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The Form and Function of the Fantastic in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* Trilogy

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Abstract

This paper examines the elements of fantasy and folklore used as strategies for narrative construction in Ben Okri's The Famished Road trilogy. It applies Todorov's notion of the fantastic with its corollaries, fear, anxiety, and undecidability as well as William Bascom's four functions of folklore to the trilogy. The paper also explores the healing processes the narratives enable despite their open nature and the undecidability surrounding them. Moreover, the paper offers an alternative reading of Okri's The Famished Road trilogy by framing his choices of including a wide range of folklore whose thrust is the fantastic. It first reviews the major readings of the trilogy in the light of the concepts associated with magic realism, then it roots it in a tradition of literary works marked by the overall indeterminacy in plot arrangement where no closure is achieved. By availing himself of the imaginative powers of his Nigerian traditions, Ben Okri achieves two important goals: first, he fills in some disconcerting gaps generated by history; second, he produces narratives of colonial and post-independence histories which, apart from linking past and present traumatic experiences, disclose possibilities of healing wounds that are still open in Nigeria. More powerful than politics, more enduring than historiography, Okri's selected novels form an instrument to fight oblivion and use transmitted values to envision a more hopeful future.

Keywords: *The Famished Road Trilogy*, Fantastic, Magic Realism, Folklore, trauma, healing.

1. Introduction

The paper argues that in the construction of the literary narrative, Ben Okri, in his magnum opus *The Famished Road Trilogy*, appropriates "an indigenous cultural resource-base."(Maurice O'Connor 187) Okri's abiku trilogy encompasses *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment*, and *Infinite Riches*.[1]The construction of the written narrative is a blending of the elements taken from the 'oral' and the 'literary' thereby creating a new framework for novel writing. According to Chinua Achebe, "both novel and short story in Africa have undoubtedly drawn from a common oral heritage. But each has also achieved distinctiveness in the hands of its best practitioners." (*African Short Stories* vii) There is evidence that the major Nigerian writers have drawn on their traditional cultural heritage to write literary works that distinguished themselves from influential western types and modes, especially in a much-favored genre: the novel. Achebe is one of them and so is Ben Okri.

The beginning of "literacy" does not suggest the end of "oral culture." With reference to the African societies it could be said that the latter is a vital force in shaping the literary. The written narrative is a continuation of the oral narrative under changed circumstances in a different form and shape with different nuances. The expression "oral heritage" should not be taken to mean just "orality" which has been well explored in relation to writers like Amos Tutoala, Achebe, or others. The work of writers such as Tutuola had a dynamic effect on the developing literary tradition."The most successful of the early African writers knew what could be done with the oral tradition; they understood how its structures and images could be transposed to a literary mode." (*Encyclopedia Britannica*2) Indeed, their works have been examined in relation to distinctive linguistic features like the use of proverbs, translated oral sentence structures, turn taking in dialogue, and the use of translated figures of speech. By oral heritage, a whole world view is made to surface in the literary works and is made to impart a singular touch to a western genre like the novel. This heritage is made up of beliefs, values, and codes that go by a variety of names like myth, magic, fantasy, oral lore or folklore, to name but the most common attributes.

This paper is devoted to the innovative uses of this heritage, its functions and its forms in Okri's *The Famished Road* trilogy. While it recognizes the efforts of researchers in delineating a possible postmodernist orientation in Okri's trilogy towards the use of what has become known as "Magical Realism", the "fantastic" as delineated by Tzvetan Todorov remains the guiding principle by which Okri's trilogy is approached as it offers an open-ended array of possibilities and undermines any fixity in the potential of meanings generated by the narrative strategies adopted by the novelist.

The paper reviews the basic readings of Okri's trilogy in the light of the concepts associated with magic realism before framing the examination of the writer's choices in matters of including a wide range of folklore whose thrust is the fantastic. It then reads the trilogy in the light of the function and form of the narratives structuring Okri's trilogy. It seeks to root the selected novels in a tradition of literary works marked by the overall indeterminacy in plot arrangement where no closure is achieved. Following Baldick, indeterminacy is taken to mean "a principle of uncertainty invoked to deny the existence of any final or determinate meaning that could bring to an end the play of meaning between the elements of a text." (*The*

Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms 125) The paper ends with the healing nature of storytelling associated with the fantastic.

2. Magical Realism: A Contested Concept

Stephen Slemon argues that Franz Roh was the first person to have coined the term "magical realism" in 1925 in connection with post expressionist art:

> The Concept of Magic Realism is a troubled one for literary theory.[1] Since Franz Roh first coined the term in 1925 in connection with Post-Expressionist art, it has been most closely associated, at least in terms of literary practice, with two major periods inLatin-American and Caribbean culture, the first being that of the 1940's and 1950's, in which the concept was closely aligned with that of the "marvelous" as something ontologically necessary to the regional population's "vision of everyday reality;[5] and the second being that of the "boom" period of the Latin-American novel in the late 1950's and 1960's, where the term was applied to works varying widely in genre and discursive strategy. In none of its applications to literature has the concept of magic realism ever successfully differentiated between itself and neighboring genres such as fabulation, metafiction, the baroque, the fantastic, the uncanny, or the marvelous, and consequently it is not surprising that some critics have chosen to abandon the term altogether. ("Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse" 9)

What is of interest for the purposes of this paper is the fact that the issue of drawing on the magical has to do with the attempt by novelists to cater not only for peoples' worldviews by representing the ways in which they apprehend the world(s), their vision of the life and the environment in which they interact, not just with other fellow humans, but also with their ancestors. Another question raised by Slemon and which is at the heart of the theoretical narrative considerations this paper undertakes to deal with is the slippery nature of the concept. As a concept, Magical Realism gets drowned in related synonyms and related associations with terms such as the fantastic, myth, fabulation, and legend.

The tendency among critics to read Okri's trilogy in terms of Magical Realism has become an established critical tradition that it seems to have left no room outside this binarism. Everything is so locked in the two-sided relation that the potential of exploration of the novels gets stifled when the effect sought by the multimodal representation is that of fluidity, of indeterminacy, and endless possibilities. Before moving to sample readings aligned on this connection between the so-called real and magical in Okri's trilogy, an examination of what is meant by the binarism imposes itself.

The first phase of theorizing the concept is associated by Marisa Bortollussi with formalist approaches in the Canadian Review of Comparative Literature. According to her, the "theorizing of and criticism associated with the term was formalist in the beginning of 1940s till 1980s with works like Flores and Amaryll Chanady." She argues that "those critics […] sought to elaborate a poetics of the genre by locating the features of Magical Realism within literary texts." ("Why We Need Another Study of Magic Realism" 282). Formalists concern was to elaborate a corpus of texts sharing the same features of causing the two modes to exist and to establish generic boundaries. That some works do have similar features is not contested by Bortolussi who sees a problem with a confusion in the field of taxonomies that oversee features of the same nature existing in totally different genres. (284-85)

Those early studies, being formalist, have absented context which returns with "poststructuralist, post-modern, and post-colonial approaches which seek to articulate the relationship between Magic Realism on the one hand, and either the aesthetics of postmodernism, or post-colonial contexts, on the other." (285) According to Bortolussi, context returns with overgeneralizing and lack of methodological precision as the tendency is to lump together texts out of dissimilar contexts affirming that "one of the most serious conceptual problems ensues from the tenuous methodological assumption that there exists a homologous correlations between cultural and textual products, and that this correlation can successfully describe the properties and functions of a set of literary texts."("Why We Need Another Study of Magic Realism" 285) When a literary mode is said to have originated in South American fiction, then travels to a postcolonial environment, it certainly has to take into consideration the very context it yielded it.

An approach that works against the binarism mentioned above does not consider the two terms as opposites striving for prominence but envisages them as a whole none excluding the other. This is the view held by Frederic Jameson regarding the film industry where, according to him, magic realism is "not a realism to be transfigured by the "supplement" of a magical perspective but a reality which is already in and of itself magical or fantastic." ("On Magic Realism in Film" 311). Realism is in no position of superiority over the magical and the latter cannot be considered that "dangerous supplement" to use Derrida's phrase.

3. Critical Readings of Ben Okri's "Magical Realism"

An examination of the literature on Okri's so-called use of magic realism is likely to strike the reader as odd in two opposed instances, where one denies the mode any relation to the imaginary and the metaphorical while the other stresses the display of the strong imaginary and metaphorical nature of the narratives in the trilogy. The major proponent of the first is Appiah whose review of *The Famished Road* asserts that "for Okri, in a curious way, the world of the spirits is not metaphorical or imaginary; rather it is more real than that of the everyday." ("Spiritual Realism" 147)

In "Postmodernism as Realism: Magic History in Recent West African Fiction" Derek Wright singles Okri out as a true realist, denying him any use of the metaphorical, as if being metaphorical cannot be equated with realistic: "Okri does not envisage his world as an imaginary mythic, metaphorical or parabolic construct, after the fashion of the magic realists, or as a surrealist fantasy, as in the folkloric dream-narratives of Amos Tutuola, where the fantastic events occur only in a hallucinated esoteric real sharply differentiated from the real world. The novel's spirit realm is not an approximation to reality but a reality in its own right." (182) Wright complicates the issue by arguing that whatever is presented by Okri has nothing to do with a particular mode that is just extraordinary in comparison with the daily, common and ordinary experiences. A reading in such lines purports to view the content offered in the trilogy as a reality of some sort of an order. If so, one may ask what kind of order does this other reality belong to, and if such an order existed what name could we give to it?

Binarism is still at work under a different guise. It collapses different orders into a totality that rejects one of its parts and claims to bring forth a new mode that is made up of two

otherwise opposed orders into an impossible amalgamation. Rather than denying the existence of the metaphorical which is inherent in the very nature of the language people use to make sense of the world, it would have been much more fruitful to consider the abundance of the metaphorical and the fantastic to counter balance the lack that characterizes the realistic mode.

While Appiah and Wright deny Okri the use of metaphors and imagination on grounds that his writing is realistic in some sort (which they do not explicit), ChristopherWarnes sees Okri as a magical realist writer. The critic resorts to a new concept which he calls"multi-dimensional realism." Obviously, this is a new sub-category of magical realism which he attempts to explain as follows:

> It is my argument in this chapter that it is exactly this feature of the narrative project behind *The Famished Road* that qualifies the novel as a magical realist text, and that thereby connects Okri with a number of writers specifically affiliated to magical realist modes of narration. The caveat in this observation is that we need to be clear that Okri's is a faith-based, ontological magical realism quite different from the irreverent, discourse-oriented magical realism of a writer like Salman Rushdie. (*Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel* 129)

To the already complicated labelling, Warnes adds different types of magical realism(s), which are defined by the specificities of the space and time of their production. In addition to the multiple forms of the mode, there seems to be an effort at distinguishing Okri's use of the mode from other novelists. William Spindler is one advocate of this separation as in an article entitled "Magical Realism: A Typology", he puts forward three different types of magical realism, "Metaphysical Magic Realism" (Roh's ideas and the original definition of the term), "Anthropological Magic Realism", and "Ontological Magic Realism" (79-82).

