a snake's bare fangs" - the comparison with the snake's fangs makes the false, mask-like smile seem dangerous

**Stanza 7:** Concluding the monologue with more or less its own opening words ("Once upon a time, son"), the lyric evinces a structure commonly known in critical idiom as the envelope pattern.

So show me, son,  
how to laugh; show me how  
I used to laugh and smile  
once upon a time when I was like you.

40-42: So show me, son,/ how to laugh; show me how/I used to laugh and smile.

43: once upon a time when I was like you. See notes (above) on line 1

**Summary:** "Once Upon a Time" is an emotional poem about the story of a grown up man—who once was an innocent child. His adult world has lost the charm of his childhood years. The poet describes how the process of growing up transforms the innocence of childhood. After entering the adult world, the young adults will gradually forget how to "laugh with their hearts." While growing up, the cold world intimidated our main character. He used to sense

People's insincerity and their superficial laughs, because "they only laugh[ed] with their teeth,/while their ice-block-cold eyes/search[ed] behind [his] shadow" It is a vicious circle: once someone has entered the adult world, he will change—then change others. Our character will learn how to say things that he doesn't really mean: "I have also learned to say, "Goodbye,"/when I mean "Good riddance";/to say "Glad to meet you,"/without being glad; and to say "It's been/nice talking to you," after being bored" 2 Like

everyone else, our main character was forced to grow up--in order to adapt to the adult world: "I have learned to wear many faces/like dresses--homeface,/officeface, streetface, hostface, cock-/tail face, with all their conforming smiles/like a fixed portrait smile" In this selfish world, our character learned how to adapt; he adapted a little too well. He now can play the adult role without any problem. However, once he became a parent, parenthood seems to have helped him to remember the innocent world of his childhood. Because of his son, he wants to re-learn how to be sincere.

### 3. 'He Laughed and Laughed and Laughed'

In "He Laughed and Laughed and Laughed," he stands tall against the foolishness of the colonialist who laughs at his "dance" and his "inside," clinging to material objects like cars, affected European manners, ice-block laughter, and other paraphernalia of European modernity.

#### 3.1. Sources and Influences

Michael Echeruo's commentary on "You laughed, and laughed, and laughed" is worth quoting at some length as a good starting-point for a critical understanding of the sources and influences as well as the humor, lyricism, nationalism, sarcasm and intellectual honesty that informs its thematic design. Comparing the tenor of the poem with those of Senghor, Diop and Clark, Echeruo invites us to read it as a work that is "appropriately straightforward: proud without arrogance, hurting without showing it, and blunt without rudeness":

The piece belongs with the best of Senghor's nostalgic verse, with the militancy of many of David Diop's lyrics, and certainly with J.P. Clark's "Ivbie," another of my favorite African poems. Okara's poem is more relaxed than these, however, more ironic, less tortured. In some ways, of course, it is less urgent, less strident, less involved. If Clark's "Ivbie" was complex and for good reason, "You laughed, and laughed, and laughed" seemed also appropriately straightforward: proud without arrogance, hurting without showing it, and blunt without rudeness.

Echeruo then proceeds to delineate—against the background of his early lyrics and those of his contemporaries (such as Senghor, Diop and Clark)—the features of theme and style that mark out "You Laughed and Laughed and Laughed" as a quintessential expression of African "laughter" or humor:

"You laughed" has always been on my list of poems for "appreciation." It is a poem to make the mind speak to the heart. It makes my students laugh with pleasure at the magic of verse, only then to find themselves laughing with the author over business that is no laughing matter at all. "Ice-block laughter" is a pretty phrase, and in the late 1950s we savored it many, many times. It was a definition of otherness, a foreign institution (and, technically, a recent import). It made a point that we were all too anxious to express: namely, that we were the people of the sun, the sunburnt people. Our laughter was the laughter of the warm and open heart. We had heard the Senghorian celebration of our essence; with David Diop we were wont to be bitter and defiant in the spirit of those poems of his we read in *Black Orpheus* and in the much-neglected little anthology compiled by the biochemist and activist Olumbe Bassir. When J.P. Clark spoke in "Ivbie" about the "sanctity of things human" being "swathed in menstrual rags, not in the market place," we cared not at all for the syntax but clung to the finality of his phrasing. We read Senghor and Diop and Clark with no joy in our hearts. When we read Gabriel Okara, however, the smile reappeared, for though Okara's poetry too was protest poetry, the poetry of frustration and even failure, it was essentially that of affirmation. Okara began with affirming the value of the movements of the communal African soul, as in his tantalizing "Piano and Drums"--"the mystic rhythm, urgent, raw / like bleeding flesh, speaking of/primal youth and the beginning"--a poem which pitted us against an alien but clearly recognizable world of Rachmaninov's First Concerto and is kin to my own clumsy "Nocturne."

