

ALLEGORY OF WATER IN CHRISTOPHER OKIGBO'S POETRY

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Abstract

*Water is fundamentally perceived as a liquid or platonic body. In the creative unconscious, it recalls life, creation, fertility and continuity. In the religious imagination, water evokes purification and the afterlife. In the pictorial arts, the blue of the sky and sea evokes tranquility, calm, and death. The sea is also a painful reminder of the slave trade. As a powerful hydraulic device, water can symbolise life, trauma or apocalypse. In our analysis, the figure of water appears in allegorical forms. In other words, it subtly permeates the lines of the poem, evoking allusions, innuendoes, metaphors and symbols. Therefore, we are interested in the socio-artistic functions and the divine and vital figure of water; then we conceive of water as a labyrinthine figure that traces the hiding places of the poet's soul. Finally, we see water as an allegory of the end or memory gap. To do this, we used two theoretical tools: postcolonial theory and Trauma Studies. With regard to postcolonial theory, which postulates allegory as a form of destabilization of the imperial imaginary and the establishment of a new creative African imagery, this study aims at revealing the multiplicity of the figure of water in postcolonial poetry. To achieve it, we will look at the ways in which poets use water implicitly in their artistic creation. These two theories have helped to move beyond the liminal perception of water and introduce it into the artistic imagination. This study focuses on Christopher Okigbo's collection of poems, *Labyrinths with Path of Thunder* (1971). In this collection of poems, allegory permeates the poetic lines in subtle and implicit ways.*

Key words: *water, allegory, postcolonial, trauma, memory.*

Résumé

L'eau est perçue, fondamentalement, comme un corps liquide ou platonique. Dans l'inconscient créatif, elle rappelle la vie, la création, la fécondité ou la continuité. Dans l'imaginaire religieux, l'eau évoque la purification, l'au-delà ou la vie après la mort. Par ailleurs, dans les arts picturaux, le bleu du ciel et de la mer renvoie à la

*tranquillité, le calme mais aussi à la mort. La mer retrace aussi le souvenir douloureux de la traite négrière. Puissant dispositif hydraulique, l'eau peut symboliser la vie, le trauma ou l'apocalypse. Dans notre analyse, la figure de l'eau transparaît sous une forme allégorique. C'est-à-dire, elle irrigue les lignes du poème de manière subtile évocant ainsi des allusions, des sous-entendus, des métaphores et des symboles. De ce fait, nous nous intéressons aux fonctions socio-artistiques et à la figure divine et vitale de l'eau ; puis, nous concevons l'eau comme une figure labyrinthique qui retrace les replis de l'âme du poète. Et enfin, nous percevons l'eau comme allégorie de la fin ou vide mémoriel. Pour se faire, nous nous sommes servi de deux outils théoriques : la théorie postcoloniale et les Trauma Studies. Au regard de la théorie postcoloniale qui postule l'allégorie comme forme de déstabilisation de l'imaginaire impérial et l'instauration d'une nouvelle imagerie africaine créatrice, cette étude vise à révéler la multivalence de la figure de l'eau dans la poésie postcoloniale. Pour y parvenir, nous traiterons la manière dont les poètes figurent l'eau implicitement dans leur création artistique. Ces deux théories ont contribué à dépasser la perception liminale de l'eau pour l'introduire dans l'imaginaire artistique. Cette étude se focalise sur le recueil de poèmes de Christopher Okigbo, *Labyrinths with Path of Thunder* (1971). Dans ce recueil de poèmes, l'allégorie innerve les lignes poétiques de manière subtile et implicite.*

Mots clés : *eau, allégorie, postcolonial, trauma, mémoire.*

Introduction

Water includes rivers, seas, ponds, swamps, fountains, marshes and any moving space. Basically, water is fluid or concrete. However, for G. Bachelard, water goes beyond notions of seascapes arguing that “every liquid is water ... everything that flows is water, and participates in the nature of water” (1942: 134). Thus, in the literary and poetic creation, water can be associated with drink, natural phenomena such as rain, snow, dew, mist; organic liquids, weeping, urine, blood, saliva or spittle. In the socio-cultural ethos, water is associated with fertility and dreams. But it can also mean trouble, turmoil or war. In the twentieth-century poetic writing, the fluctuating nature of water suggests “a pathological saturation of memory and recollection: there is no longer a past, only an eternalizing present” (A. Agnessan, 2019:274, translation mine). Consequently, water is an elusive material which appears in the creative works in a form of allusion or allegory.

