

**MYTH, MEMORY AND THE NATION STATE: AYI KWEI ARMAH'S
TWO THOUSAND SEASONS AND BEN OKRI'S *THE FAMISHED ROAD***

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Abstract

The cultural utilities of myths and legends in Africa interplay with history to constitute the artefact for constructing imaginaries of cultural self-assertion and retrieval politicised to counter the pervasion of hegemonic texts which came with alienation and imposition. Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* signify the interface of myth and history centralised in the memory of the African experience. By intertextualising the ancestral oral texts with the texts of emergent modernity, the two authors deepen insight into the realities of postcolonial Africa while drawing copiously on the body of myths and legends that inhere in the cultural past and situate them in the context of the chaotic nature of contemporary world order. The argument of this paper is that although the influx of modernity has revolutionised global cultural space, African cultural material retains its relevance for engaging the order of postmodernity. By bending backward to the past, the two texts represent the projectile for illuminating the veracity of the evolving disorder as it affects the postcolonial milieu. The resilience of cultural self-consciousness and historical memory has been useful in mediating the tensions of the colonial encounter with its tendencies. We explore how the utility of myths, parable, riddles, and other ancestral folk heritage are creatively woven and intricately appropriated to mediate the borders between the ancestral and the postmodern realities towards constructing new sensibilities of nationhood in Africa.

Introduction

The influence of folklore elements straddles aesthetic space in modern African literature. Although Ben Okri and Ayi Kwei Armah represent a generation apart in modern African literature, their creative sensibilities in the two selected texts tilt to a point of overlap when the contexts and thematic thrusts are placed in the historical perspective. The two writers draw on the ancestral cultural artefact and focus their creativity and vision in a way to re-engage and textualise the dilemma of the present realities while centralising African experience in their aesthetic endeavours. The notion of cultural self-retrieval and belonging as construct of postcolonial politics is pervasive in the literary texts that emerge out of the rupture of colonial history. Such texts, in their different genres, are essentially involved with the project of re-memorialising and deepening interests in cultural and historical self-memory and racial pride in a world of besetting prejudices. Such texts, Dasylyva affirms, come

from “the urge to interrogate a signifying historical fact of self-place erosion occasioned by psychological dislocation that made a condition of alienation and advancement of colonial interest inevitable” (73).

But what is culture other than a way a people perceive who they are and what is peculiar to them or their community or group, pertaining to their origins, worldview and social organs that bind them together? Every race, therefore, lays claim in some ways to cultural ownership. This is the general medium of self-assertion, pride of personhood and rational sense of belonging. Naturally, culture is harmless and keeps evolving and mixing over time. Conflict only arises when one culture and belief system tends to contradict the other and the struggle for superimposition ensues. There, therefore, arises the need for negotiation, understanding and tolerance. African culture has suffered untold violence, rape and repudiation in the hands of others since the very first contact with outsiders. This is the point of departure of the multifarious crises that pervade contemporary existence. Let me agree with the point of view of Clifford Geertz on the way of cultural perception as a construct relevant for this occasion:

The concept of culture I espouse is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after, constructing social expressions on their surface enigmatical. But this pronouncement, a doctrine in a clause, demands itself some explication (238).

It is against this underpinning background that this paper situates the nuances of its discourse towards diversifying what myth and folklore about African encounter with the West means to the African person and to Africa as an entity with diverse cultures.

In African traditional epistemology, the material world and the spirit realm cross-romance or submerge into one reality. This epistemological reality is imaginatively reworked to make statements that address the evolving social circumstances. This is the basis and foundry of myths and legends as aesthetic strategy that have been resorted to towards constructing new paradigms for the understanding of the contexts of belonging and cultural self-pride. Arising from such sensibility, the past is perused, the present brought to prognosis, and the future projected. From the narrative sweep and thematic imperatives, Ayi Kwei Armah’s *Two Thousand Seasons* and Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* are constituted in the paradox of the postcolonial milieu. They are projected against the overawing menace of imperialism-informed cultural

hegemony that tends to negate, distort or demonise Africa's input in global civilization and culture.