Declaring Okara "our holy man, ever careful to remain within the law." Echeruo proceeds to lay out "the travails" of Okara's "individual soul as it responds to the world of the outside," thus inviting a deeper philosophical and psychological analysis of the mythos and praxis of his lyricism:

Okara would later delve deeper into the travails of the individual soul as it responds to the world of the outside. On occasion, but never as a major theme, he would explore passion and even lust, that human urgency which very easily gets mixed up with sentiments of love and patriotism and duty and even holiness.

Okara is our holy man, ever careful to remain within the law, to hold the reins on feelings while celebrating them. Fidelity is his primary virtue: truth to one's self and to one's anguished existence. Even then, though, it was usually with a blend of thought and pulse that Okara confronted his subject, concerned as always with the Inside that shared the world, inescapably, with the Outside. He was destined, in his person, to be a sad though not an unhappy man, what with that mix of a lyricist's riotousness and the epicist's sense of choric responsibility; and that was the man the late Robert Wren noticed but did not recognize: "somber, even severe," Wren said, "he laughed easily, especially in self-deprecation." Okara is a poet for all seasons, born (alas) into Africa's prime season of much uncertainty.

In the face of the sun  
I see only darkness  
At the back of my Back  
I see only darkness  
and the water in the desert  
has dried in darkness

One model that readily presents itself in any deep structure philosophical and psychological analysis of "You Laughed and Laughed and Laughed" is Plato's Allegory of the Cave. A dramatic monologue in which the speaker is a colonial subaltern talking back to the empire about European arrogant detraction of African peoples and their cultures, the poem's organically coherent and unified narrative and dramatic and the diametrically contrasting milieus of the subaltern and the imperium are vividly realized through the speaker's soliloquy. The white man laughs at everything African. But what does he know about the Africa he derogates? Nothing but the figments of his imagination. In the opening stanzas (1 and 2), he is discovered with his "ears" nailed up and "eyes" shut. Cuts off from the concrete phenomenal realities of the natural African world, he is one of the prisoners chained in the Platonic cave of his own imagination from which he hallucinates about African realities and the extent of his "understanding" of the nature of these realities. Plato's Allegory of the Cave is presented after the metaphor of the sun (507b–509c) and the analogy of the divided line (509d–513e) in his work *The Republic* to illustrate "our nature in its education and want of education" (514a). These allegories are summarized in the viewpoint of dialectic at the end of Book VII and VIII (531d–534e). Plato lets Socrates describe a group of people who have lived chained to the wall of a cave all of their lives, facing a blank wall. The people watch shadows projected on the wall by things passing in front of a fire behind them, and begin to ascribe forms to these shadows. According to Plato's Socrates, the shadows are as close as the prisoners get to viewing reality. He then explains how the philosopher is like a prisoner who is freed from the cave and comes to understand that the shadows on the wall do not make up reality at all, as he can perceive the true form of reality rather than the mere shadows seen by the prisoners. \The Allegory is related to Plato's Theory of Forms, according to which the "Forms" (or "Ideas"), and not the material world of change known to us through sensation, possess the highest and most fundamental kind of reality. Only knowledge of the Forms constitutes real knowledge. In addition, the Allegory of the Cave is an attempt to explain the philosopher's place in society: to attempt to enlighten the "prisoners."

### 3.2. Close Reading

**Stanza I-2:** In the first two stanzas of Okara's monologue, the speaker addresses an European colonialist that laughs at African way of life

In your ears my song  
is motor car misfiring  
stopping with a choking cough;  
and you laughed and laughed and laughed.

In your eyes my ante-  
natal walk was inhuman, passing  
your 'omnivorous understanding'  
and you laughed and laughed and laughed.