Beyond its literal perception, water is a protean figure that unfolds in the artistic work. Moreover, it is a pervasive theme in the poetic writing. In the works of artists, painters and mythologists, it appears as a dominant theme. In that vein, A. Bamba notes that “water as a mirror can transcribe the malaise of the human condition” (2020:144, translation mine). It can also be identified as a “trace” or “flow of time” (P. Ghinelli, 2006: 2&5, translation mine), because of its transitory and random nature.

This analysis is based on postcolonial theory and Trauma Studies. In the first theory, we are mainly interested in allegory, a “‘symbolic narrative’ in which the major features of the movement of the narrative are all held to refer symbolically to some action or situation” (B. Ashcroft and *al.*, 2007:7). In the literary perspective, allegory is a story, tale, poem or image that encompasses an implicit meaning. It can also be found in parables, myths, metaphors or symbols. For René M. Gnaléga, “allegory is a narrative of a symbolic or allusive nature. It expresses an idea through an animated metaphor” (2014:54, translation mine). Furthermore, as far as Trauma Studies are concerned, N. Mambrol (2018) points out that they draw on Freudian theory to sketch out a schema of trauma that projects a painful experience that resists the boundaries of language and even of pleasure and meaning. According to J. Berger, “trauma is the psychoanalytic form of apocalypse, it is temporal version. Apocalypse, on the other hand, is preceded by signs and portents whose interpretation defines the events in the future” (1999: 20-21). Allegory also runs through the apocalyptic thought. “Jewish apocalyptic or eschatological literature, for example, makes extensive use of allegory” (D. Assefa, 2007: 169-170). In addition, Trauma or disaster are identified with water in that it refers to flood or unrest. Now, flood, allegorically, can mean loss, death or chaos.

In the light of these two theories, this study aims at revealing the multiplicity of the image of water in postcolonial poetry. To achieve it, we will examine the ways in which poets represent water in their works. The analysis will be focused respectively on the collection of poems *Labyrinths with Path of Thunder* (1971) by Christopher Okigbo. We will first show water and its socio-artistic functions and also water as allegorical traces and figures; then, this substance will be revealed through the myth of the labyrinth as reflected in the inner psychology of the poet-protagonist; and finally, it will be posed as the imaginary of end.

1. Water and its socio-artistic roles

Water is a substance with many virtues that interests poets, artists and philosophers. Just by looking at the sea or the beach, the poet or philosopher is inspired. In human communities, water is used for bathing, drinking or cooking. It is also used for agriculture, industry and electricity.

In addition, water is a source of divination. This practice is called “hydromancy”, (Ancient Greek ὑδρομαντεία, water-divination, from ὕδωρ, water, and μαντεία, divination) – a method of divination by means of water, including the color, ebb and flow, or ripples produced by pebbles dropped in a pool (Ch. Dezobry and Th. Bachelet, 1878 : 1363). In other words, it is a source of telling the future or the personality of an individual.

Water appears in literature or poetry in a form of purification and transformation. Allegorically, it can evoke renewal or rebirth. It helps the human spirit to renew on both physical and spiritual levels. So doing, it brings happiness and fulfillment to people in communities. For instance, in Africa, palaver ceremonies are always resolved using water. When we want to pacify the ancestors or dignitaries, we pour water or drink over them.

Moreover, water is a source of justice. It can bring disaster throughout floods, tsunami and hurricanes. In the literary or poetic realm, water exemplifies catastrophe and chaos. Divinities use water as an element of punishment or reward.

Water pervades many myths like the Abla Pokou myth in which the queen led the Baule people from Ghana to Côte d’Ivoire. She sacrificed her only son to cross a river. In the Bible, Moses and the people of Israel faced the Red Sea while running away from Egypt to the Promised Land. Moses lifted his rod and the sea split in two, letting the Israelites through. In the two myths, legend has it, after the fugitives had crossed the ocean or river; the enemies were drowned. The saved people are aquatic ones. They owe their survival to water. Besides, the Koran conceives of paradise or the after life as a green space where water flows freely because originally people lived in the desert.

This ambivalent and multicultural uses elect water as a very favorite poetic topic like sky, nature, etc. as it can inspire the imagination of artists

and philosophers. It is the same nature with the sky. Substance, nature, water, fire, space are elements that irrigate poetry. The intent look into water, at the sea beach, generally triggers artistic or poetic thoughts with artists or philosophers. This is well exemplified in Okigbo's poetry.