Regarding the first 'form', he considers it not so much as a form, even though he uses the word form, but as an effect saying that "depictions of real objects produce a "magical" effect." ("Magical Realism: A Typology" 79) There is confusion in the terms form and function which he sees as effects produced or generated by the production of the unfamiliar. "Anthropological Magic realism" has to do with a choice of the mythical that is specific to a community and blending it with a "rational point of view" which is a realist aspect, for the critic. ("Magical Realism: A Typology" 80) Spindler's third term "Ontological Magic Realism" requires a systematic use of the "magic" without having to provide a logical explanation. ("Magical Realism: A Typology" 82) As mentioned above, there is confusion in the use of the terms 'form' and 'effect' as the intended should be mode and function. In addition to this debatable approach to the labelling, the reader is still left with unresolved paradox, which does not need to be resolved, as it may still float as a deliberate paradoxical mode having a specific form and a specific function.

Regarding the readings of Okri's novels in line with magical realism, a number of critics have written about the mode of writing and the political considerations in the aftermath of the wave of independence or the "wind of change" announced by Harold McMillan's speech in 1960 concerning the transfer of power to African newly independent nations, chief among them present Nigeria. Abiodun Adeniji, offers an analysis of Okri's "Interface of Myth and Realism" when he writes:

> The interface of myth and realism in Okri's setting is an authentic vehicle for his thematic preoccupations. Through the interface of myth and realism in his setting, comprising the physical locale and the temporal dimensions, Okri condemns the neglect and oppression of the common man by post-independence African leaders. Okri's main argument seems to be that the kind of physically debilitating and spiritually nauseating socio-economic environment deliberately created by self-serving Nigerian leaders can only foster the birth of many abikus, and only the rich benefit when the poor continually give birth to abiku children because the phenomenon extinguishes any kind of competition that the children of the poor might give to the children of the rich. ("The Interface of Myth and Realism" 217)

Adeniji's first premise articulates the function of the mode which he sees as 'vehicle' for a political content which articulates the rich-poor binarism in the society after or on the eve of independence. While this may be considered as a function of the mode in that it offers a critique of social stratification, corruption, and inequalities, the critic does not explain how the mode works to convey such conditions in Nigeria.

Another critic maintains that Adeniji's views "corroborate" [his] argument that the abiku myth in the novel is a parable of postcolonial African condition. The abiku symbolizes the back and forth between hope and despair in the social and political life of the masses in postcolonial Africa." He adds that "the setting of *The Famished Road* between two contradictory worlds is informed by Okri's desire to capture the incomprehensible realities in postcolonial Nigeria, where the living conditions are comparable to the conditions dreaded by all the abikus who refuse to be born or remain in the real world," (Issifou, Moussa 148) and offers as his justification Azaro's explanation: "There was not one amongst us who looked forward to being born. We dislike the rigors of existence, the unfulfilled longings, the enshrined injustices of the world, the labyrinths of love, the ignorance of parents, the fact of dying, and the amazing indifference of the Living in the midst of the simple beauties of the universe. We feared the heartlessness of human beings, all of whom are born blind, few of whom ever learn to see." (*TFR* 3) So far, the two critics agree on considering the use of magical realism in *The Famished Road* as a critique of flawed politics. Content for them is positioned as the primary goal and form, that is the use of non-realist modes, comes as second in labels like aesthetics or poetics. The creation of such hierarchies is likely to produce the mode of the non-real as ornamental rather than inherent in the novels' worldview and organic, something added rather than partaking in a whole artistic production. The approach articulates another binarism of form vs content similar to that of real vs non-real.

Another generalizing that is likely to fix Okri's rich works has to do with the lumping together of postcolonial writers in a group whose use of the so-called magic realism is a form of writing back to the center from an aesthetic and political stance.[2]It consists in a rejection of realism. The critic strongly affirms that such use "serves to capture what may seem unbelievable to Western sensibilities but real to indigenous understanding." (Issifou 6) The argument is not pursued any further and sounds like thrown in the debate of the postcolonial strategies in general. Femi Osofisan returns to the idea of the close link between the use of magic realism and the function assigned to it as one "aesthetic response to West Africa's recent experience of civil war, dictatorship, drought, famine, and economic failure." ("Warriors of a Failed Utopia" 25) The idea about the function may sound attractive as purpose and method at the same time but remains vague and not demonstrated. He adds

another oppositional stance to the first one opposing western realism by arguing that such recent opting for magic realism comes as a reaction to previous literary trends among African writers adopting realism as mode in their representation of African realities saying that "all these misfortunes require a narrative mode that provides both a powerful condemnation and room to dream again.

Magic realism is "a break away from the modes that had characterized African literature for decades." (Issifou 12) What might have objected to such generalizing is that it seeks to fit works whose range is so varied and whose modes are so multiple that becomes very reductive. It creates a clear-cut division between imagined literary eras in African literature and ignores the existing continuities between earlier literary productions and current experimentations. A more balanced attitude is put forward by Wendy B. Faris who considers the use of magic realism as convenient for African writers to come to terms with the aftermath of decolonization, on the one hand, and to produce a poetics of their own that would help "question that dominant discourse constitutes a kind of liberating poetics." ("The Question of Other" 103) The use of the mode offers alternatives to representations that are political, historical or sociological rather than poetic.

Adnan Mahmutovic takes the metaphor of the road as an example when he argues that the "road" trope in the novel is history, one with a sense of infinity looming large into the past and stretching into a distant future: "there are never really any beginnings or endings." (*TFR* 488) The road and other concepts are used in a unique way by Okri to signal the singularity of his approach. They remain metaphorical, imagined, and drawn from a cultural heritage that mingles easily with lived experience.

A useful concept that is used in Okri's novels is fabulation, which critics of *The Famished Road* hardly wrote about so far. Robert Scholes uses "fabulation" which "tends away from direct representation of the surface reality but returns toward actual human life by way of ethically controlled fantasy." The characteristics of fabulation, according to him, trigger pleasure in form (*Fabulation and Metafiction*3)and offer the didacticism one finds in traditional fables (3). They are akin to romance by producing certain allegorizing which crude realism cannot offer (*Fabulation and Metafiction* 25). "[O]ur fictions are real enough in themselves, but, as signs pointing to any world outside the fiction or the dream, they have no factual status. [...] We may think about reality all we please, but we shall never reach it in thought. [...] Reality is too subtle for realism to catch it. It cannot be transcribed directly. But by invention, by fabulation, we may open a way toward reality that will come as close to it as human ingenuity may come." (*Fabulation and Metafiction* 13). What may be gathered from Scholes's view on fabulation is the fact that there are two orders of reality: one is superficial and the other is deep. As a result, the down-to-earth ordinary experiences will belong in the first order, that of the surface reality, and the one more sophisticated, because they are deeper mental and even physical sensations and experiences, belong to another invisible, yet existing reality. However, fabulation is not so much an order of things as it is a device that represents that which does not belong in the order of surface reality.

In their readings of Okri's trilogy, most critics explored his texts in terms of magic realism. As demonstrated above, the trends vary from reading the texts as allegorical or not. To those who deny any metaphorical and imaginary dimension, some oppose these views by stressing

the imaginary and the magical. It is a starting point for a binarism that seeks to root Okri's works into an either-or container. The binarism does not disappear in works that attempt to locate the use of magic in opposition to traditional western realistic works or even earlier African ones.

In most cases, the form is rather vague, ill-defined or confused with the mode. As to the function of the peculiar uses of the fantastic mode, it is limited to an oppositional political stance whereby, magic is a means to represent a gloomy political reality to better critique it without providing alternatives or explaining the sense of "totality" that Lukacs has always associated with the novel as a genre.[3]In dealing with the mode of representation, one may be tempted to think in generic terms, too. If folklore is not an established genre, but rather a "creation of peoples' primitive and civilized," stories as Jonas balys says (Qtd in *SDFML* 397) a more generic term is 'myth' which is defined as follows: "From the Greek mythos, myth means story or word. […] The term myth has come to refer to a certain genre (or category) of stories that share characteristics that make this genre distinctly different from other genres of oral narratives, such as legends and folktales." (Magoulickn.p.n) The definition establishes story as a generic label for 'myth' which accommodates an understanding of the various stories in the selected novels.

Magoulick adds that there are several definitions of myth but they share the following in common and "may be summarized thus: Myths are symbolic tales of the distant past (often primordial times) that concern cosmogony and cosmology (the origin and nature of the universe), may be connected to belief systems or rituals, and may serve to direct social action and values." (Magoulickn.p.n) The key concepts that may best serve the purposes of this paper are "symbol" and "usefulness". William Bascom's article "The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives" offers a definition where myths are defined as "tales believed as true, usually sacred, set in the distant past or other worlds or parts of the world, and with extra-human, inhuman, or heroic characters. Such myths, often described as "cosmogonic," or "origin" myths, function to provide order or cosmology, based on "cosmic" from the Greek kosmos meaning order" (Leeming 3, 13; Bascom13).

In *The Famished Road* Okri uses myths from his native land as much as those from the Western world. This trend seeks to identify a number of myths in the trilogy and its findings are illuminating. The findings classify the myths in terms of numbers and naming as follows: "Being a novel on the birth of a nation, myths of origins are justly integrated. From Adam and Eve (*TFR* 140) to floods (*TFR* 140, 186-188, 286, 311-318, 377, 423-424) the novel emanates a feeling of beginnings that are, nevertheless, repeatedly delayed. The study spots other myths and references of non-African origin such as Erisicton (*TFR* 258-261), the prophet Jeremiah after whom the photographer is named and whose pictures also work as a warning against the immoral state of the world (*TFR* 45), Sisyphus in Azaro's father's strenuous but vain labour since the family remains constantly threatened by hunger and eviction, the tortoise, both a well-known figure in African tales (appearing in one of Azaro's dreams and in the shape of Madame Koto's car) but also recalling in the mind of the Western reader Alice in Wonderland (*TFR* 16-17, 379, *SOE* 92), the female vampire (*TFR* 496), the Christian paradise (*TFR* 4), Pandora (*TFR* 450), Nostradamus (*SOE* 5), Pythagoras (*SOE* 5), Oedipus (*SOE* 188), and the Sphinx which is shared by African myths too (*TFR* 461 and

479).” The study concludes with the fact that some of the myths are named while others are suggested.

Finally, whether it is a matter of magic realism, fabulation, myth or any other form of the imaginary as opposed to the concrete down to earth everyday life, reality in Africa and in Nigeria particularly, Irele and Jeyiefo argue, is not “only physical but also metaphysical”. They see Africa as “a world in which everything is interconnected in an arrangement in vibration.” (*The Oxford Encyclopedia of African Thought* 313) The vibration is for them an “interactionism” meaning an interaction between two worlds, the physical and the spiritual. The survey of readings of Okri’s works in terms of the imaginary demonstrates that to the already ambiguous status of magic realism, critics have added sub-categories like ontological, anthropological, and metaphysical forms of magic realism which confuse the reader as the threads separating them are either hazy or inexistent.