The addressee emerges as a prisoner of the mind, trapped in a Platonic cave of his own deluded imagination. On the walls of this psychic cave, he observes vivid imaginaries that are no more than

projection of the ugliness of his own post-industrial world, such as “motor car misfiring/ stopping with a choking cough.” Instead of the sound of music—the speaker’s “song” (chant, hymn, mantra) as a metaphor for all that is beautiful and true in his cultural expressions, with ears blocked, the white man laughs, because he can only hear the cacophonous rancor of broken machines of his post-industrial world.

In Stanza 2, the phrases. “ante-/natal walk” and 'omnivorous understanding', are deployed as vehicles for an attack on two of the major pillars of Eurocentrist racism and hegemony—social Darwinism and the exclusivist Eurocentrist claim to universality attacked in Achebe’s essay. “Colonialist Criticism.”

**Stanza 3-5:** Stanza’s 3 and 5 are symmetrical patterns of repetition and parallelism that not only function in the monologue as refrains of the kind found in folk songs but also embody the key tropes of the lyric—song, walk, dance and inside—in their antithetical semantic relationships to the central trope of “laughter” by which they are linked in the overriding pattern of anaphoric repetition:

### Stanza 3

You laughed at my song,  
you laughed at my walk.

### Stanza 5

You laughed at my dance,  
you laughed at my inside.

It seems necessary at this stage to pause a while to take a close look at the key tropes identified above as they seem vital (and will indeed be shown to be vital) for a proper understanding of the *mimesis* and *diagnosis* of the monologue.

“Laughter” is a recurrent trope in postcolonial African writing. A code from the oral tradition for natural and meaningful human existence in the world, it is a trope that is shared in common by many other African, modernist, postcolonial poets of Okara’s generation such as Christopher Okigbo (1930-1967), Kwesi Brew (1928-2007). Thus, in Okigbo’s *Path of Thunder* (1965-1967), the violent and bloody political crises arising from the betrayal of the hopes of independence in Nigeria in the early 1960’s is depicted in “Come Thunder” as “our laughter, broken in two”, the same postcolonial “broken laughter” that informs the great majority of the lyrics collected in *The Shadows of Laughter*, (1968) by Ghanaian poet Kwesi Brew. In *An African Elegy*, Ben Okri writes of the ‘strangled laughter’ caused by ‘political fevered and riggings’ (<http://literature0305.bravehost.com/African.html>). Further insight into the trope of “laughter” in postcolonial African writing may be gained from Doris Lessing’s (1992) memoir, *African Laughter*, recounting her four visits between 1982 and 1992 to the land of her birth, Zimbabwe, after a lifelong exile in South Africa and Europe. Commenting on the title, a reviewer, Robert Earle (2009) writes:

The book is aptly named. Toward the end, Lessing records some whites wondering why it is that the blacks (or Affs) seem to enjoy themselves more, no matter how desperate their circumstances. Throughout these visits, however, good cheer is found everywhere among the Zimbabwean people--all, except, the whites who are "holding on," confused by the upside down world in which they find themselves, politically disenfranchised if still economically relatively prosperous.

Part of the answer must lie in the benevolence of the climate and terrain in Zimbabwe, so much of which is fertile and life sustaining, but there is always the underlying truth that people who have little sometimes have less to worry about than people who have a great deal.

As a modernist, postcolonial trope for natural and meaningful human existence in the world, it bespeaks of an attitude of “being in the world” that is reminiscent of Martin Heidegger’s phenomenology. Okeke-Ezigo () has attempted a comparative study of Heidegger and Okara; but it is not necessary to engage in a systematic and comprehensive study the relation of Heidegger’s often abstruse philosopher to Okara’s mythos to apprehend the African sense of “laughter” as an expression of being in the world. Very little research has been done on human laughter as a type of mammalian lyrical vocalization rooted in the language instinct and the fundamental lyrical impulse that makes us human.

Now to the antithetical tropes ("song", "walk", "dance" and "inside"), for the speaker, "song," to begin with, does not simply mean chant, mantra or such other conventional denotations of the word as hymn, tune, or musical cry. It means "lyric" in its pristine sense of vocalization that reflects the lyrical impulse or the natural human instinct—in certain situations—to utter words that are expressive of intense personal emotion.