The texts in context are symbolic reassertions of pre-colonial communal life, mythic resources as means of entrenching social order and existential harmony, and for perpetuating tradition, envisioned to further mediate history and the heritage of the people. This assertive projectile is important to re-interrogate the repudiation and disruption that was brought about by colonial mercantilists and European missionaries and politicians who were bent on creating a space in all ramifications for the construction of expansionist and mercantilist platforms. This issue has been a significant concern of such African writers as the Ghanaian poet, Kofi Awoonor, the Nigerian writers, Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo, and Amos Tutuola, the author of *The Palm-Wine Drunkard*, whose works have had lasting influence on successive generations of African writers.

The element of myths, legends and related oral texts that embed contemporary African literary texts are sustained by the creative imagination and firm grasping of the cultural order, skilfully invoked to energise the eloquence needed to articulate and engage the memory of the postcolonies. From the onset of its cultural setting, Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* is enmeshed in the milieu of folk legends with the hunter's tales, the village square meeting, the proceedings of the council of elders, rendered in typical scenery of captivating tales of the moonlight, signifying African traditional world setting. Such mythical or legendary tales, often sauced with songs and drumming or relevant performances, serve to create the right atmosphere to energise the memory of the narrators about issues of life and the great exploits of the ancestors, the warriors of the tribe, the footage of brave hunters, or the marking of special events that are of historical significance to the community. They could also serve to pay homage or tribute to ever-present ancestors who are believed to play eternal role in the affairs of the living long after they might have gone, as part of social heritage of the people.

It is this cultural order that gave form and wholeness to African societies. But colonialism came with its imposition and in the process turned Africans into strangers of their own ways with the attendant lingering crisis of adjustment which left devastating and long-lasting repercussions on the consciousness of the colonised and subjugated societies. The theme of cultural alienation has been recurrent in the works of African writers including Chinua Achebe, Es'kia Mphahlele and many others who envision or imagine the postcolonial milieu. Falola asserts that the colonial experience wrecked great havoc on African cultures "to the extent that some became strangers to their traditions of old, suffering alienation in the process" (4). This can be appreciated when one reasons out the manner by which European texts, in their typical sensibilities, such as in Joyce Cary's numerous writings and Joseph Conrad's

as well, handled their African characters. These texts simply posture the African ways as uncivilised, heathenish, uncouth, primitive and crude. On the other side of the picture looms the benevolent European who has come to tame the wild beings of the Dark Continent. By this the alien civilisers justified labour exploitation, land dispossession, the numerous atrocities meted on their hosts, and the phenomenon of social exclusion of the colonial subjects even from the affairs of their own native land and labelled as misfits and foolish. The aliens even deprived them of asserting their humanity and the benefits of their natural endowments. Boehmer asserts:

Stereotypes of the Other as indolent malingerers, shirkers, good-for-nothings, layabouts, degenerate versions of the pastoral idler, were the stock-in-trade of colonialist writing. In contrast the white man represented himself as the archetypal and provident profit-maker (39).

Many reasons attest to the colouration of the various myths woven in or about a society or even people of a given race. In Africa, what is called myth in European lexicon is more than just a past time as have been conceived in the mind of foreigners who have had to romance with the continent by one means or the other. Europeans and North Americans have developed myths about Africa, Africans and African history in the context of their enslavement of Africans, their colonization of Africa, and their promotion of racism. But that is yet another strand of what have been conceptualised as myth in European texts. It, therefore, means that what is myth in one cultural setting may be reality in another. Indeed, racism perpetuated and still perpetuates myths about Africa and peoples of African descent whose personhood and humanity were objects of racial denigration, forming the opinion which translated into the myth that was supposed to justify the point that black people have neither culture nor history.

This distortion of the reality about Africa served the purpose to justify centuries of social, political, and economic subordination of African peoples both in Africa and in the diaspora. It also made an easy way for colonialism and imperialism to thrive through those turbulent ages. The primary way in which racism denigrates Africans is by creating negative images and stereotypes of Africans and their non-Europeanised ways. But myth as we use it in the context of this paper is centred on the heritage of folklore and legendary tales of African people that have been transmitted orally from generation to generation, and which became the major source of African history before the coming of European writing on a wide scale. However, as Osofisan states, the mythic personages that are drafted into African literary expression incarnate the tension between the existing and the visionary, the past and the present, the present and the future, not as deity but as metaphor for re-constructing history (99).