That Okri uses some traditional forms of narratives this is evident. The dominant ones remain the recounting of stories, dreams, visions, fabulations, prophecies and what is called wanderings in realms that sound strange, akin to traditional beliefs in the supernatural and the uncanny. What the paper seeks to explore is not just thesubject-matter of the oral traditions in use, but most importantly their functions, forms, and the contexts in which they are used, and what these entail. In this respect Ruth Finnegan’s *Oral Literature in Africa* presents a useful direction in the exploration of the selected novels as she stresses the importance of context over subject-matter when she writes: “[I]n trying to distinguish different categories of African oral narrations, in particular potential ’myths’, it may be more fruitful to look not primarily at subject-matter but at context. Questions about the circumstances in which the narrations take place, their purpose and tone, the type of narrator and audience, the publicity or secrecy of the event, and, finally, even the style of narration may be more crucial than questions about content and characters.” (355) Oral traditions comprise the traditions of a people, their constructions of the past and their apprehensions of the present in a sense of continuity. As a concept, it is general and can accommodate terms like “folklore” or the lore of the people, a term coined in 1846 by an Englishman, William John Thoms and defined as “the loving study of manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs, etc. of the olden time.” (“Folklore” Emrich 155)

In *Living Folklore*, Martha Sims and Martine Stephens explain the meaning of folklore and how it operates:

> The term folklore refers to the knowledge we have about our world and ourselves that we don’t learn in school or textbooks- we learn folklore from each other. It’s the informally learned, unofficial knowledge we share without peers, families and other groups we belong to. […] Folklore is informally learned, unofficial knowledge about the world, ourselves, our communities, our beliefs, our cultures and our traditions, that is expressed creatively through words, music, customs, actions, behaviors and materials. It is also the interactive, dynamic process of creating, communicating, and performing as we share that knowledge with other people. (3-8)

What is at stake here is the formal aspect (style, narration, structure) in the contribution of Finnegan and communicative considerations as put forward by Sims and Stephens. What the authors add is of significant relevance to an understanding of the function and the form

behind Okri's choices in matters of narrative techniques. The whole issue has to do with the relevance of his choices about sharing with others that which no written book has taught formally.

Folklore can be used to explore the channels of communication whenever a story, a dream, or a vision is recounted. It can cover the form of narrating and the purposes behind such discursive practices as delineated by William Bascom's four functions: "educating; escaping accepted limitations of our culture; maintaining cultural identity; and validating existing claims." "folklore is an important mechanism in maintaining the stability of culture." Bascom adds that "folklore is a collection of cultural traditions that functions to provide a traditional form of schooling within a given society that transmits knowledge and wisdom from one generation to the next." ("Four Functions of Folklore" 298) Alan Dundes explains that "folklore educates children, encourages kinship and family unity, provides a code of conduct, and creates alternative ways to deal with daily issues." (*The Study of Folklore* 279)

When it comes to the nature of the narratives rather than their forms, the so-called sacredness of the myth or some of the myths is dispelled in Okri's trilogy. Whatever folklore one can gather from the novels may be said, after Todorov, to be fantastic. As far as the substance of the narratives is concerned, they touch on and are inspired by the fantastic so that their form is folkloric while their substance remains fantastic the way Todorov delineated the concept:

> Some critics offer a thematic approach, focusing on the content of the fantastic story, and others look at the story from a structural and semiotic perspective, outlining strategies used by the writer to produce a fantastic effect. Some have attempted to situate it historically, linking it to a shift in thinking associated with European Enlightenment or romanticism, while others have approached it philosophically, showing how it reflects a metaphysical angst rooted in the modern world. Beyond these simple contours, it becomes very difficult to speak about the fantastic with any authority, since there is so much disagreement about the meaning of the term and how it can be used. There has also been, over the past fifty years, a tendency to conflate all kinds of imaginary fiction into a single broad category with a variety of names proposed for it, and an equally strong push to distinguish between different kinds of imaginary fiction and give each one its own clear identity. My purpose here is not to put an end to the debate, which would be an exercise in futility, but to look at the debate as emblematic of the fantastic itself. What is it about the genre that makes it so impossible to pin down? (Todorov 3)

What may be retained from the above overview is that philosophically, the fact that the fantastic is equated with angst or anxiety and fear is a fruitful area of investigation in the function of the fantastic. The equation points to the appeasing nature of the fantastic and its healing power as when invoked, it does not merely functions as a representation of apprehensions only, but as therapy to relieve the haunting fears of the present and the future.

Another adequate use of the fantastic lies in the difficulty in fixing it in any given social role or any given poetic dimension as it remains slippery and marked by indeterminacy which Todorov sees as "emblematic" of the phenomenon. In what follows, the functions and forms of folklore and the fantastic and their social and aesthetic driving forces are tested through Bascom's four functions to better assess their functional and structural features before highlighting their indeterminate and unstable nature and projecting their healing potential.

Bascom's view is that a common concern with common problems rather than with a common body of subject matter is what matters for him. He argues that there are four functions:

> Finally, anthropologists are becoming increasingly concerned with the functions of folklore-what it does for the people who tell it. In addition to the obvious function of entertainment or amusement, folklore serves to sanction the established beliefs, attitudes, and institutions, both sacred and secular, and it plays a vital role in education in non-literate societies... But, in addition to its role in transmitting culture from one generation to another, and to providing ready rationalizations when beliefs or attitudes are called into question, folklore is used in some societies to apply social pressure to those who would deviate from the accepted norms. …it is apparent that beneath a good deal of humor lies a deeper meaning, and that folklore serves as a psychological escape from many repressions, not only sexual, which society imposes upon the individual. (*Journal of American Folklore* 290)

In undertaking to analyze the function and form of the fantastic, methodological considerations dictate that one considers the twin relations in their respective positions either as positioned in a particular order as first and second or as co-existing. However, as a starting point is required, the paper deals with the function first.

Regarding the said functions, the paper highlights the educational function with the following remark: While Bascom limits the educational function to the illiterate, one may argue that in fictional works, educating readers through folklore is not just desirable, but as Achebe demonstrated, it is one of the duties of the writer. ("The Novelist as Teacher" 44) The educational function holds on and is an important function of folklore. Educating is geared towards what Bascom calls the transmission of culture. Offering "ready rationalizations" is also retained as a function while its repressive abuse is rejected in the present reading which maintains a fundamental quality, that of supplying deeper meanings, chief among them is the 'escape' from many repressions," or a form of healing for a traumatized community. These are the primary functions borrowed from Bascom's basic functions and proposed as the sum of the intentions behind the abundant use of folklore in its fantastic dimension.

As mentioned above, to start with the function means to begin with the intention or the goal, before working on the form. This is inspired by two important views, one coming from the world of construction, architecture or the initial phase in projecting an idea before giving it shape. This is taken from Louis Sullivan, who developed the shape of the tall steel skyscraper in late 19th Century Chicago, USA:

> Whether it be the sweeping eagle in his flight, or the open apple-blossom, the toilingwork-horse, the blithe swan, the branching oak, the winding stream at its base, the drifting clouds, over all the coursing sun, form ever follows function, and this is the law. Where function does not change, form does not change. The granite rocks, the ever-brooding hills, remain for ages; the lightning lives, comes into shape, and dies, in a twinkling. It is the pervading law of all things organic and inorganic, of all things physical and metaphysical, of all things human and all things superhuman, of all true manifestations of the head, of the heart, of the soul, that the life is recognizable in its expression, that form ever follows function. This is the law ("The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered" 2).

The precedence of the function over the form comes as a natural law in creating, whereby the starting point is an idea to be followed by implementation rather than the chaotic scribbling of form seeking a purpose. In literary matters, and particularly in the relation between the shape or form and the idea, Edgar Allan Poe uses the word "construction" to signify the careful process of building stages. A construction is the result of an idea or intention followed by shaping or mapping. Poe's philosophy of composition remains a valuable document that sets the stages in the process of achieving a product. He too advocates that there is no such thing as jotting down chunks of words and ideas and then going back to arrange them. The beginning is the intention when he writes "We commence, then, with [the] intention" (*The Philosophy of Composition* 2).

In the process of the implementation, Poe's second stage is what he calls "the choice of an impression, or effect, to be conveyed" before moving to aesthetic considerations, or beauty, then tone, the length, the refrain, forming a beginning and a close. Unfamiliar things are paramount as when Poe says, "My first object (as usual) was originality." His originality lies not in the individual uses of the elements but in their unusual combination: "Now, each of these lines taken individually has been employed before, and what originality the "Raven" has, is in their combination into stanza; nothing even remotely approaching this has ever been attempted. The effect of this originality of combination is aided by other unusual and some altogether novel effects, arising from an extension of the application of the principles." Then the locale. "I have availed myself of the force of contrast" (*The Philosophy of Composition* 7-8).

What Poe announces is useful for the reader's understanding of the existence side by side of the fantastic, which is here a mode rather than a genre, and the concrete or real or what he sees as the tone: "The effect of the denouement being thus provided for, I immediately drop the fantastic for a tone of the most profound seriousness." However, in dropping the fantastic, there is a certain complication to be achieved which he calls "complexity, "along with "some amount of suggestiveness- some under-current, however indefinite, of meaning." (*The Philosophy of Composition* 9) The contrast is not just between the fantastic and the down-to-earth matters, but also between the complex and the simple, the not easily comprehensible, not quite available to the common and ordinary and that which is the daily stuff of life.

4. The Function of the Fantastic

a. Knowledge, Education and Wisdom Transmission

References to the Abiku pervade in Okri's trilogy. The Abiku Azaro is the narrator, the major character and the agent that helps the action progress. These are conventional roles which Azaroplays from beginning to end. He dominates the narrative features of the trilogy as the representative of the creatures who are waiting to be born and wavering between staying on earth and rejoining the world of the spirits they descend from. Azaro acts as the representative principle of knowledge/sanctioning beliefs/and alternatives to daily life. His narratives about his origins, his role on earth, and his instable situation wavering between two or more worlds are evident, often repeated as reminders of the mythical about his people's roots in a distant past where the world of the living is in constant communication with the

worlds of the dead and the spirits to be born. In the present paper, the focus is on his function as purveyor of knowledge, transmitter of traditions, and wisdom.

An examination of the trilogy shows that these educational functions are either transmitted by him or by characters he, as the chief sole narrator, rotate around him. Some of the narratives educate the reader on deep seated beliefs of his people. They are narrated by Azaro himself, while other narratives, whose educational thrust is evident are told by his mother, his father, or other characters. They all share a common intention or purpose, that of transmitting cultural heritage and by so doing, educate the listener and the reader alike. An Abiku is a "phantom" but an ideal historian for Africa due to his privilege of approaching "other lives behind and in front" and of knowing "people actually living their futures in the present." (Wilkinson 83) As a first-person narrator whose point of view dominates the novel, Azaro is more a receptacle for dissimilar visions, telling stories through his abiku life and experience as well as through other people's dreams. Azaro's narratives are characterized by a combination of the four functions announced by Bascom. They do not feature the order followed in this paper as the educational comes rather at the end of the narrative. However, concerning the four functions, one can assert that they are well present in the trilogy. The at length below quoted passage may be said to be representative of the mode in which Azaro's narratives operate.