Like its antecedent "song," the trope, "walk," presents itself also as a polysemous code, in this case a code for kinetic human activity whose multiple nuances are shared across the Atlantic with many African Diaspora communities. In many African languages, such as Okara's native Ijo and the proximate Igbo, from which the trope has been appropriated into English, folk idioms with the matrix, "walk" are generally connotative of personal mannerisms, attitudes, behavior patterns, idiosyncrasies, and above strengths and weaknesses of character and all lifestyles. For example, in the folk iconography of the proximate Igbo, the kinetic idiom, *ije agu* (Leopold walk) draws a circle, as described by the proverb, *okirikiri but ije agu* (circular is the walk of the leopard). By the same token, in the Igbo idiom, *ukwu-na-ije* (feet-and-walk), the constituent sememes—feet (*ukwu*) and *ije* (*walk*)—are conjoined to form an expression that sums up the totality of human experience as the walk or journey of life. This cosmographic sense of "walk" appears to have been carried over wholesale to the Black Atlantic, not only in the idea of the solo in the folk song as the "walk" in the polyphonic or call-and-answer form comprising solo lines or verses ("walk") alternating with choruses ("shout") (See Gordon, 19xx: 445-451) but in the common parlance, "walking the walk and talking the talk" as expressions of distinctive individual lifestyles defined in terms of a communality of shared world views in which one is the other and either is both, a traditional communalism that has survived in the Black Atlantic as "soul" in which, in walking hers or her walk of life, every person is at simultaneously projecting a personal mannerism and a communal ethos of shared identities.

"Dance" is also a polysemous code for kinetic human activity with multiple nuances that are shared across the Atlantic with many African Diaspora communities.

Finally, in the trope, "inside," we have one of the central rhetorical figures in Gabriel Okara's poetic vocabulary which I have elsewhere (Azuonye, 2012) described as "connotative of the spiritual, the numinous, the magical, the supernatural, and the shamanistic" and "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>1</sup> As I have also posited, "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>2</sup> personal experiences or complexes<sup>3</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

**Stanza 4-6:** In these stanzas, Okara's speaker show through his reenacts of the robotic actions of the colonialist that the prison of the mind is a powerful magic circle with an ineluctable hold on a person

<sup>1</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>2</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>3</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).

under its charm. Every effort, in these stanza, through artistic performances of the highest excellence, described as "magic dance," is not sufficiently persuasive to lure the prisoner out of the cave and the shadows that had become his reality. Shutting his "eyes" (symbolically blinding himself), he turns his back to true reality and returns to his familiar cave, her symbolized by his "car":

Then I danced my magic dance  
to the rhythm of talking drums pleading, but you shut your  
eyes and laughed and laughed and laughed.  
And then I opened my mystic  
inside wide like  
the sky, instead you entered your  
car and laughed and laughed and laughed.

**Stanza 6**

You laughed and laughed and laughed.  
But your laughter was ice-block  
laughter and it froze your inside froze  
your voice froze your ears  
froze your eyes and froze your tongue ."

**Stanza 7:** In anticipation of his robust cultural nationalist defense of his indigenous African heritage in the following stanza (8), the speaker attacks the iciness and unnaturalness of the arrogant colonialist's "laughter,"

In this stanza, the speaker contrasts his own natural "laughter" with the artificiality of that of the mocking colonialist:

And now it's my turn to laugh;  
but my laughter is not  
ice-block laughter. For I  
know not cars, know not ice-blocks.

The colonialist's laughter is not only icy (comparable to "ice-block") it is also, by default, comparable to mechanical products of European industrialism by dint of the litotes that recall Aime Césaire's disavowal of the world of industrial invention and machines which, from his romantic primitivistic<sup>4</sup> eye, constitutes the authentic African way of life:

Hooray for those who never invented anything;  
Hooray for those who never discovered anything;  
Hooray for joy! Hooray for love!  
Hooray for the pain of incarnate tears.  
My Negritude is no tower and no cathedral  
It delves into the deep red flesh of the soil.

In the final stanza of the lyric, this romantic primitivism will be restated even more vehemently as the summation of the nascent African's answer to the arrogant European imperum.