Within the scope and context of this paper, there is an obvious interconnect in the imaginative and visionary directions of the two key African writers, Armah and Okri. The motifs they rely on are similar in their variations and aesthetic purpose, thematically devised to bend backward to the milestones of history and traditions of the old for the retrieval of the knowledge of the past which colonial forces strived to erase, dismiss or demonise. By relying heavily on oral culture that flourished in the past to address contemporary social history, the two writers try to creatively “make sense of our multiple heritage” towards shaping and reshaping the canonical imperatives of African literature (Oyedele 167). In this context, *Two Thousand Seasons* is concerned with “the way” that punctuates every scenario of the narrative. Similarly Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*’s narrative vitality is grounded on the dilemma of the ‘Road’ constantly imagined and cast as ‘hungry’ and of which has been undergoing construction for epochs gone yet getting nowhere. The ‘road’ here illustrates the paradox and dilemma of Africa’s vicious history of colonialism, neo-colonialism and the chaos of contemporary dependency and socio-economic misery. In Armah’s sensibility of this mythic ‘way’ of the legendary past, which he seeks to memorize, revise and reappraise, he summons the muse to serve as tribute to cultural self-memory. In the ‘prologue’ he calls on the ancestral memory and history’s informant to reveal the way back to the ancient path so that the path to the future may be clearly defined:

You hearers, seers, imaginers, thinkers, rememberers, you prophets called to communicate truths of the living way to foretelling, to join the uncountable seasons of our flowing to unknown tomorrows even more numerous, communicators doomed to pass on truths of our origins to a people rushing deathward, grown ignorance of our source, prejudiced against our own survival, how shall your vocation’s utterance be heard?... (xi).

With this invocative elocution, the path is set for the recreation of the parable of a vicious history of alien incursion, plucked on the cultural memory and the outcomes of colonial encounter and the aftermath. The story deploys the heritage of the legendary elders to landscape the frontiers of colonial politics, the devices of usurpation and power hegemony. In the same temperament, Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*, with its mythical spawn, draws on the widely held traditional worldview of the spirit-child, ‘born to die’ and to be born into this other side of reality again and again, in a vicious circle of return, causing pain to the parents; neither belonging here nor in the world of the spirits. Known in Yoruba folklore as ‘abiku’, and by several other names in other African cultures, the spirit child, which Okri names as Azaro in his story, has been popularised as motif in the articulation of the dilemma of African experience. The implication of this mythical character’s ability to traverse the

two worlds of reality metaphorically makes for the possibility of exhuming the relics of timeless time and for the perusal of different dimensions of history by which the connection between the past and the present is established. Through this historical re-entry into the “house of memory” which Osundare also refers to as “the backyard of time” creates the metaphoric arena upon which the origins of the present reality is re-interrogated and re-engaged. Reflecting on the enduring impetus of colonial oppression and the conglomerate of imperial powers to the subjugated peoples, Osundare then states: “for in the intricate dialectic of human living, looking back is looking forward” (xii).

The very beginning of the story in *The Famished Road* tilts to the mythical timeless time to announce the African sense of time, which again, Okot p’Bitek has specifically implied in *Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol* (1984). In other words, before the European intrusion into Africa, before the history of conquest, pacification and civilising mission, there had been a beginning in the timeless past. Opening with ‘In the Beginning’, the story of *The Famished Road* is, therefore, a counter-theology to the Western notion of creation story, giving rise to the telling of an African version of the history of colonial imperialism and the aftermath. In the mythical beginning of African folk heritage, the journey builds its aesthetic and cultural impetuses on the folklore milieu, across the forests of spirits and ghosts, the ancestors, the dead whose ears and eyes are believed to attune to the activities on this side of reality; the rivers and all creation co-mingle with the conscious and the unconscious to give form and pattern of things to the sense in the pre-colonial traditional societies. *The Famished Road* thus opens:

IN THE BIGINNING there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry. In that land of beginnings spirits mingled with the unborn. We could assume numerous forms. We knew no boundaries. There was much feasting, playing, sorrowing. We feasted much because we were free (3).