> We didn't see the seven mountains ahead of us. We didn't see how they were always ahead, always calling us, always reminding us that they are more things to be done, dreams to be realized, joys to be re-discovered, promises made before birth to be fulfilled, beauty to be incarnated and love embodied. We didn't notice how they hinted that nothing is ever finished, that struggles are never truly concluded, that sometimes we have to re-dream our lives, and that life can always be used to create more light. We didn't see the mountains ahead and so we didn't sense the upheavals to come, upheavals that were in fact already in our midst, waiting to burst into flames. We didn't see the chaos growing; and when its advancing waves found us we were unprepared for its feverish narratives and wild manifestations. We were unprepared when our road began to speak in the bizarre languages of violence and transformations. The world broke up into unimaginable forms, and only the circling spirits of the age saw what was happening with any clarity. This is the song of the cycling spirit. This is a story of all of us who never see the seven mountains of our destiny, who never see that beyond the chaos there can always be a new sunlight. (*SOE* 3)

To start with the educational, Azaro wants his narrative to be a story for all. Knowing the importance of storytelling for Okri, but also for the community and the whole people of Nigeria, what is being offered is a lesson from which a number of things can be learnt. The whole novel is an expansion of the bigger story he intends for the community and the readers at large. His use of the plural 'we' is associative and inclusive. The fantastic framing the narrative with the seven mountains that require sight and insight purports to enlarge the horizons of his people and is an invitation for them to wake up to the grandeur, the unfamiliarity, and the revelation of the mysterious.

The educational function is enhanced by the verb 'see' and the negative structure associated with its use. "We didn't see" is repeated throughout the whole page creating a parallelism whereby it signifies blindness to the real issues like those of living in harmony with the environment, achieving dreams, and struggling not just to survive but also to be creative. The second function is well present in the narrative as the unbelievable is rationalized. In this

sense, the seven mountains are personified and endowed with the vocal power to call on people to see and beware of their condition. They are reminders of traits of a cultural identity that internalizes the belief in the inanimate as part of one's life. The presence of the seven mountains causes the people and nature to come together into an inseparable whole. The very existence of the mountains dispels any doubts about the severing of man from the elements of nature.

Regarding the maintaining of cultural identity, it is achieved through the conjunction of the two preceding functions as by strongly holding to the belief in the coexistence of the human and the non-human, the worldly and the spiritual, there is a validation of the claim made about the inseparability of the two realms or orders. It is by rooting this belief into times immemorial and the present and the future that a continuum is established.

The above selected passage is echoed towards the end by reference to the mountains where the novel ends with the following: "Maybe one day we will see the mountains ahead of us. Maybe one day we will see the seven mountains of our mysterious destiny." (*SOE* 297) The uncertainty of the ending with the use of the modal 'may' leaves the door open to all sorts of interpretations and lack of resolution. What is significant in the whole narrative is the immutability of the mountains, the eternal existence of the "we" of the people, the possibility of seeing and learning, and the extension of the field of vision past the order of the ordinary.

When Azaro is not the narrator of a story, the teller of an anecdote, or a tale, older characters are invited by him to tell a story as in: "the elders have often responded in the true African way of […] telling a story laden with wisdom and lessons for the youth." ("Postcolonialism as a Reading Strategy" 52) The functions of the stories and the tellers mingle into purveyors of wisdom which is drawn from past experience and which is owned through transmission by elders, who in turn are bound to pass it on as cultural heritage. The term 'lessons' functions at two levels, one is purely pedagogical, and the other is moralistic, the way fables have functioned since the beginning of times.

What seems to be unique in the trilogy, is the sense of fusion in the educational function between the narrator and the story being told. The former is identified with the latter and the story acquires the status of function the same way its narrator does, so that teller and tale become one. The tale is not just a vehicle as it acquires the status of an attribute of the teller and instead of considering them as separate entities having separate functions, they become one educational purveyor of meaning. Azaro asks his mother to tell him a story about white people:

> When white people first came to our land,' she said, as if she were talking to the wind, 'we had already gone to the moon and all the great stars. In the olden days they used to come and learn from us. My father used to tell me that we taught them how to count. We taught them about the stars. We gave them some of our gods. We shared our knowledge with them. But they forgot all this. They forgot many things. They forgot that we are all brothers and sisters and that the black people are the ancestors of the human race. The second time they brought guns. They took our lands, burned our gods, and they carried away many of our people to become slaves across the sea. They are greedy… Learn from them but love the world. (*TFR* 282)

The tone of the narrator is indicative of her status as an elder full of wisdom and readiness to impart knowledge that is transmitted pedagogically from one generation to another as she confesses that the information being delivered was transmitted to her by another elder, her father. Neither the time nor the circumstances are disclosed. It is the fact that the information is passed on from her father that is stressed.

Learning and teaching are the key concepts associated with the narrative as the white people were taught the basics (how to count), more complex things like astrology, and cosmography. This is carried out in an embedded story within the story whose framework is the transmission of knowledge. The educational function is best seen as working in the merging of the content with the story deliverer: A teacher, teaching about the transmission of teaching. Finally, the educational function takes the form of a clear fable a la Fontaine or a la Aesop, where the purpose behind the narrative is the truism "learn from them but love the world." (*TFR* 282) One notes the presence of humans rather than the usual animals that act as the carriers of the moral lesson. As to the structure of the narrative or fable, it is the most common one in La Fontaine's and Aesop's structures whereby the moral lesson or truism occurs at the end of the narrative crowning it with the urge to learn from the story or fable.

The story quoted above subverts the Western version of colonial history, in which the colonizer justifies colonialism by the idea of the white man's burden, and which depicts colonialism as a beneficial mission for both the colonized and the colonizer, a mission which educates the colonized and develop their countries. However, in this story, Azaro's mother presents a different (hi)story, in which the white people first came and took what they needed from the African cultures and knowledge, and then came back and destroyed it all. Margaret Cezair Thompson argues that Azaro's mother does not merely reverse the binary opposition but she "replaces her narrative of colonial violence and betrayal with a narrative of self-renewal. […] Thus, colonial history is retold as part of a larger, timeless, indigenous discourse which acknowledges but does not stagger under the weight of Europe's colonization of Africa" ("Beyond the Postcolonial Novel" 43). Azaro's mother completes her story by saying that "Justice will rule the world." (*TFR* 283) Her story validates the economic exploitation of the colonies by the colonizer during the colonial period, but for Mum this is merely a temporal success, as it is justice that should be truly sought after. To use the terms of Cezair-Thompson, Okri "refrains from the angry, displacing mood that some postcolonial literature expresses, and instead presents the regenerative forces of replacement." ("Beyond the Postcolonial Novel" 34) He rewrites the story of colonialism not merely to reverse the Western version of this (hi)story, but also to signal that justice is the true objective.

At the very moment, the reader believes the story ended, a supplement is added announcing a closely related vision Mum had in one of her dreams: "Do you know what my mother said to me in a dream?'" […] "She said there is a reason why the world is round. Beauty will rule the world. Justice will rule the world." (*TFR* 283) It is the beginning of another story, the concluding of a previous one or rather a soft transition from a mode to another, more serious as they "went on in silence," we are told. Justice and beauty are elevated to the highest positions and with them the narrative reaches its moral peak. And it is another elder who possesses the magical power of telling, of teaching and inculcating wisdom to students who are eager to "ask her a lot of questions." (*TFR* 283) It is as if a lesson is triggering another

lesson, interrupted only by the arrival of another elder, Dad, this time who is bearer of news that would in their turn teach more lessons.

Dad acts as a true elder, entrusted with the educational treasure of the elders, inherited from his father. To both his wife and son he recounts a story or a vision which he saw in his sleep: "My wife and my son, listen to me. In my sleep, I saw many wonderful things. Our ancestors taught me many philosophies. My father, Priest of the Roads, appeared to me and said I should keep my door open. My heart must be open. My life must be open. Our road must be open. A road that is open is never hungry. Strange times are coming." (*TFR* 497) There are the ancestors and his father. He claims he had a vision of them about keeping his door open. So far, the narrative may be considered as a telling of a personal dream to his closest members of the family. However, the very invocation of the ancestors and his own father, whose status is as dignified as that of the ancestors sends the listener to an order of people, an elite the title of which rings as very respectable and veneered. They hold such a position as a result of a cultural and spiritual heritage that demands respect and admiration. What he learned from them is wisdom (philosophies) taught to him and which it is his duty to transmit to his kin. The educational function is similar to that where the mother stands as the transmitter of knowledge. The content of that knowledge or 'philosophies' as he calls it is only important as long as it advances the educational function of the narrative. It is not of a common type as it calls forth issues related to identity, relationships with the others, a worldview based on openness, all of which are abstract modes of global thinking reminiscent of Socrates inculcating philosophy to his listeners.

Dad's narrative turns into a pamphlet about knowledge, or rather true knowledge. The elevated sense of wisdom is reached when he stresses the power of 'seeing' and 'hearing' capitalized in the text as follows: "People who use only their eyes do not SEE. People who use only their ears do not HEAR." (*TFR* 498 emphasis in original text) It serves as the ultimate objective behind the telling and the listening. Its function is educational like the story told by Mum. Like that story, it works at an identification between the content of the tale and the personality of the teller. They are inseparable. This is not the first or the last story/vision/ that dad sees and recounts. The same is equally true about Mum's storytelling full of wisdom, which at times is being completed by Dad's voicing of sublime songs, combining solid teachings with pleasure.

b. Ready Rationalizations

The function of narrators and narratives help characters and readers "escape accepted limitations of our culture, that is "providing ready rationalizations when beliefs or attitudes are called into question," argues Bascom. ("Folklore and Anthropology" 290) This is his second function. One of these limitations has to do with the difficulties in dealing with a spirit child who keeps 'wandering' all the time in unknown territories. Azaro's parents feel bewildered by their son's escapades and the only way they manage to cope with him and them is by way of resorting to the herbalist who is the only one character who can find out about the truth of the matter. The herbalist is not primarily a man of medicine as an intermediary between the world of the living and that of the spirits.

Mum and Dad call him for help to decipher the secrets about Azaro. There are instances where they display the limitations of their society and the constant search for comforting rationalizations which turn around the idea that the interference of the world of spirits in the world of the living is naturalized, accepted and much sought at times. The herbalist had difficulties in the beginning or feigned to have some. Finding out what the newborn baby suffered from but ended up diagnosing the case: "This is a child who didn't want to be born, but who will fight with death." His recommendation that the parents perform a ceremony and that his "special tokens of spirit identity" be found otherwise he would "die before the age of twenty-one" is accepted as a part of the cultural continuum and surprises nobody (*TFR* 8).