2. Allegory of water: traces and figures in Okigbo's poetry

Water is seen primarily as a source of life. It is a source from which we drink, wash and purify ourselves. It is also represented through wet landscapes. This fluctuating trait permeates allegorical figures or forms of metaphor-identification. In *Labyrinths with Path of Thunder* (1971), Christopher Okigbo begins his poetic narrative with an allegorically divine female figure:

BEFORE YOU, mother Idoto,
naked I stand;
before your watery presence,
a prodigal.
(Okigbo, 1971: 3)

In the above stanza, the poet-protagonist seems to be addressing a human being. In fact, he is addressing a local river entity, Mother Idoto (verse 1). This water site is associated with a local divinity. The poet speaks to the water as one speaks to a woman or a mother. The possible transfer of the aquatic substance to the woman or mother reveals the artistic effort of the poet. In this case, R. Tillot talks about a "metaphor that becomes an allegory" (1979: 96, translation mine). This is a reinvestment in African poetic expression, in which man has a strong symbolic relationship with his plant, animal, and above all, river environment.

The poet-protagonist also stands before the mother, the goddess Idoto, naked (verse 2). This is done in an "aquatic presence" (verse 3). Allegorically, the poet's nakedness reveals his abandonment to the goddess. He aspires to "a divine bath", a purification to reconcile himself with the ritual practices of his traditional land. Nudity is also a form of cleansing. In addition, nakedness is the fragmentation of the poet's intimacy. The poet makes his body available to the water to take on a new identity. He does not stand in profile, still less from behind, but he stands in front of her, [Mother Idoto], "before your watery presence"

(verse 3). This posture is singular in the articulation of Christopher Okigbo's allegorical discourse. The element of water completes its circulation in the poem through the overflowing and dissipative feature of the persona of the poem considered as "a prodigal" (verse 4). The profligacy of the poet-protagonist is due to his openness to the female and divine figure. Moreover, the image of water can also be perceived through the myth of the labyrinth.

3. The myth of Labyrinth or 'long-juju'

Christopher Okigbo's *Labyrinths* (1971) depicts the journey of man, from birth to death, through his adventures, sufferings and initiations. We might think of the long poem as a long river that takes detours, whose course is not straight. As well, the poem is similar to a meander strewn with stumbling blocks; in short, a river of intranquillity where the poet's inner and outer worlds become entangled. This entanglement is seen in both form and content. Its inconstant appearance, fragmented typography and use of complex words reflect a maze, a place where the persona of the poem wanders as if lost, searching for a way out.

In the introduction to *Labyrinths* (1971), Okigbo himself points out that "the long and tortuous passage to the shrine of the 'long-juju' of the Aro Ibos may perhaps, best be described as a labyrinth" (1971, p. xiv). Originally, the figure of the labyrinth, recalls the palace of Minos, an enclosed and disturbing space where "the myth of the Minotaur" (É. Nguyen, 2019) was played out. A labyrinth is an impenetrable place. It is a place with twists and turns. It reflects a maze with intertwined paths. The maze-like road evokes water through its sinuosity, flow and its elusive nature. Okigbo's *Labyrinths* look like an esoteric space because of the complexity and fragmentation of some lines, and the pervasiveness of the punctuation such as dashes, hyphens, suspension points and comas.

Furthermore, the substitution of one figure for another is allegorically a form of reincarnation. The absence of the poet's mother is compensated by Idoto, the mother goddess represented by the river. The isotopy of the river is evanescence, transience. This suggests that just as the poet's mother, like all mortals, no longer exists, the river is evanescent and elusive. The fleeting line characterises both the mother and the river. It is also the sign of death. But death, for the Igbo, is not linear. It is

circular. Men die and come back again and again in a cyclical repetition. The cyclical repetition reveals the possible reincarnation of Idoto in Anna. Death manifests itself as an illusion, since reincarnation fills the void and the absence.

As well as a mother figure, Idoto is also a divine figure, a water spirit. Idoto is the water that purifies, sanctifies and sustains the lives of communities. It symbolises the source of life, a vital space. It represents continuity, the extension of human life. Idoto is assimilated to other maritime sites in Okigbo's work. The rivers to which Idoto is assimilated have the same symbols and meanings, including Asaba, the most significant for Okigbo. O. Nwakanma recounts that 'Asaba has been one of the earliest, administrative centers of colonial Nigeria, and gained importance as a major trading post and missionary center in the nineteenth century' (2010: 27). The poet recalls his brief stay in Asaba, where he learned of the legend of Onishe, 'the river deity of the Asaba people which was worshipped by his adherents in an elaborate, colourful, annual ritual at the mysterious waterfront with its shrine at Cable Point' (2010: 27). This memory reappears in the form of a poem in which Okigbo in a footnote explains that 'Cable Point at Asaba' is 'a sacred waterfront with rocky promontory, and terminal point of a traditional quinquennial pilgrimage' (1971:26). This is illustrated in *Siren Limits III*:

Hurry on down –
 Thro' the hight-arched gate –
Hurry on down –
 little stream to the lake;

Hurry on down –
 Thro' the cinder market –
Hurry on down –
 in the wake of the dream;

Hurry on down –
 To rockpoint of Cable, *
(Okigbo, 1971 : 26)

“Cable Point” refers to a ritual that takes place every five years. The ritual is in fact a pilgrimage for the people of Asaba. Symbolically, it represents an individual pilgrimage for the poet. From the celebration of this annual ritual, the poet sees a retrospection, an inner and psychological journey. He also examines himself and identifies with the deity as a muse, and also as a point of reference for purification and renewal. In so doing, he purges the evils of his society. Although here he exploits the space of the poem to convey the idea of pilgrimage, the layout of the above stanza traces the sinuosity of a river or the irregular paths of the labyrinth.

Idoto goes by the name of “white queen” in *Watermaid* (1971 : 10). This inflection of the name is an allegorical device that allows the poet to substitute Idoto for the “white queen”, who is the poet’s wife. This allusion is repeated when the water goddess is superimposed on the poet’s mother. Moreover, the ‘white queen’ is for the poet ‘a muse, the physical alter ego to Idoto, at once lover and at once mother’ (Nwakanma, 2010 : 166). Idoto is also, allegorically, a ‘watermaid’ and a ‘lioness’ (1971 : 11). This additional function reinforces Idoto’s multifaceted trait. It goes beyond the literal, riverine framework and is part of another heterogeneous form.

Thanks to the poetics of water, the labyrinth no longer appears as a boundary between the self and the other, between the intimate and the public. Social boundaries are eroded by the circulation of the element of water through physical and psychic landscapes. The diversity of paths offered by the labyrinth does not always lead to disorientation or loss. He loses himself in order to find himself in the other. Thus, the “I” of the poem is liquefied. The liquefaction of the “I” disrupts the homogeneity of the subject which becomes composite and liquid – scattered in the lines of the poem. It is from this composite tension that the allegorical meaning of the poem emerges. This is observed through syntactic breaks, absence of verbs in the following stanza:

SILENT FACE at the crossroads:
festivity in black ...

Faces of black like long black
column of ants,
behind the bell tower,
into the hot garden

where all roads meet:
festivity in black ...
(Okigbo, 1971: 5)

The above poem reflects the unconsciousness of a twisted and confused experience. The maze-like, complex lines of the verses can be read in the “SILENT FACE at the crossroads” (verse 1). A. Agnessan points out that Deleuze and Guattari demonstrated that “every face is a landscape” (2019: 272, translation mine). So, the “silent face” is an allegorical representation of still, soft or dead water. The water here is contrasting, “festivity in black” (verse 2) – which refers to mourning. This allegory of black also portrays the night as an abyss where life lies buried. In addition, the recurrence of identical phonemes in the poem reflects the long, dark line at a funeral procession. Beyond the conception of water as a riverine or labyrinthine entity, it can unfold in the poem as an expression of the End.

4. The Imaginary of the End or the Memory Gap

The imaginary of the End presents itself as the expression of an apocalyptic thought. The apocalypse is not exclusively the catastrophe that occurs after the flood or massacres. It is also interested in the disaster to come, that is, the one that is not yet produced suggesting the unveiling and the catastrophe. A. Agnessan specifies, in this regard that “within the post-apocalypse, everything becomes liquid, inconsistent, pervasive. The saturation of memory and images of the disaster is the other name of a memorial flood of the subject” (2019: 250, translation mine). In the same order, Z. Bauman speaks of *liquid modernity* or *Liquid Life*. For him, “liquid life, just like liquid modern society, cannot keep its shape or stay on course for long” (2005:1). This instability postulated by the liquid life acts on the subjects of the post-apocalypse, the times – present and future – in a form of liquefaction.