Yes, the myth of the beginning that is equated with European intrusion and determination is put on the balance of epistemological cross-currents. Myths are the essential cultural material against which historical memory is animated and aesthetically tempered for creating the imaginaries for mediating contemporary discourse of nationhood. Beyond the mythical surface value of ancestral tale, the two texts are thematically grounded on the myths and realities of colonial encounter, drawing on folklore resources as utility for imaginative engagement of this history. With these resources, history can be reframed to fill up the points of the gaping silences that were the undoing of imperialism and racist mentality. In the chapter ‘making sense of the western encounter’, Toyin Falola asserts:

Modern Africa, indeed, the entire complex of modern African cultures, cannot be understood without considering the impact of the West.... In studying their people and continent, African scholars have had little or no choice other than to make sense of the Western encounter.... The so called glory of European imperialism belongs to European history.... Studies of African resistance and nationalism have empowered Africans and turned them into agents of their own history (20-21).

Among others, a few characters that are critical in drawing home the mythical motifs in the two texts are worth pointing out. In Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*, the metaphorical characters of Anoa, Isanusi, Koranche and Otumfo on one hand, and the identified 'white predators' and 'destroyers' on the other hand, create a balance in the dialogic scenes. In *The Famished Road*, Azaro, Mum and Dad on one hand and Madame Koto, the monstrous on the other, embody the paradoxical trait of the vicious 'road' around which the stories evolve. With these creative devices, the screen board is put in place to project the argument of the origins and the role players of historical exigencies of our contemporary experience, bringing the antagonists into dialogues and clarification of the postmodern order.

Anoa is the recreation of the visionary ancestors, the sages who though are dead and gone to the beyond of time, but the values they represent remain immortalised in the hall of memory, bequeathed through generations. Anoa is the haunting presence of the fathers, the seers, the ancestors who embody the past, the present and the future. They are the historical memory-the reminders and the rememberers. Anoa is the undying voice encoding and decoding the ancient path and translating the direction to the future for the present. In the present course of history, where alien invaders and usurpers, characterised as destroyers and predators, have broken the tribes from the umbilical cord of collectivism and communal order, cultural values stand bastardised and have brought division. Slavery, colonialism and imperialism have put a sharp knife between the tribes. Anoa's voice echoes from the past:

It is a wonder we have been flung so far from the way? That our people are scattered even into the desert, across the sea, over and away from this land, and we have forgotten how to recognise ourselves?.... Killers who are from the sea came holding dead of the body in their right, the minds and annihilation in the left, shrieking fables of a white god and son unconcieved examplar of their proffered senseless suffering (2).

Anoa is cast as a force, an invocation of the legendary, the mythical personality signifying a cultural semiotic, from whose imaginative text history of the nation states can be reconstructed and reconstituted. From the oral background, the past is woven into tangible reality in which case, misconception and prejudices are re-imagined and mediated. In this regard, Okanlawon makes the following assertion:

African historiography depends on oral traditions with which it has successfully debunked the notion of the primitive African, sans history, sans past... There are some genres which are of common interest to both scholars of history and literature: there are those who contain data about personalities and events that is apart from their aesthetic content; myths, legends, proverbs, panegyrics, dirges (oral elegies!)...constitute the touchstones of oral literature, oral civilisation, as they help to interpret and lend artefact (206-207).

In the invisible eyes of the ancestors, the narrative persona explicates memory not only of the pre-colonial social order but rememorizes the midstream of the colonial encounter. She projects the trajectory of history to underscore the wholeness of African society before the advent of European hegemony and alien usurpers. The worldview, belief system, religion, economic and social structure, culture and agricultural system are expatiated to prove and also to disprove the claims of the 'destroyers' and 'predators' either from the desert or from the sea. Their greed and footage of their bloody escapades are replayed in the picture to sensitise memory. The manner of their arrival and the devices and intrigues of their entry into the mainstream of traditional world with landmarks of forceful dispossessions also come under historical scrutiny. But what is implied by Armah's sensibility as one of the most devastating of this historical onslaughts is the invasion of the mind by what he describes as "strange and shrieking theology, both of those who infiltrated from the desert and the sea shores. Their education and history glorified alien cultures and such colonial monuments as Mungo Park, and the British Empire" (*Two Thousand Seasons* 212).