Another herbalist, a female this time, unveils the secret about Azaro's disappearance as she manages to spot whereabouts. On her friends' suggestion, she consults an herbalist, Mum hesitated we are told. (*TFR* 30) Her hesitation is understandable as prior to that she manages to find her husband in a police station and frees him. This is explained in a down to earth manner as the result of an unyielding search and by bribing the police to get him released. The explanation is easily acceptable as it is rational. However, when it comes to Azaro's disappearance, the issue is much more complicated. It is almost a matter of magic and requires the appropriate magical remedy which consists in resorting to some sort of diviner or soothsayer. This role is played by the herbalist who has supernatural powers that enable him/her to solve the riddle. Right from the beginning, the herbalist's powers are announced as we are told that "Mum had hardly stepped in when the herbalist, a fierce-looking woman with one eye that glittered more than the other, told her from the shadows that she knew the purpose of Mum's visit." (*TFR* 30) The description focuses on two related aspects; the notion of far-sightedness through the one eye that is more glistening than the other and the knowledge about the unknown to ordinary humans.

The story line is expected: Mum consults the herbalist, she requires some ingredients for her divination work, the answer to the queries is either delivered immediately or left to mature for some time, then, depending on the difficulty of the case, the diviner may require more things or not, to finally deliver the much awaited for answer. The process is recounted by the narrator as follows: "She told Mum to leave. She wanted to sleep on her divination. Mum came back the next morning and without any preamble the herbalist told her that the fee would be very expensive because the case was very difficult." (*TFR* 30) The community has already internalized the process and its outcome. It passes as logical with the waiting, with the aura, and the ultimate deliverance from the pains of waiting for answers.

Everything about Azaro's disappearance is digested and the very fact that the diviner found the answer becomes unquestionable once that answer obeys a certain logic, no matter how little probable. The herbalist is respected, her instructions obeyed, and her know how is confirmed. Providing rational answers for unlikely happenings causes the happenings to be accepted, believed, and likely to happen. Such answers dispel incredulity and the fantastic merges with the real and becomes an undistinguishable fact co-existing with it. Beliefs are not put into questions and when they do so, they are comforted by rationalizations, the way Bascom saw the second functions of folklore.

The story progresses in such a way that Mum is visited by a relation who came to see the picture of Azaro on a newspaper, which leads to the fact that he is alive, to be found by the

police, who in turn leads her to the officer with whom Azaro is staying, and to his final recuperation by his mother. The fact that on instructions given by the herbalist, Mum had to wait for the lightening to strike before she takes him home, is internalized in turn as the weather conditions with thunder and lightning and rain, make the herbalist instructions perfectly believable rather than remote from reality and common sense. It becomes a matter of verisimilitude for the actors and the readers alike. Both readers and actors are facing the same question of plausibility. Instead of disbelief, one can argue that it is rather a suspension of belief that is lifted as soon as a readiness to accept the seemingly irrational occurs.

c. Maintaining Cultural Identity

According to Saul Macleod "social identity is a person's sense of who they are based on their group membership(s)." He adds that according to Henri Tajfel "groups give us a sense of social identity: a sense of belonging to the social world." ("Social Identity Theory" 34) Another important dimension is associated with Stuart Hall. According to Hall, there are two approaches to understanding a cultural identity. "One is to assume that a cultural identity is the essence of one's true self. It is fixed, cannot be replaced," and is "hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed "selves", which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common." This approach is essentialist since it focuses mainly on what is shared by a community where the stress is on the underlying essence, of "a people" ("Cultural Identity and Diaspora" 111-12). From this point of view, the formation of a "cultural identity" strengthens the links between the "existing self" and what is regarded as one's "authentic" or "original" culture.

According to Hall, the second approach to cultural identity denies the existence of any authentic cultural identity. This approach understands cultural identity "as relational, incomplete and always changing in the context of the political, economic and social environments." To put it differently, this approach considers cultural identity "as a matter of always 'becoming' rather than of 'being'." That is, "cultural identity is not something which already exists or has been fixed. It is something that is always in process." (Chu 93) Henceforth, cultural identity is inexorably complex, impure and contradictory. Cultural identity in this regard is neither fixed nor inclusive, it is rather free-floating.

A very important attribute Hall dwells on is that of an "authentic cultural identity, a "true self", which "people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common" ("Cultural Identity and Diaspora" 111) The signifiers of the cultural identity that are maintained may be summed up in a number of ways, chief among them the belief in the paramount role of storytelling, in the spiritual world, in the coexistence of the spiritual and the worldly, and the set of rules of conduct to which the community is expected to conform, despite individual interests. These are found in the easily accepted belief in the spiritual world whereby, at no time, the world of the spirits and ancestors is questioned.

The role of the story telling in keeping the compactness of the community is attested in the multiple needs of Azaro to hear stories not just for educational purposes but to have a stronger sense of belonging to a line of thinking about the world as made up of narratives woven throughout the long spans of time and transmitted from one generation to another thus perpetuating origins, experience and common and shared worldviews. Stories retrieve a

world of the unknown and cause it to still mix with the present of the community so that coexistence rather than exclusion is the landmark of everyday life past and present.

In his defense of storytelling, Okri sees the sense of continuities in the human experience because in the absence of storytelling, there are "no magical places resident in us." ("The Joys of storytelling" 29) He argues that there is a fractured view of history which is based on what he calls 'certainties' which he sees as the sources of all of humanity troubles. (30) Storytelling brings the magic that checks uncertainties and makes a return to the 'primordial waters' possible. (34) It was possible because "the earliest storytellers were," according to him "magi, seers, bards, griots, shamans." In his representation of storytellers, Okri sees them as ancient, sometimes fearful, but mostly transformers of mysteries into myths which helped the community understand the world as coded where life became possible with its paradoxes as people live into "darkness, with eyes wide open, and with hearts set alight" ("The Joys of Storytelling" 35).

Okri's reference to the masters of storytelling like Homer and Cervantes, Ovid, Boccacio, Schehrazade, Aesop, and the "African enchanters" indicates his desire of belonging to a world of the fantastic, "where stories are journeys into the forgotten dreams of the centuries." ("The Joys of storytelling" 45) Affiliation does not shun him from advocating a line of storytelling following the western tradition because telling is a worldwide endowment.

If, as Okri argues, "the universe began as a story", then its continuation must be carried out by storytelling. ("The Joys of storytelling" 113) The past of the community is modelled as a story to tell about how it began echoing the beginning of the trilogy: "In the beginnings there was a river." (*TFR* 3) Its historical stages are told as stories like the recounting of the first encounter between the community and the white men, the second one, when the latter did violence to the Africans, and the present one, when the white men are leaving and the members of the community are left with the task of rebuilding a cultural identity that survives and is maintained thanks to its deeply rooted beliefs in ancestry and a particular worldview the story is at the heart of.

Stories loom large in the three dimensions of past, present, and future and there is no escaping them. Having been at the beginnings, they generate not just the present, frame it, explain it, and give its actors a meaning, they "resonate our beginnings and intuit our endings," our mysterious origins and our numerous destinies, and dissolve them into one" argues Okri ("The Joys of Storytelling" 114). According to him, the sense of fusion of the three parts in the lives of the community merges them into one. "Stories are reservoirs of views and values, a way for people to know themselves and associate themselves with (or distinguish themselves from) others, and are reflective of the past, present, and future their culture holds 'true.'" "This last is particularly crucial: classic stories are those which resonate with our origins ('real' or, perforce, imagined/created) and would seem to foreshadow our future as we hope it will be; at their most powerful, they dissolve past and future into one." Okri conceives stories as 'a reservoir of values', though he understands them as a "secret reservoir" (*Birds of Heaven* 21).

Stories bring people together and cement their sense of belonging to common denominators. They transform them into a compact whole, unified despite their individual differences. This

"oneness," argues Hall in his definition, articulates a "stable, unchanging and continuous [frame] of reference and meaning" whose very attributes "make up the broad, shared cultural beliefs and common historical experiences of a people" ("Cultural Identity and Diaspora"111). This is how cultural identity is maintained throughout the ages. It is natural, freely adhered to, and defended because of its authenticity. This "Authentic" cultural identity is an essence common to the community and shared by all its members. "It is foundational to a people" as Hall put it. Its existence is realunwavering and lies "beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of [their] actual history." ("Cultural Identity and Diaspora" 111) As a matter of fact, no matter how Dad differs from Madame Koto, or Mum from other women from the compound people, or Azaro is the opposite of Ade, the other Abiku, what they share is stronger than what divides them. This is clear towards the end of *The Famished Road* when Dad is 'redreaming "the world." The use of "black people" "our people" "our history" stresses common history and destiny, common fears and preoccupations with clear wh-questions like "WHAT MUST WE DO?... WHAT IS THE BEST WAY?... WHAT IS THE FIRST STEP?" (*TFR* 494 emphasis in the original text) The plural does not just signify the many, it also conveys a sense of togetherness bound by a common past. The present adopts that past, adheres to its organizing principles, and works towards consolidating it by maintaining its cultural components and perpetuating them.

The belief in the spiritual world is evident in the very nature of the narrator who happens to belong to the world of spirits. If the reader or the community finds it difficult to admit the existence of such world, there are compelling evidence of its existence through the multiplication of Abiku children like Ade whose existence and decision to go back to the world of spirits is plausible in that Abiku children are not necessarily the same as some like Azaro decide to stay on in the world and others like Ade, seeing that he is unwanted, decides to join the other spirits. The spiritual informs almost everything in the life of the community as herbalists reinforce the existence of such a world by creating channels of communication with them and trying to solve everyday preoccupations by resorting to a dialogue with them. This is evident whenever a character falls ill, gets lost, or enters the world of the unknown. The various instances about Azaro's disappearance and his illness, Dad's illnesses and Mum's are recounted with the firm belief in the world of the spirits.

The very existence of Azaro is proof that not only his parents believe in the other world, but also other members of the community like Madame Koto who realizes that Azaro enters her dreams, knows things about her like when she is pregnant and the number of babies to be born to her saying "I saw that Madame Koto was pregnant with three strange children. Two of them sat up straight and the third was upside down in her womb." (*TFR* 464) Azaro details what he sees but the relevant issue here is that she guesses what he is capable of seeing and his super powers that she simply admits saying "why are you staring at my stomach like that with your bad-luck eyes?" (*TFR* 464) The belief in the world of the spirits is just shared and natural to the members of the community.

Another strong belief that is equally shared is the fact that there is no clear cut between the world of the living and the world of the spirits and ancestors. They co-exist in the imagination of the people, and their co-existence is the source of the singularity of the community. It draws on its ancestors, wisdom like Dad who constantly refers Azaro to his Grandfather, the King of the Road. The sense of continuity between the ascendants and the

descendants is so strong that it becomes the defining principle, one built on affiliation. Azaro is equally entangled in a long-established relationship between the two worlds and acts as the embodiment of that relationship.