**Stanza 8:** In this stanza, the speaker defends his indigenous African heritage as "laughter" (meaningful human existence in the world) which he compares, by dint of extended and hyperbolic metaphor, to the four elements ("fire", "earth", "air" and "water"):

My laughter is the fire  
of the eye of the sky, the fire  
of the earth, the fire of the air,  
the fire of the seas and the  
rivers fishes animals trees

---

<sup>4</sup> The term romantic primitivism is from Ali Mazrui (1995; 35).

and it thawed your inside,  
 thawed your voice, thawed your  
 ears, thawed your eyes and  
 thawed your tongue.

As meaningful human existence in the world, the speaker's "laughter" is particularly identified with "fire" (in its varied manifestations as light, heat, flames, blaze, bonfire, conflagration, combustion, or inferno). To begin with, it is compared to the primal thermonuclear energy of the sun—the "eye of the sun" (as it is known in the author's native Ijo and in Igbo)—that sustains life on earth. Secondly, it is "the fire of the earth," the energy associated with the birth of human civilization in world-wide myths about its theft by a daring culture hero from the deities by whom it was originally monopolized. Thirdly, it is "the fire of the air." Finally, it is "the fire of the seas." Thus, in the running metaphors within the overarching and whorled metaphor, the poet's "laughter" is associated with all the key sacerdotal and deified entities in the poet's indigenous culture—the sun (the Sun-God), the earth (the Earth-Goddess) the air (the Airy and Sky Deities), and the sea (the Water and Sea Deities). We can see some of the bases of these associations in "Ogboinba: An Ijo Creation Myth," a version of which was recorded and published in English translation by Okara himself in 1960. Implied by these mythic associations is a nativistic, naturalistic and transcendentalist (albeit idealistic and romantic) claim to belonging to an autochthonous human civilization whose anteriority and pride of place in the origins and evolution of cultures can neither be demeaned nor denied by any Eurocentrist arrogance. The link with the sun and the divine light of creation is particularly stressed. In the poet's native Ijo, as in Igbo and many other West African Kwa and Semi-Bantu languages, the sun is not only "the eye of the sun" but the archetype and source of the heat of natural human passion. Imbued with this archetypal heat, the speaker presents himself as possessing the pristine and natural human energy (shared in common with "the seas and the /rivers fishes animals trees") that does in the end overcome and thaw the "cold" unnaturalness and pretensions of Eurocentrist cultural arrogance, in all its psychological and sensory ramifications—"inside" (psychological), "voice" (vocal), "ears" (auditory), "eyes" (visual), and "tongue" (linguistic).

**Stanza 9:** At last, in this stanza, the mocking colonialist is awakened to the value of the African cultural heritage he mocks and forced to ask the most important question of all ("Why?") to which he receives an answer that bespeaks of the poet's unwavering commitment to his indigenous heritage:

So a meek wonder held  
 your shadow and you whispered:  
 'Why so?'  
 'And I answered:  
 'Because my fathers and I  
 are owned by the living  
 warmth of the earth  
 through our naked feet.'

**Summary:** But generally, in the discourse on the perennial dialectic between the thesis of indigenous African culture and the antithesis of European takeover through Christianity and colonialism, Okara's position is that, in the matter of the culture of the colonizer and the colonized, we are left with no choice one way or the other, but the inevitability of reconciliation between both—the absolute inevitability of the acceptance of a postcolonial synthesis.

#### 4. Summary and Conclusion

Okara's universalism and rational critique of romantic nationalism should by no means mislead the reader into missing the essentialism and centrality in his topoi (recurrent poetic conventions or motifs) of a strong cultural nationalist veneration of his ancestral heritage and its telluric (or earth-related) mysteries.

#### References

Abrams, M. H., ed. 2005. "Dramatic Monologue." *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 8th ed. Boston: Thomson Wadsworth, 70-71.