Through the agency of folklore and the words of the sages, the creative artist emerging from the postcolonial background is intricately involved with the project of re-historicising the nation states for cultural self-retrieval. By such aesthetic propensity, the roadmap to the origins of colonial presence is perused and the milestones of this epoch are landscaped for re-entry and reappraisal. This has the utility for illuminating the sites of stigmatisation and contestation meted against the heritage of the African past especially by the early European explorers. Okpewho clearly states that "myth is the intellectual or the symbolistic element in an oral narrative", even though some of its contents simply might have been sacrificed "to new cultural

imperatives” (36). In Armah’s *Two Thousand Seasons*, the deconstructed oral narrative is rendered with a sweeping lucidity and in the temperament of a ‘dilemma tale’, sometime mimetic and at another time dialogic, “which presents choices between alternatives and are resolved through debate” (Bascom 155). This extraction from the texts points at this sensibility as embedded in the mimetic scene which triggers a back-and-forth motion of memory in the imagined or assumed audience:

From beyond our new home, it was not too long before news came rushing from the future. The coming experts of thirtieth generation came back from the shore telling us white men from the sea had arrived at Edina, ten days off, searching for a king among the people, bringing gifts for the special enjoyment of that king, and asking him land...like other white destroyers of our remembrance they too said they were searching for a hospitable place, they too said they were searching for a home (61).

This skilful recreation and interpretation of the mythological legend underpins the framework of *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Famished Road* at different levels within the familiar motif. Essentially the two are involved in the popular project of ‘telling the African story’. Ben Okri’s story in context meticulously experiments as a creative juxtaposition of myth and realities of African experience, drawing on the folk heritage of African traditions. There is a composite of creativity and historical memory. The fabulous streak, the inanimate but spirit-animated beings, the queer trees, the eternal river, and the huge ravished road with the gnomonic characters that travel this same time-beaten road, such as witches and other elemental forces that take form in the sensibilities of the traditional folkloric societies, evoke the eerie and weird and arresting atmosphere typically devised to arouse attention for the telling enactment in the traditional folklore world. These forms are taken for granted to the African audience as a cultural norm, but in the European sensibility, they may be jarring and cast pre-logical images. But the balance is maintained by the quick juxtaposition of historical material articulated in the obvious symbolism in cultural trope as signifiers. Essentially, Emenyonu acknowledges this enduring trait of the postcolonial writers which he asserts is “imbued with a sense of inviolable mission” as follows:

This is essentially meant to correct the distortions of African reality imposed on the world by the forces of slavery, colonialism, and neo-colonialism... Equally they sought to raise the levels of consciousness of their fellow Africans about the harm done by the European colonisers to African cultural values and sense of self (vii).

The dual-natured role played by the central character, Azaro in *The Famished Road* in his startling tale about the myth-ridden road traversing between two realities, inter-textually echoes the Bible character, Lazarus, the poor, hungry wretch who, while in this life was sore-ridden and socially ostracised, but on the other divide was someone to reckon with. In Azaro's wretched life in this side of reality he bestrides the fringes of the material and the spiritual realms; tied down to this side of reality by mother's love while at the same time beckoned by the spirit world and enticed to return to the other divide of reality. The story of his wondering the 'hungry road', the market places and the forests fringes are clearly contextualised in the traditional sensibility of beliefs and worldviews of African people. It is thus understandable that Ben Okri and Ayi Kwei Armah - like Wole Soyinka in *The Road*, and *A Dance of the Forests* and other African writers who either directly or impliedly - have had to resort to these traditionally mythological elements as motifs in addressing the cultural and historical encounters of Africans with alien powers and the processes of decolonisation and crisis of power succession in the chaotic modernity and project.

Several meta-narratives are embedded in *The Famished Road* which further enforce the traditional cultural ferment and explicate the richness of African culture; but beyond this, this has been creatively appropriated to tell the horror story about alien incursion, slavery, colonial imperialism, and how these engendered the 'hunger' and confused the 'way', broke the cultural affinities and divided the tribes and 'natives' in bitter hatred one against the other, with the lingering repercussions. The state of the postcolony is symbolised in the marketplace, which in African sensibility is a melting pot for exchange and for multifarious transactions; visited by a medley of cacophonous role-players, both the seen and unseen, the queer and the real; where the dead and the living meet, trade and barter. The market is the haunt ground for wizards, witches, ghosts, the mammy waters and allied strange beings in folk imagination. It is sometimes considered the abode of the deities who watch closely the affairs of mortals. In the animist cultural sensibility, everything is capable of senses and animation. The roads can go hungry and demand blood of sacrifice and appeasement; the trees are invested with weird beings and therefore capable of some spiritual sensibility and motion. It takes people with some unusual sensitivity like Azaro and Madame Koto, who sometime is cast in the story as having extra-human abilities, to notice and translate these imperatives to the human senses. The realities of these senses can equally be perused when one is in dream state or goes into a trance like Dad, Azaro's earthly father as we notice in the story.