The world of the living is illuminated by the world of the spirits through providing the necessary rationalizations to strange, magical phenomena that could only be understood through the inevitable proximity of the two worlds, their real- fantastic embrace, and their incessant contact. Okri's trilogy articulates the connectedness and display it as a normalized one. The connectedness pervades every aspect in the novels from the plot, the characterization, the setting, to the nature of the stories embedded in the novels.

d. Validation of Claims

Finally, the validation of the said claims about the cultural identity is worked out in such a way that it becomes next to impossible to refute existing claims about the need to apprehend the world in a multilateral way, where that which exists on earth is never cut off from the world of the spirits, that the two worlds are complementary rather than competing for prominence and one excluding the other. This is evident statistically where an almost equal portion of the text is devoted to the other world, that of ancestors, of spirits, of talking animals, and animate objects.

The validation is motivated by the strong will to present a community of ordinary people living both ordinary and extraordinary moments of their lives. The environment facilitates such coming and going as next to the compound and the city, the forest is that space where one can have access to the world of the imagination and the fantastic. The latter world does visit the world of the living and does interfere in its everyday events. Dreams and visions compete with stories to enforce its necessary coexistence with the other world. It may inspire a sense of awe, but it is accepted, and sometimes cherished as whenever Dad is in a critical situation or musing about the present and the future of the community, the invocation of the other world brings comfort, alleviation of pain, and most importantly a sense of certainty that dispels possible doubts. Tradition is reflected through the image of an elderly man who is Azaro's grandfather. He is considered the priest of the God of Roads and he is described as a very powerful man. Though completely blind, he can walk without any help. Dad, who is Okri's mouthpiece in this case says, "our old people are very powerful in spirit… We are forgetting these powers. Now all the power that people have is selfishness, money and politics" (*TFR* 84).

5. Form and the Structuring Nature of Stories and Dreams

Chapter one of *The Famished Road* is ended with Azaro's reflection on his short narrative of the beginning: "These are the myths of beginnings. These are stories and moods deep in those who are seeded in rich lands, who still believe in mysteries." (*TFR* 6) The ending seems to sum up the nature of the story, considering it as "myths of beginning," to further explicate it as stories and 'moods.' The narrative begins in a linear form with some sense of origin (river) to be transformed into a (road) 'branching" the world. The world in question is already presented as fantastic in that a river, not necessarily drying up, becomes a road. While the

reader may accept the transformation as logical given certain circumstances, that the river dries up to become a linear space for walking, the change remains fantastic as mutability whereby a phenomenon gives way to another one different yet akin to it. For, in the two cases, the river and the road share a common element that of routes for travelling, to be taken by human travelers. It is the hunger of the road, which as a personification, that may strike the reader by its unlikelihood, at first glance.

The road is hungry is a metaphor that becomes easily acceptable as one thinks of death striking travelers on their way to a certain destination. Today, for instance, it strikes us as familiar to speak about the road or the highway as swallowing travelers through accidents and instead of saying the road killed so many people, one may comfortably use the metaphor "the road has eaten so many travelers." The substitution of kill by eat comes as a natural act, whereby the eating is synonymous with causing to disappear, eradicating, or erasing. What seems to be fantastic, at first contact, proves to be easily internalized as two orders of things are made to coincide through language in a use: the metaphorical one.

The story takes the form of substitution and mutability. The latter is evident in how the 'unborn' could "assume numerous forms" like those of birds. Substitution works at the level of using metaphors whereby creatures take form of animals, and certain fowls like birds with a layer that attaches freedom to birds in their chief characteristic, that of flying and floating in the air, yet capable of landing on earth. Their story is an enactment of the fantastic in the sense that it is at once remote from the palpable, down-to-earth real and the otherwise distant, abstract, and unreal. It fuses the two orders by resorting to substitution producing metaphors which are highly symbolic and organic as they propose a worldview where the fantastic is part of the real and the real is internalized as crossing borders of the fantastic.

The story which constitutes chapter one of the trilogy keeps drawing the two orders one towards the other. From the land of beginnings and the imaginary, the reader is taken to the lands of the real with all "the rigours of existence, the unfulfilled longings, the enshrined injustices of the world, the labyrinths of love, the ignorance of parents, the fact of dying," as opposed to "the Living in the midst of the simple beauties of the universe." (*TFR* 3) This constant drawing of the two worlds, their colliding and their co-existence form the nature of the story, its contents and its forms: the fantastic and the real, the concrete and the symbolic, and the unceasing of the coming and going from and to them.

From the state of bliss with the world of the spirits and the unborn, their king described as "a wonderful personage" the limitless space and the "beautiful terrors of eternity," the story descends into the realms of the real like the painful birth of babies and their coming into a life that is bitter-sweet. It is a life described as of the "exile" of creatures "seeded in rich lands" and therefore capable of coping with the mysterious and the concrete, both sad and smiling, forming the 'enigma' of landing and yet yearning for remaining high well above this world. (*TFR* 2-3)

The story has a beginning, a middle, and an end. It helps the reader follow it. It does have a top-down structure whereby the top, a time and space of bliss has a downward trajectory, that of the descent into the world down here, which by definition lacks mystery, the fantastic, and the wonderful. The downward movement is marked by a sense of linearity where beginning

is a starting point somewhere in the distant past moving in time and space into a middle and landing on earth. Time and space are fused to convey this movement based on origins and developments. However, the movement is not just one-directional from top to bottom, from a point of origin to a point of arrival. It is also a two-way movement as the relationship between the two worlds is never clearly cut off. On the contrary, it is one whereby one world or order is constantly talking to the other, inter-penetrating the other, enriching the other and made meaningful through it. The duality is established in such a way that any stability is denied, any fixity is impossible, and indeterminacy and ambiguity are the dominant characteristics.

This is further evidenced in the images he sees in chapter two like that of his father "swallowed up by a hole in the road" which is synonymous with death or his mother "dangling from the branches of a blue tree." (*TFR* 7) the father and the mother belong in the world, yet their relationship with the fantastic is also made evident through the images of the road and the dangling which is a form of swinging and vacillating in a sort ofin-betweenness. The whole is wrapped up in a vision which brings together the living and the immaterial. The question is whether this structure of the story is similar to that of the remaining stories recounted by Azaro and the other characters in the trilogy, and what function they have and how unified their structures or forms and functions are.

In comparison with the first story, chapter two of Book five of *The Famished Road* presents a story of Abiku's traveling with the three-headed spirit. Azaro is angry at his father's punishing him and after four days of fasting, he came to "leave the world" as he says. His journey lasted for less than two weeks. As opposed to the first journey down to earth, this one is that of ascending to the world of spirits. Led by the three-headed spirit, Azaro starts by leaving the world of his own will "singing the song of departure", a song only his companion spirits could sing. His recounting spots the time of the events as the three-headed spirt joins him on the fourth day of his initial decision to depart. From then on, the spirit who has always been there offers to take him on the journey for a 'feast' of homecoming. The space is clearly configured as after some distance, they came to "a blue terrain," where birds were singing and "the trees were golden" till they reached "a mighty green road." (*TFR* 326)

Structurally, the travel is clearly delineated as a route with the road leading to nowhere and everywhere, to "heaven and hell", worlds unknown to them. The story of their travel is interrupted by the father (*TFR* 327-29) the mother weeping (*TFR* 331, the rain) until they reach a chasm (*TFR* 333) and they resumed travelling (*TFR* 334) seeing a bird (Mrs. Koto's), a lizard, the blind man's, green rocks, and a great river bank, a canoe, interrupted by Dad, a woman with the feet of a lioness and a collusion between the figure of the woman and the three-headed spirit leading up to lightning interrupted by Dad. (*TFR* 336) The form of the story of Azaro's desired departure from the world of his parents to that of the spirits is a one of an upward movement. It consists in leaving the downtrodden world of humans and 'flying' to that of the spirits without joining them. It may be translated into a loss of consciousness resulting from his physical weakness due to his rejection of food and drinks to sustain him. He speaks of an amnesia which leads him to forget the world and wander in between this world and the world of the dying without completely vanishing. As such it is an incomplete journey as he never reaches the dwelling of the spirits of the dead.

The story is interrupted by Dad's vision, resumed by the fight between the woman and the three-headed spirit and the whole sunk into confusion bringing worlds together, that of the spirits, that of human with Azaro in-between, seeing and recounting the multiple facets and the inexorable momentary ending of a story which goes back to its beginning about leaving the earthly world and venturing in the world of spirits. It is also a story of confrontation between the two worlds.

The downward movement is not meant any form of elevation or aloofness. It is a trajectory that configures the world of the spirits as located somewhere above the present world of human. It could be below geographically, under the earth. Its elevation is more poetic than real as in that world, the unimaginable seems to occur, the beautiful is everywhere, and the far-fetched is at hand. As opposed to this poetic elevated realm, the world, is down, less poetic, vulgar with all its miseries, and suffering. However, it remains accessible to the poetic, the elevated in that it is constantly measured against it. The stories, by being structured in terms of upward and downward movements configure the two spaces, construct them as opposites yet intermingling, excluding yet inclusive, warring yet longing to a peaceful co-existence. Mum recounting a story towards the end of the trilogy is presented the way traditional stories are told around a cozy place with Mum rocking Dad's chair and smoking. It begins by "One day…" (*TFR* 482) Ingredients like time and space are present and the actors are clearly delineated: There is the narrator, the tortoise (endowed with speech) and the riddle.

As far as dreams are concerned, one of them occurs to Dad after his fight against Green Leopard and his exhaustion. He spoke of terrible experiences he had been having and of his state between sleep and waking. He narrates how he was fighting "seven spirits' who wanted to avenge Green Leopard and how they even wanted to assault his wife. (*TFR* 404) He defeated them before a seven-headed spirit appeared to him who wanted to avenge his comrades. The fight resulted in his own father intervening and offering to take Dad's place, that is die instead of him. In the end, Dad manages to free himself, saw an eagle turn into a woman and then three women wearing black like the women in his house. (*TFR* 406-7) The structure of the dream is one that has a beginning with Dad fighting spirits, a middle with the seven-headed spirit, and an end with a recovery that links the last stage of the dream with the real world. It is a transposition from the world of the living to that of the spirits, a story of confrontation and of victory of Dad. The movement is that of a two-way travel between two worlds, of a fierce fight for survival.

What may be of significance is the sightseeing whereby in that fighting realm, Dad saw other things such as the black rocks which tasted good, and Mum dancing naked, and several other fantastic things. (*TFR* 407) The question to be raised is whether these were part of the dream or visions that run parallel to the dream without a clear structure, beginning or end. One of the most intriguing visions has to do with "listening" to his Dad's thoughts (*TFR* 441). Starting from the scope of the thoughts described as "wide" he moves on to their movement described as "spinning" and "bouncing off everything in the room." (*TFR* 441) From scope to the nature of the movements of the thoughts Azaro moves inside his father's brains where he is taken to the "beginnings." However, the visions or the hearings are rather short this time and they mingle with seemingly real events like the knocking on the door and the beggars, among whom the gentle girl and the total confusion with Mum fighting for husband until the

chapter ends with the real morning and an orange left for Azaro after his parents left for work. The vision melts into the real like all short seeing, a glimpse of the psyche into the worlds of others. The trajectory starts with a backward movement into a distant past to fuse into the present linking past and present, real and perceived rather than just imagined.