- Afrika Museum. Mask. Ijo. Forms of Wonderment: the History and Collections of the Afrika Museum, Berg en Dal. Volume 1, page 289
- Hollos, Marida and Philip E Leis. 1989. *Becoming Nigerian in Ijo society*. New Brunswick [N.J.] : Rutgers University Press (In the Series 'Adolescents in a Changing World').
- Achebe, Chinua. 1988. *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays, 1965-1987*. Portsmouth, NH: Alagoa,
- Ebiegberi Joe. 1972. *A History of the Niger Delta; An Historical Interpretation of Ijo Oral Tradition*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.
- An Ijaw Story: Journey to the Presence of Woyingi: <http://woyingi.wordpress.com/about-woyingi/an-ijaw-story-journey-to-the-presence-of-woyingi/>
- Anderson, Martha G. 1983. "Central Ijo Art : Shrines and Spirit Images." Ph. D Dissertation, Indiana University.
- Anderson, Martha G. 1987. "The Funeral of an Ijo Shrine Priest." *African arts*, vol. 21, no. 1, p. 52-57+88.
- Anderson, Martha G. 2003. "Bulletproof : Exploring the Warrior Ethos in Ijo Culture." *Ways of the River: Arts and Environment of the Niger Delta*. Chapter 3, pages 90-119, 352-353.
- Anderson, Martha G. 2003. "From River Horses to Dancing Sharks : Canoes and Fish in Ijo Art and Ritual." *Ways of the River: Arts and Environment of the Niger Delta*. Chapter 4, pages 132-161, 353.
- Anderson, Martha G. 2003. "Ikiyan aru : Ijo vessels of sacrifice." *African arts*, 36 (1) Spring, pages 24-39, 91-92.
- Anderson, Martha G. 2003. "The Dancing People : Eastern Ijo Masking Traditions." *Ways of the river: Arts and environment of the Niger Delta*. Interleaf H, pages 216-219.
- Anderson, Martha G. 2003. "Visual Arts." *Land and people of Bayelsa State: Central Niger delta*. Chapter 9, pages 127-148
- Anderson, Martha G. 2003. "Water-Spirit Headdress, Nigeria, Ijo." *For spirits and kings: African art from the Tishman Collection*. Pages 149-150..
- Anderson, Martha G. 2004. "Water Ethos : the Ijo of the Niger." *African Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Philip M. Peek and Kwesi Yankah, pp. 502-504. New York and London: Routledge.
- Anderson, Martha G. and Philip M Peek. 2002. "Ways of the Rivers : Arts and Environment of the Niger Delta" (Exhibition Preview): *African Arts*. 35 (1) spring 2002, pages 12-25, 93.
- Anderson, Martha G. and Ebiegberi Joe Alagoa, 2003. "Lower Niger Delta Peoples and Diaspora." *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion*. Volume 1: Africa. Pages 323-328.
- Anderson, Martha G. and Enid Schildkrout. 1989. *Wild Spirits, Strong Medicine : African Art and the Wilderness*. Seattle [u.a.] : University of Washington Press.
- Anderson, Martha G. and Lisa Louise Aronson. 2011. "Jonathan A. Green : an African photographer hiding in plain sight." *African arts*, . 44, no. 3, p. 38-49.
- Anderson, Martha G. and Philip M Peek. 2003. "Reflections : Looking Back On Our Journey." *Ways of the river: Arts and Environment of the Niger Delta*. Interleaf H, Pages 334-339, 355.
- Anderson, Martha G., Lisa Aronson; Peter Habicht. 2003. "Werbung in eigener Sache : Selbstdarstellung und lokale Aneignung der Fotografie in Bonny und Opobo aus dem Englischen ubersetzt von Peter Habicht." *Fotofieber: Bilder aus West- und Zentralafrika: Die Reisen von Carl Passavant, 1883-1885*. Pages 119-134, 222-223, 233.
- Anderson, Martha G., Christine Mullen Kreamer; and Enid Schildkrout 1989. *Wild spirits : strong medicine; african art and the wilderness; [...exhibition ...organized and presentend by the Center of African Art]* [Martha G. Anderson; Chrstine Mullen Kreamer. Ed. by Enid Schildkrout ...]. New York [u.a.] : The Center for African Art [u.a.].
- Anderson, Martha G., Christine Mullen Kreamer; Enid Schildkrout; Jerry L Thompson; Susan Mullin Vogel. 1989. *Wild Spirits, Strong Medicine : African Art and The Wilderness*: New York : The Center for African art, cop.
- Anderson, Martha G., Christine Mullen Kreamer; Enid Schildkrout; Jerry L Thompson. 1989. *Wild Spirits, Strong Medicine* : New York : Center for African Art ; Seattle : University of Washington Press.
- Anderson, Martha G., Philip M Peek; et al. 2002. *Ways of the Rivers : Arts and Environment of the Niger Delta*: Los Angeles : UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History.