Before his death on the battlefield at Nsukka, Christopher Okigbo had already written his collection of poems *Labyrinths with Path of Thunder* (1971). The latest collection including *Path of Thunder* announces a gloomy atmosphere. Mourning, tears, blood, rain appear in his poetry in a significant way. As a poet-prophet-oracle (D. Okafor, 1998:146), Okigbo saw the disaster coming to Nigeria. Although he did not have

time to experience the turmoil of the Biafra War, the Nigerian poet had predicted it as John of Patmos in the book of Revelation.

Christopher Okigbo speaks of a catastrophe to come (and which will surely destabilize the quiet life of the Biafrans). The publication date of C. Okigbo's work is 1971. It is the place to specify, by the way, that Okigbo's poems were written between 1961 and 1963 long before the Biafran crisis. They were first published in various journals or publishing houses like *Transition*, before finally being published together in 1971. In the introduction to his collection of poems, Okigbo writes that, "[a]lthough these poems were written and published separately, they are, in fact, organically related" (1971: xi). Using the figure of water, Christopher Okigbo subtly explores the imagination of the End in *Labyrinths*:

DARK WATERS of the beginning.
[...]
a sunbird, to mourn
a mother on a spray.
(Okigbo, 1971 : 4)

Okigbo's poetic imagination is marked by the element of water in an allegorical form. In this regard, Stella Okoye-Ugwu (2021: 8) states that "DARK WATERS of the beginning" (verse 1) refers to the flood that destroyed the world of Noah in the biblical narrative. This biblical tone recalls the Genesis, the beginning of the world. It also alludes to the depth of abyss before the creation of the world. In fact, the abyss represents emptiness, chaos or end referring to the "black hole of trauma" (M. T. Mnensa, 2010:102). Similarly, the theme of flood is also developed in Gerard Manley Hopkins's *The Wreck of the Deutschland*. The poetic work describes the sinking of a ship "Deutschland" with passengers and five nuns on board. In the midst of the storm, the voice of one of the oldest nuns is heard, "O Christ, Christ, come quickly" (Backiavathy and Rosabella, 2019:1667). The nun whose voice rises above the sea and the storm is set up as a martyr like Okigbo himself, the poet-protagonist who circulates in *Labyrinths with Path of Thunder* (1971) in the form of a shipwrecked soul who, from the poem's opening line, seeks for an anchor.

The catastrophe is hectic in the second collection of poems *Path of Thunder* with its subtitle *Poems Prophesying War* (1971). In this composition, the poet writes in a context of urgency. The lines look like a narrative rather than a canonical poem referring to a traditional poetry namely the “dirge” (B. Aschroft and *al.*, 2002:180). Furthermore, in *Path of Thunder*, the allegory of water is inscribed in terms such as “thunder” or “lightning”. Thus, thunderstorms, lightning, storms, low-pitched water, the crackling of firearms are related to the spectrum regime. However, the persona of Okigbo’s poem does not remain passive in turmoil. He aspires to free himself from the catastrophe that surrounds him. Allegorically, in *Elegy of the Wind*, Okigbo represents a suffering world – marked by blood and pogrom, the sinuosity and the uncertainty of the next day, ‘the slick route of the feathered serpent’, ‘a night of deep waters’ (1971: 66). This is reinforced by the line from *Elegy for Slit-drum* “CONDOLENCES ... from our swollen lips laden with / condolences” (Okigbo, 1971: 68).

Furthermore, in *Elegy for Alto*, the verse “The eagles rain down on us” (1971:71) could include dropping bombs on a given territory or battlefield. It shows the image of rain falling. Indeed, this allusion recalls the Biafra War. Similarly, ‘eagles can represent warplanes. This alludes to the flood in that it causes trouble, chaos and death. The imagery of end is symbolized by the flight of planes, the evanescent noise and fleeing from gunfire; finally, death and the end that close such an apocalypse. We do not conceive of water as a concrete material but as an allegory of catastrophe. War is about to ravage everything on the surface of the Nigerian land.

Conclusion

This study made it possible to display the allegorical pattern of water. It was also the time to consider water beyond its liminal perception. It is not only liquid or concrete material. It also circulates in the artistic imagination in an expressive form. Postcolonial poets use it to express their own imagery in an allegorical form. The study has also been achieved basing on postcolonial theory and Trauma Studies. To do so, this analysis has showed that water reflects a multiplicity of figures and symbols. It can express the flight of time, deterritorialization or the end of man. This made it possible, firstly, to conceive water and its socio-artistic roles as a vital figure. Then water unfolded under the figure of

the labyrinth. Shortly, water was presented as the fall of man. The study was based on the collection of poems by Christopher Okigbo, *Labyrinths with Path of Thunder* (1971).

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