The second sentence begins with the verb to see: "He saw the world." (*TFR* 492) the following sentences repeat the same structure bringing forth a parallelism which organizes the dream as seeing and seeing as becoming conscious of. He saw, the world, explained or narrowed down to 'our' world, to 'our people (repeated twice) then the category of the rich, followed by the 'divisions; the women, the wars, the 'emergence of tyrants.' (*TFR* 492) The funnel shape of the structure of the tale supposes a descent from the general to the particular, from the people to categories of people singled out as the responsible for the suffering of the rest of the nation.

Seeing is followed by reactions chief among them is arguing one's case for justice in courts of the spirits, which are presented as supreme courts. Then to the static and panoramic view, a movement is initiated with the verb to travel through rain, through diseases, and deaths ironically set off against the politicians' lies about the dawn of the future nation. In his journey seeing becomes meeting with "forms of chaos." (*TFR* 493) There is in the recounting of Dad's dream a double movement whereby the dream enters in dialogue with the vision that Azaro has at the same time so that the dream becomes a trigger for the latter character's own visions since Azaro in following his father's steps sees for himself 'other spheres' that lead to the same conclusions as those of the father. They turn around the need for justice and truth with questions like why, how, what? in the midst of a coming together of the father, the grandfather, and the son. (*TFR* 404) Dad is constantly seen between two states (awake and asleep) dreaming and not dreaming. Azaro dreams constantly but dreams are also moments of seeing.

Another vision is described by Azaro during his dancing with the midget woman. This leads back to Azaro whose "circling in the dreams of the spirit children and the dead carpenter allows him to SEE a number of unshared things." (*IR* 10 emphasis in original text) First, the carpenter's roaming in the compound, then Mum's dream with her mother. Circling and circling, Azaro is able to enter others dreams and get out of them. The more the distance, the more the dreamers, like the politicians twenty miles away and the Governor-General, thirty miles away. What about the distance? And the characters? And the waking up under the form of an interruption by the arrival of Dad. (*IR* 11-12) His dreams or the capacity to see in the dreams of others is recounted several times.

It maintains that while some of the most general aspects of myth are present and others are rather absented, myth is characterized by flexibility in use, structure, and finality. First, Okri devotes a chapter to the notion of circling. (*IR*10-12) Circling is the product of restlessness says Azaro. His circling enables him to eye the whole community and to zoom in into characters' dreams. From the community, he is going to circle in the dreams of the 'spirit children', the dead carpenter, then his mother, the "future rulers of the nation" (*IR* 11), then from a longer distance a "richer part of the city" then the "English Governor-General" and then he had a pause where he saw his father. (*IR* 12) Because circling is an unceasing movement in the novels, Okri decides to add more circlings and more chapters. In "Circling

spirit (1)," the story recounted by Mum regarding a famous story about a "chief who ordered all the frogs to be killed because they disturbed his sleep." (*IR* 83) The story goes on with the killing of the frogs and the coming of mosquitoes whose uncontrolled presence (frogs are all dead) brought diseases and the land was deserted by all its people. Azaro remembers that "long afterwards toads and snakes appeared" in their street. (*IR* 83) Spiders and wolves and hyenas made their appearance, too. The narrator starts associating the happenings with the events of the story Mum told. Circling is related to the wandering from one story to another, one happening triggering a series of other related ones, always connected, never ending.

Circling is an attribute of the stories and the happenings in the novels. It is a pattern which lends mystery and indeterminacy. The narrator indicates this when saying "Our stories were patterned and circular, trapped in history." (*IR* 105) The reader may recognize a pattern which is cyclical like history, which keeps returning. However, what Azaro means is that the "stories are "trapped by the things we wouldn't face," unresolved and "unable to rise above a problem older than millennia." (*IR* 105) Hence the circling is never ending, leading to nowhere but the aging of the old woman, the diviner and storyteller.

Indeterminacy is not just closely related to the stories but equally a prevailing characteristic of "contending dreams." In *Infinite Riches* Book Five, three chapters are devoted to dreams, how they are contending and the way their circularity is enhancing indeterminacy with the sense of paradox. Chapter ten deals with flowing contending dreams where Azaro finds himself "circling Madame Koto's room." (*IR* 201) Circling and spinning "in the voices of her illness, her erupting nightmares, her agony" conveys the narrator's wandering in the mind and body of Madame Koto. He can recount her dreams and the dreams of others. All of them are different, competing for the birth of a nation. They are unique to their dreamers, varied, and impossible to reconcile. The chief characteristic uniting them is their multiplicity, their lack of similarity, and above all their circular nature without a clear direction as he asserts that "the river of dreams was without direction":"The dreams were too many, too different, too contradictory." (*IR* 202) Such dreams about the nation are so violent for Azaro that he needed a place for resting, for a pause, but then again, his roaming leads him to the dreams of the Governor-General, which he finds totally opposed to those of the people, with signs about Africa as the "heart of world" or "Brave New darkness" (*IR* 204-5).

Azaro's circling takes him away from the Governor-General's dreams to the old woman in the forest. His wanderings are best caught in his views of himself "floating in the air of dreams, circling in the crowded spaces of the atmosphere." (*IR* 207) By now, circling is better understood to mean rotating, wandering, moving in various directions or being multi-directional. The forms of the stories remain open-ended, nowhere searching for closure. They definitely fulfill one of the functions of the fantastic as used by Okri, that of opening the gyre of possibilities and may accommodate the thrust for the search for an identity.

Baldick defines indeterminacy as "a principle of uncertainty invoked to deny the existence of any final or determinate meaning that could bring to an end the play of meaning between the elements of a text." (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* 125) McHale stresses the "partial indeterminacy, the 'gappiness' of fictional objects, […] and characters." (*Constructing Postmodernism* 36) He argues that characterization is never complete "it is always as if a beam of light were illuminating a part of a region, the remainder of which

disappears in an indeterminate cloud." (*Constructing Postmodernism* 36). McHale distinguishes between two types of indeterminacy. The first he calls permanent indeterminacy where there are always gaps. The second form of indeterminacy is temporary; the author leaves a gap on purpose for the reader to fill in, by the "process of realizing or concretizing the text." (*Constructing Postmodernism* 36)

An examination of the indeterminate nature of the narratives displays what McHale calls permanent indeterminacy, whereby there is no gap left for the reader to fill in. There is no ambiguity in Dressler and De Beaugrande terminology. There is abundant incoherence, which when pursued at length takes the form of a deliberate and conscious play working at an instability of meaning. The fact that narratives happen to recount dreams or visions, fabulations, and stories related to what the characters are made to imagine they see form a pattern of indeterminate happenings. The fact that they occur in a chronotope that is mostly ill-defined contributes to their indeterminacy. Between sleep and waking, the stories have no fixed setting. The text hovers between non-related spaces.

Indeterminacy occurs at a second level where abikus like Azaro and Ade are constantly on the move, wandering, floating, and landing, just to take off again. "Wandering" as a concept occurs several times. In *The Famished Road* alone, it is used seventy one times. Most of Azaro's wanderings take place in the forest, a location that is presented as most natural for him as he feels at ease there: "And then I wandered. I wandered for a long time in the forest." (*TFR* 241) However, Azaro's wandering takes place in the city streets as when he says, "[i]n the morning I wandered up and down the streets of the city." (*TFR* 15) His description focuses on real sights which run as follows: "Houses were big, vehicles thundered everywhere, and people stared at me." (*TFR* 15) Other spirits are made to wander in the city much like him: "Spirits and other beings come there too. They buy and sell, browse and investigate. They wander amongst the fruits of the earth and sea." (*TFR* 16) Whether they wander in the forest, in enchanting environments, or in the city among humans, spirits in general, and Azaro, in particular, seem to wander aimlessly. Like the stories about them, they remain indeterminate and circular the way Azaro explicitly confirms it when he says "FOR A WHILE I wandered up and down the street, not sure of where to go" (*TFR* 277 emphasis in the original text).

Another concept used as a substitution for wandering is "journey." As a concept, it is used twenty-eight times in *The Famished Road* alone and mostly in a figurative sense whereby following and travelling are close to the circling and circulating as in the following example which is worth quoting at length:

> I followed Dad sometimes in his cyclical dreams. I followed him in his escape into the great realms and spaces, the landscapes of genius, the worlds before birth, the worlds of pure dreams and signs. I followed him sometimes in his brief reunion with his own primeval spirit and totem, in his fleeting contact with glimmerings of his true destiny. I saw angels erasing some of the memories of his journeys. He travelled far and his spirit ached and as he sweated in our room, dampening the bed, it poured with rain outside and the floods rearranged the houses of the road. The rains were sporadic. Frogs and bugs and diseases roamed in our lives and children died in the mornings when the politicians on their trucks announced the dawn of our new independent destiny. (*TFR* 493)

Key travelling concepts are "followed" and "travelled" which organize the passage in a framework of movement of the father and the narrator Azaro. The following is associated with the perception of what goes on in Dad's dreams and therefore remains immaterial or palpable. However, by the end of the passage, the fantastic soon gives way to the real with the sweat, the bed, the room, and the rain outside. The descent into the realms of the real are simply momentary as the spiritual returns with the concatenation of concepts associated with staying on, that is itself just momentary.

In *The Famished Road*, "staying" as a concept is repeated one hundred seventy four times not so much in its affirmative form as in its other forms related to hesitation to stay on, refusal to stay on (mainly Ade's), and wavering between two worlds, those of the spirits and of the humans. Azaro's staying on is motivated by some sense of exhaustion because of his coming and going when he says "I was born not just because I had conceived a notion to stay, but because in between my coming and going the great cycles of time had finally tightened around my neck." (*TFR* 6) This may be called his forced staying on which is explained by his fatigue, on the one hand, and his love of his mother. It is something not shared by his fellow abiku Ade.

Staying on is perceived as tragic and terrible as it brings hatred from the spirit world and estrangement among humans as he correctly diagnoses the issue: "Our cyclical rebellion made us resented by other spirits and ancestors. Disliked in the spirit world and branded amongst the Living, our unwillingness to stay affected all kinds of balances." (*TFR* 5) Hatred and resentment are the product of an unstable position which abikus occupy and which is characterized by its terrifying consequences on them as he argues "It is terrible to forever remain in-between." (*TFR* 5) This in-betweenness is at the heart of the texts' indeterminacy. It is a choice that is didactic, in keeping with the first function of folklore announced by Bascom. It is also in keeping with the other three functions, the validation of claims, the maintaining of cultural identity, and the ready rationalizations.