- Anderson, Martha G., Philip M Peek; et al. 2002. *Ways of the Rivers : Arts and Environment of the Niger Delta*: Los Angeles : UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History.
- Azikiwe, Nnamdi. 1937. *Renasant Africa*. Reprinted, London: Frank Cass, 1968
- Barnard, Rita. 2004. "On Laughter, the Grotesque, and the South African Transition: Zakes Mda's Ways of Dying." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* (Duke University Press), Vol. 37, No. 3, Postcolonial Modernisms (Summer, 2004), pp. 277-302.
- Byron, Glennis (2003). *Dramatic monologue*. New York: Routledge. pp. 208 pages.
- Earle, Robert. 2009. "African Laughter: Four Visits to Zimbabwe by Doris Lessing—A Review." Blog Posted by Robert Earle—March 18, 1:48 pm [<http://redroom.com/member/robert-earle/blog/african-laughter-four-visits-to-zimbabwe-by-doris-lessing-a-review>]
- Echeruo, Michael J.C., 1992. "Gabriel Okara, A Poet and His Seasons," *World Literature Today*, Summer 92, Vol. 66, Issue 3, p. 454-456., 1 Black and White Photograph
- Gordon, Robert Winslow, "Negro 'Shouts' from, Georgia," *Mother Wit*, 445-451.
- Howe, Elisabeth A. (1996). *The Dramatic Monologue*. Boston: Twayne Publishers.  
[http://www.worldcat.org/title/water-ethos-the-ijo-of-the-niger/oclc/59004768&referer=brief\\_results](http://www.worldcat.org/title/water-ethos-the-ijo-of-the-niger/oclc/59004768&referer=brief_results)
- Lessing, Doris. 1992. *African Laughter: Four Visits to Zimbabwe*. HarperCollins
- Mazrui, Ali. 1995. "Pan-Africanism: From Poetry to Power." *Issue: A Journal of Opinion*, Vol. 23, No. 1, Winter-Spring, pp. 35-38.
- Mbadiwe, Kingsley Ozuomba. 1942. *British and Axis Aims in Africa*. New York: W. Malliet and company.
- Nevadomsky, Nevadomsky; Martha G Anderson; Philip M Peek. 2003. "Review of *Ways of the Rivers: Arts and Environment of the Niger Delta*." *African arts*, vol. 36, no. 3, p. 10-11+90-91.
- Ojike, Mazi Mbonu. 1946. *My Africa*. New York: The John Day Company.
- Okara, Gabriel. 1966. "Ogboinba: An Ijo Creation Myth" In: *The Origins of Life and Death: African Creation Myths*, ed. Ulli Beier. London: Heinemann. Repr. Kampala: East African Publishers
- Orizu, Nwafor. 1944. *Without Bitterness: Western Nations in Post-War Africa*. New York: Creative Age Press.
- Williamson, Kay. 1965 (2nd ed. 1969). *A Grammar of the Kolokuma Dialect of Ijo*. (West African Language Monographs, 2.) London: Cambridge University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1971. *The Benue-Congo languages and Ijo*. In: Current Trends in Linguistics, Vol. 7, series ed. \_\_\_\_\_ (ed.) 1972. *Igbo-English Dictionary*. Benin: Ethiope Publishing Corporation.
- by T. A. Sebeok, 245-306.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (ed.). 1973. *Benue-Congo Comparative Wordlist: Volume II*. Ibadan: West African Linguistic Society.
- Williamson, Kay, and Kiyoshi Shimizu (edd.). 1968. *Benue-Congo Comparative Wordlist: Volume I*. Ibadan: West African Linguistic Society.
- Williamson, Kay, and A. O. Timitimi (ed.). 1983. *Short Izo-English Dictionary*. (Delta Series No. 3.) Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press.
- Zabus, Chantal. 1999. "Gabriel Okara," in *The Companion to African Literatures*, eds. G.D. Killam & Ruth Rowe (Bloomington: James Currey & Indiana University Press,).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> <http://rapgenius.com/King-tee-time-to-get-out-lyrics#lyric>