It is against this cultural notion that the escapades of Azaro the spirit-child can be put in perspective. But at the end, the metaphor is appropriated to redefine the chaotic social order and confusion that mark colonial presence, and translate the possibilities of interplay of cultures rather than hegemonic

autocracy of one culture or history over the other. The crises that are pervasive in the post-colonies is given a deeper probing at the marketplace and history is exhumed to dissect the awkwardness of human experience within the milieu, where Azaro notices the proceedings and un-human activities going on in this turbulent environment. With this device the milestone of the postcolonial disorder and crisis-ridden politics is re-examined:

THAT NIGHT I slept under a lorry. In the morning I wandered up and down the streets of the city. Houses were big, vehicles thundered everywhere. I became aware of my hunger when I came to the market place...

At this market place the story now gathers momentum as a horror film, where frightful scenes rise towards the climax, causing breathtaking stirrings and unease in the audience. This sort of scenario is also common in some types of moonlight tales, rendered to arrest attention, teach hard lessons of life or warn the living of consequences of certain activities. The spirit-child continues to reel out the spin before the audience:

I watched the crowds of people pour into the market place. I watched the chaotic movements and the wild exchanges...I shut my eyes and when I opened them again I saw people who walked backwards, a dwarf who got about on two fingers, men upside-down with baskets of fish on their feet, women who had breast on their backs... and beautiful children with three arms. I saw a girl amongst them who had eyes on the side of her face.... That was the first time I realised it wasn't just humans who came to the market places of the world. Spirits and other beings come there too. They buy and sell, browse and investigate (15).

In addressing the imperatives of the appurtenances that congregate to conjure up what he calls the "ancient mythography", which seeks to energise memory of Africa's past, Thompson asserts of myth and legendary tales as social history on the which the past can be translated. He asserts that such species of historiography would be valued as a storehouse of examples to be imitated or avoided by present and future generations "as source of moral instruction, and as open promoter of patriotism" (53). Uzoigwe (42-50) affirms also that the oral traditions of the African past have the potentials for "determining the study of primordial African values" while at the same time serving to perpetuate memory of the historical encounters with Europeans and the role these visitors/settlers played towards bringing to extinction these valuable cultures, thereby obstructing social advance. *The Famished Road* is therefore not to be taken as merely a fabulous tale as it may appeal in some scenes. The

skilful juxtaposition of the spell-bound tales with the real life in the modern makes sense and brings relevance to bear on the myth and legendary tradition of the fathers and mothers of the timeless time. When the scene shifts to Madame Koto's bar, a cacophony of voices breaks out again to describe the real life experience of modern politics, echoing the excruciating memory of modern myths of the market place. Azaro says it all here:

They talked in high-pitched voices and congregated round Madame Koto in the backyard as she sat on a stool preparing the evening's pepper soup... I learned a lot about the talk about what was happening in the country through them. I learned about the talk about how the white men treated us, about political parties and tribal divisions (76).

In a related scene that has appeal to order of things in the postcolonial world of experience, Azaro finds himself in his wanderings in the house of a police officer who had taken sympathy for him and takes him home when he missed his way. Here he makes the reader to come to grips with the realities of social decadence and decay prevalent in the world of humans unknown to the average man in society. In this police officer's house the spirit child is haunted by the spirit of other children and strange voices who have been the victims of police brutality and corruption, exposing the vulnerability of society, that has turned into a cultic system, where threat and fear rule. In the same breath, Madame Koto's bar paints a scenario of political violence, where thugs hold swear, wrecking havoc and causing injury and inflicting pains in the game of ruthless politics and power struggle. Each time Azaro hits the 'road', gloom and confusion mark the way. As far as he is concerned the 'road' is marked "with too many signs, and no direction"; a chequered road "with no direction", where the travellers become "aimless pilgrims" (115). The 'road' is thus a strange place from what it used to be in the timeless time before the advent of imperial powers with new values; that turn things upside down from their natural order; a solitary place that alienates modern travellers.

In the transformational streak of the myths the notion of belonging in the modern conception is therefore fraught with confusion and contradictions that defy the natural order of things. As Azaro, the narrative node wanders again into the bizarre road, in the garage, he encounters the toiling mass of the people "carrying monstrous sacks as if they were damned", as others are "staggered under the weight of salt bags, cement bags and garri sacks", as "the veins of their faces were swollen to bursting point" (144). On the same streets he witnesses violent political campaigns where the emergent political leaders are engaged in power tussle where new 'visionaries' conjure the authority and powers of the ex-colonial master to impose themselves against the will of the people. The persona hears one of them boast: "All you have to do is press ink next to my name...My party will bring good roads and

electricity and water supply... whether you vote for our man or not we will win" (198).

The spirit child is everywhere and quite at home with the unfolding socio-political scenario in the milieu of his wandering. On this road, he hears the peasants echoing in the gossips about the new order of power-hungry rulers that whether they are called the party of the poor or of the rich, the story remains the same: that "they are all corrupt", translating the imagery of the postcolonial world as the emergent vicious order, a circle of social reproach. In the quiet of night he tracks voices of disquiet about the "stories of recurrence told down through generations of defiant mouths... crying out in lamentation at the repetition of an old circle of ascending powers" in a vicious history (178). In this confused atmosphere, "the thugs and ordinary familiar people alike pour out on the road... wounding the night with axes rampaging our sleep, rousing the earth, attacking compounds" and this wind of recurrence continually circle the earth (183). The night of Azaro's wandering is punctuated by gunshots, and murdering shrieking of casualties and victims of misrule that litter the world. In that same mythical tinge, along this viciously hungry and bizarre road, Azaro encounters the undercurrent tension of riotous sacked workers shouting slogans; hoard of protesters, nude women that stalk the road; and on this same road he sites ugliness and monstrous sights including dogs with tails of snakes. As night falls the world becomes benighted. At Madame Koto's bar he sights the horrifying phenomenon of ochre palaces, cats with legs of women and spirits who mingle freely with humans. To illumine this metaphoric scenario, the dialogue between Azaro and Mum who is at the receiving end of the anguish this side of reality is inserted. She narrates her story in the extract as following:

When white people first came to our land...we had already gone to the moon and all the great stars. We gave them some of our gods. We shared our knowledge with them. We welcomed them. But they forgot all this.... They took our lands, burned our gods, and they carried away many of our people to become slaves across the sea...some of them believe they have killed God. Some of them worship machines... (282).

Such rhetorical explication that characterises the major scenes in Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* and Okri's *The Famished Road* serve to project the interplay of communal folklore resources with the myth of modernity and 'higher' civilization traded in the crucible of colonial history. The tales in these instances go beyond empty fable and primitive enactment but exploited as social satire to give insight into the postmodern cultural crisis. The folk tradition of telling our story is inherent in African cultural sensibility as a "common heritage" and as a compulsion (Obiechina 21). This resource

constitutes the hallmark of social imaginaries into the historical past of the narrative communities (Abarry 24-37). Awhefeada affirms that given the historical memory pertaining to the trauma of colonial presence and the background of the African past, “there is no discourse woven around the postcolonial that negates the imperatives of history” (172). Historical concerns then have been the potent force of the postcolonial representations in African literature.

The thematic involvement with the memory of the nation-states as sited in the mainstream politics of European colonisation and neo-colonialism in Africa are brought to the open court of dialogue in the novels of Ayi Kwei Armah and Ben Okri in this context. Thus in the aesthetic strategy in Isanusi Armah’s dilemma tale, this character plays the role of the traditional historian whose presence in the story helps to translate the traditional wisdom into the demands of the present experience in modernity. It is, therefore, the place of Isanusi to engage and appraise the rationale of lingering crisis pervading the postcolonial societies. In a typical ‘town square meeting’ with the imaginative elders of the tribes with visionary Isanusi, a dialogue concerning the way ensues:

All our conversations with Isanusi turned about a central understanding: remembering the thousands upon thousands of seasons of our people’s existence, remembering the thousands upon thousands of days spent journeying to find new resting places, remembering ancient and present assaults against the soul of our people, and remembering the harsh division - division yet to find resolution... We have been a people fleeing our true destiny (157).