<sup>2</sup> In the English storytelling tradition (according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*), it is a stock phrase that has been used in some form since at least 1380 and seems to have become a widely accepted convention for opening oral narratives by around 1600. These stories often then end with the coda, "and they all lived happily ever after", or, originally, "happily until their deaths." The opening formulae in Croatian, Ekoti in Mozambique, Euskara. Iraqw, in Tanzania, Kenya, and Cush, Kannada, Lithuanian, Macedonian, Serbian. Telugu, Urdu, Malay and Thai translate exactly into "once upon a time." In various languages across the world, its numerous variants are invariably couched

in oxymoron, paradox and similar tropes and are invariably associated with romance and fantas. They include the following samples in the languages indicated in parenthesis: "Once, in another time" (Greek); "One day, a long time ago" (Afrikaans); "One day, One time" (Persian); "A long time ago" (Assamese, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Shona, Slovene, Swahili, and Welsh); "A long, long time ago" (Irish, Kyrgyz, Polish, Russian, and Vietnamese.); "A very very long time ago" (Chinese); "At a time long ago" (Tamil); "At that time" (Latin); "During the old days (a long time ago)" (Tagalog); "In olden days" (Maragoli, Kenya); "In one era (Hindi); "In the ancient time" (Sanskrit); "In the days of auld lang syne" (Scottish); "I've told you what's coming" (Moroccan and Algerian Arabic); "Long ago (Malayalam); " Once" (Maltese); "Once long ago in times long gone" (Latvian); "Once there was a time" (Hebrew); "Once there was" (Albanian, Dutch, Finnish, German, Icelandic, Italian, and Luxembourgish); "Once there was, once there wasn't; in the old times, the sieve in a stack of hay" (Turkish); "Once there was, where t " (); "There once was" (Serbian); "There once was, as never before" (Roumanian); "There was a time or Time was time" (Catalan); "There was one time/there was once" (French); "There was one, there wasn't one, there was no one beside the Lord" (Persian); "There was this work that" (Pashto); "There was, (and) there was not" (Azeri); "There was, and there was not, there was" (Georgian); "There was, oh what there was. or there wasn't, in the oldest of days and ages and times" (Classical Arabic); "There was, once" (Norwegian, Portuguese, Spanish, and Swedish); "There was, once or Once a long time ago" (Danish); "There was, once upon a time" (Bulgarian); "There was, there was not" (Armenian and Czech); "This is an old story" (Gujarati); and "Where it was—there it was" (Slovak). Contrasting the decadent present with the good old days and its paradise or innocence lost, these crosscultural and perennial storytelling formulae are timeless romantic codes for the kind of nativistic and nationalist cultural sentiments that pervade Okara's early lyrics.

<sup>3</sup> In some dialects, *aka ìkpà*. The etymology of both variants of the keyword (*ìkpà* and *èkpè*) is rather obscure. But it may not be farfetched to assume that *kpà* in *aka ìkpà* is the same word as the Igbo verb for "snatch" or more generally stealth of hand, as in *-kpa aka ànì*—" be mischievous; play tricks" (Williamson, 2006). The left hand is the hand of stealth and wily-dealing. On the other hand, *èkpè* may be related to the name of the secret society, *Èkpè*, as carefully distinguished by Amankulor (1972: 37-47) from the homonymous *word, Ekpè*, with a high-low tone-pattern. However the relationship of this to the negative connotations of the left hand is a matter for further research.

<sup>4</sup> Dialectal variants of *ìbitè*—a common toponymic code, with the postcolonial spelling, *ibitte*—include *ìfitè* (ifitte), *ihitè* (ihitte), and *ìvitè* (ivitte). Generally used to denote the left-side or West as opposed to the right-side or East (*ikengà*) of the four cardinal points in Igbo place names, its occurrence in every day idiomatic expressions and in some ritual utterances is connotative of attracting something untoward by taking hold of, grasping, or pressing with one's hand with reckless abandon. This sense of the verb bite is explicit in the proverb, *otù mkpurū akā bite mmanū, ò zùo ibè ya* (when one finger carelessly presses on oil, it spreads to all other fingers). See Williamson's (2006) gloss of *-bitu aka* (take hold of; grasp; press with hand lightly (e.g. as when feeling the temperature of a person with hand). The left hand then is the hand of light reckless touch that is prone to attract dirt, hence the present gloss of *aka ibite* as "unclean hand."