In the utterance of the remnants of the sages and ancestors and forbearers of the tribe, what colonial encounter has wrought had been “scenes of carnage” and utter dissolution they have already left stretching over this land” in the “desert they once called their own” (204-205). Despite the destruction, death, “carnage of bodies and souls”, the narrative leaves a twinkle of hope and envisions “a coming together of all the people of the way” (206).

In *The Famished Road*, Azaro’s Dad is in a similar cast made to dream up a new dawn where the people of the ‘road’ will hold common purpose of united force and collective consciousness in a culture of mutual tolerance; a new nation subsumed in a new world order. Dad is, therefore, captioned as dreaming and in the dream state conjuring up a new dawn in his thinking, whether it comes in a revolutionary sweep or in any means possible. The extract of Dad’s imagination as reported by Azaro goes thus:

He conjured an image of a country in which he was invisible ruler and in which everyone would have the highest education, in which everyone must learn music and mathematics and at least five world languages...be versed in tribal, national, continental, and international events, history, poetry and science; in which wizards, witches, herbalists and priests of secret religions would be professors at universities...In which delegation of all the poor people would have regular meetings with the Head of State... (409).

This utopian vision may remain far-fetched, but the longing for such a world order of universal oneness of all cultures and peoples begins to prick creative imagination as long as the present reality is concerned. This creative aspiration in *The Famished Road* is further accentuated by Dad in another scene within the setting in which he reveals to the spirit-tormented son saying: "My son, I dreamt that I had set out to discover a new continent", not as the first set of 'discoverers' did and wrote their names on the landmarks to glorify the Empire or their kings and queens back in their capitals (436), but as all-inclusive nationalities in the diversity of cultures. He states further that this transformation will definitely take place when people least expected, stating that a wonderful change is coming when "struggling people will know justice and beauty" and the hitherto victimised people will realise the great meaning of struggle and hope" (478). It is significant to note that Dad has began the experience of re-dreaming the world that is imagined to be better than the present scheme of things "in which black people always suffered" and "human beings suffered needlessly" (492).

Conclusion:

The concern of this paper has been to explore how myth, legends and other African folklore material have been utilised in the two selected novels of Ayi Kwei Armah and Ben Okri respectively, to engage the postcolonial politics of Other. It is argued in context that the ancestral mythical tales and legendry stories of the forebears have remained the rich historical resource from which successive generations have relied on to peruse the mind of the ancestral for the perpetuation of this cultural heritage and for the continuity of the memory of their societies. Nnolim rightly asserts that the colouration of African literature as "emerging from the ashes of these past experiences" arising from "a strong sense of loss: loss of our dignity; loss of our culture and tradition; loss of our religion; loss of our land; loss of our very humanity; and has been attuned to address the long history of slavery and colonialism (1). The past is represented in this argument as wholeness, and complete as a social order, like any other social setting with challenges and potentials for advancement but was violently violated by the imperial powers from the desert and by those from the seas who stormed in and imposed alien cultures and created in

SMC Journal of Cultural and Media Studies. Volume One, Number One.

the process the crisis of alienation and disorder that continues to haunt the present. Myth in the postcolonial texts are involved with making meaning of this turbulent epoch, and often undertake project the past as a means to disembowelling the historical embodiment of the colonial texts. This serves to appraise the veracity of the claims in the imperial texts that were orchestrated by explorers and settlers. As a project of self-retrieval and self-renewal, we affirm Tsaaio's assertion that "the politics of postcolonial textuality necessitates the dismantling of the architecture of imperial knowledge inscribed in the labyrinthine matrices of the master texts", because, according to him, "this concerns the very survival of the postcolony" (6). It is affirmed further that colonial concerns were marked by subjugation, suppression and dispossession in all its ramifications, including the dispossession of the cultural knowledge and self-worth of the colonised subjects. The strategy adopted to dismember the colonialist texts had been the very myth and legends that were dismissed in the notion of the aliens as primitive cultures is important for the reversal of such cultural prejudices and for the renegotiation of the realities of Africa's past from what others have reputed it to be.

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