As to the notion of indeterminacy, the stories and the dreams which form the basics of the narratives embedded in the novels, one can argue that beginnings are never prepared, and endings have no sense of ending indications. Indeterminacy is characteristic of the very origins of the world of spirits and that of the living. Ending(s)feature the same indeterminacy which is more marked. As stronger concept may be used to qualify the quality of the indeterminacy examined above is paradox as defined by Abrams: "A paradox is a statement which seems on its face to be logically contradictory or absurd, yet turns out to be interpretable in a way that makes good sense. (*A Glossary of Literary Terms* 267) Abrams adds that the New Critics used the concept to "encompass all surprising deviations from, or qualifications of, common perceptions or commonplace opinions." (*A Glossary of Literary Terms* 267) The definition is naturally applicable to the systematic use of what Okri calls contradiction and paradox at the same time when he writes that "from a certain point of view the universe seems to be composed of paradoxes. But everything resolves. That is the function of contradiction" (*TFR* 327). The sense of ending in *Songs of Enchantment* is similar to that of the other two novels as it takes place on earth, mixed with comings and goings, yearnings for another day, for a dream, for the realization of a dream, but definitely a choice is made; live among trodden down paths of humans and keep sight of the other worlds. Translated in historico-political and literary terms, there is no escape from the suffering down

here and no escape from the lingering belongings to other worlds: Nigeria is floating between worlds.

6. The Healing Dimensions of the Fantastic

It is in this respect that the fantastic and the mythical metaphorically articulate the trauma and elusive nature of the peoples' experience. It is traumatic since it leaves traces of fear and anxiety and it is difficult to fix because of its slippery nature, owing to the governing principles of the context. Todorov's conceptualizing of the fantastic is relevant in this context. Before considering the effects of the use of the fantastic, issues related to the generic labelling are discarded as in the present paper, the focus is more on the psychological or cathartic effects ofthe fantastic. The fantastic has been examined in generic terms that are beyond the scope of the present paper as the focus is on how the fantastic is related to traces of fear and anxiety. However, some clarification about the use of the term by Todorov is required as it touches on the notion of effects.

In Todorov's work, there is a guiding principle in the use of the fantastic and its primary effect is that of hesitation or indecision. According to Stanislaw Lem, the hesitation is one of "a being who knows only natural laws in the face of the supernatural. In other words, the fantastic character of a text resides in a transient and volatile state during the reading of it, one of indecision as to whether the narrative belongs to a natural or a supernatural order of things." Lem cites Todorov as stressing the fact that, the "pure uncanny amazes, shocks, terrifies, but does not give rise to indecision" (Lem 229).

In his book *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Tzvetan Todorov offers the following definitions of fantastic fiction:

> In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions, either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination... or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality. The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event. (25)

Todorov argues for the integration of the reader in the event as it is not the characters alone who are involved when he writes that "that world is defined by the reader's own ambiguous perception of the events narrated." (31) The reader's hesitation is as important as that of the characters.

Hence, when talking about the effects of the fantastic, hesitation or indecision opens up a space for pauses and reflection which are so wide as to include a seemingly different attitude which in a different context, Samuel Taylor Coleridge calls "a suspension of disbelief." Coleridge coined the phrase "suspension of disbelief" in 1817 when he wrote: "[i]t was agreed, that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic, yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance

of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith." (*Biographia Literaria* Chapter XIV) Coleridge's suspension of disbelief is that state of mind which ignores fantastic elements in a literary work to enjoy what is being read.

I mentioned the adjective cathartic to speak about the effect or the outcome of the use of the fantastic. While hesitation might be the first of the series of effects, a concatenation of effects follows the primary attitude. One can consider that the feeling of fear when facing the fantastic is gradabale as it ranges from actual fear to anxiety. Hence the characters' attitudes will differ in several ways. The fourth effect which is undoubtedly connected to the mentioned ones has to do with uncertainties of an age, that of the post-independence Nigeria.

7. The Sense of Hesitation Leading to Fright, Fear, and Anxiety

As I mentioned above, hesitation is a first understandable reaction. It is a reaction to an occurrence that is characterized by its strangeness, to say the least. The characters do seem to hesitate when confronted with the case of Azaro, the abiku child in the beginning, despite the fact that the existence of such children is not totally strange to them. The hesitation has to do with a form of disbelief in the beginning when Azaro is on the verge of disappearing. His father and mother clung to him and did whatever they could to get him to survive. Hesitation is equally felt by the herbalist who is supposed to know such matters as abikus. In the case of Azaro, hesitation is followed by a sense of surprise at his survival. Even if there is a sense of admiration, the hesitation is not occasioned or accompanied by wonder. The hesitation is a matter of testing of whether the phenomena in question are still within the boundaries of the real or not and whether they "permit an explanation of the phenomena described," as Todorov put it. (42) In case, they do not permit that, then the hesitation is further motivated by the search for other means of understanding.

The fantastic is not the uncanny as Todorov put it because the latter offers an explanation within the boundaries of reality. And it is not the marvelous which requires that "new laws of nature must be entertained to account for." (*The Fantastic* 42) The hesitation is the site of indecision and that is why Todorov sees it as an in-between phenomenon when he writes: "The fantastic therefore leads a life full of dangers and may evaporate at any moment. It seems to be located on the frontier of two genres, the marvelous and the uncanny, rather than to be an autonomous genre." (42) I would add that the frontier is also that space of crossing borders and it is this unique characteristic that provokes hesitation. The hesitation is expressed in wondering whether Azaro would stay on or go away. The question is envisaged by the reader, too. It has to do with the degree of plausibility.

Hesitation triggers a wide and gradable range or responses. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary presents fear or the reaction to a danger in comparison with synonymous connects as follows: "fear, dread, fright, alarm, panic, terror, trepidation mean painful agitation in the presence or anticipation of danger. Fear is the most general term and implies anxiety and usually loss of courage." (*Merriam-Webste*r n.p.n) Gradability is not that grammatical concept associated with adjectives to which an adverb of degree like very, extremely, etc. is added to distinguish their degree from others. Gradability in this context has to do with degree at the level of synonymy with nuances and degree or force. For instance, fright is stronger than fear

whereby "fright implies the shock of sudden, startling fear." (*Merriam-Webste*r n.p.n).There is an evident passage from the state of fright to that of anxiety. Freud argues that the main cause behind traumatic neurosis is "the factor of surprise, of fright," which is different from fear and anxiety in that it is accompanied by surprise (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 6). A case in point in the trilogy may be the reaction of the herbalist who uttered the word "horror" which is close to fright (*TFR* 8), something that mothers felt dread whenever the nature of boys like Azaro is revealed. This astounded his parents who "did not really believe that [he] was a spirit-child" (*TFR* 9).The notion of recurrence is also evident, and it is the one that causes the fright or dread to be transformed into an anxiety as Azaro is going to be almost lost to his parents.

Azaro's mother's fretting and his father's irritation convey this sense of anxiety whereby, they live constantly with the fear of losing him. Freud provides an explanation of the mental process involved in facing trauma, arguing that "traumatic neurosis' dreams have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident," which creates a traumatizing cycle (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 7). The trilogy represents these recurrences which structure the novels as a series of stories and dreams and visions whose role conveys the transformation of fright into a constant fear into a sense of pervading anxiety because of the unstable and chaotic condition of Nigeria during the colonial and post-independence eras.

The gradation is visible in the fact that fright becomes internalized into a lesser degree of apprehension which is fear once the element of surprise disappears as a result of a projected knowledge of the phenomenon.The more the recurrences, the lesser the degree of apprehension, which becomes a lasting anxiety. Dreams mix with reality, fright is intertwined with fear to settle into anxiety, and that is the undecidable dimension about these reactions. The process of the internalizing of fright and its transformation into fear, to settle into anxiety has to do with the passage of a state of complete unpreparedness to face a traumatic experience to that of preparedness with repulsion to accept the experience. Freud does sum it up in what follows: What triggers traumatic neuroses "seems to rest upon the factor of surprise, of fright" (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 6) and he goes on noting the difference of fright from fear and anxiety. Fright is that response to a situation of danger when one is not prepared for it. Anxiety, on the other hand, has to do with the fact that the known or unknown threat is expected.

For Freud, fear implies being afraid of a specific object (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 6). The fact that Azaro's status and possible disappearance have become known is now a source of anxiety for his parents. Shall he stay on becomes the recurrent response to his life among them. Continuing in the same vein as that of Freud, it is natural that a stage of acceptance takes place after some acquaintance with the traumatic experience. It is what Freud calls the latency after experiencing the traumatic events. He explains the stage as one "period void of any symptoms or reactions," as Caruth put it (*Unclaimed Experience* 17). Attempts at understanding are ceaseless and yield no fixed meaning or resolution.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that in *The Famished Road* trilogy Ben Okri creatively uses

elements from an indigenous traditional oral culture for the construction of his narratives. The appropriation of oral cultural elements in constructing the literary narrative results in the showcasing of a Nigerian identity expressed through myths and rituals instead of conventional realism. The interlocking of the fantastic with the real opens up possibilities for the treatment of content in an appropriate form. At times, Bascom's functions of the oral lore and the fantastic may seem to frame the stories and dreams in a container that is educational and cultural. However, this very container remains flexible as it does bring the past to bear on the present and the future rather than collapse them in a single fixed entity. The functions lend shapes to the stories that remain open, ambiguous giving rise to a multiplicity of otherwise fragments belonging to different orders.

Endnotes

[1]Ben Okri's abiku trilogy, which comprises *The Famished Road* (1992) and its sequels *Songs of Enchantment* (1993) and *Infinite Riches* (1998). Later referred to in the text/in-text citations as *TFR*, *SOE*, *IR*. Abiku: The word Abiku is Yoruba for 'spirit child. It refers to the phenomenon of a child who is caught up in an unending cycle of births deaths, and re-births, the term being literally translated as "one who is born, dies". For further details on abiku see Sola Afolayan's "ABIKU" in African Literature, Culture and Politics.

[2] In writing back to the center, Okri does not fall prey to the age-old colonialist binary paradigm of colonizer/colonized. Instead he attempts to go beyond this binary opposition to observe the world through a "Third Eye" and to create a "Third Space" beyond the binary opposition of colonizer colonized. (see Aldea Eva's *Magical Realism and Deleuze* (2011) and Cooper, Brenda. *Magical Realism in West African Fiction* (2004). It could also be argued that this confinement within an inherited paradigm has created a further binary opposition, that of colonial/postcolonial. This is the paradigm which critics like Stephen Slemon, for instance, use in their mis/interpretation of magic realism. Although Slemon professes to the binary nature of magic realism as a postcolonial discourse, ironically in a later article on postcolonialism, he criticizes the theory for its inability to escape "the binarism of Europe and its others, of colonizer and colonized, of the West and the rest, of the vocal and the silent." ("Unsettling the Empire" 34)

[3]Georg Lukacs, *The Theory of the Novel*, translated by Anna Bostock (Cambridge, Mass., 1971). For further discussion of the use of totality in Lukacs' aesthetic work, see Roy Pascal, "Georg Lukacs: The Concept of Totality" in *Georg Lukacs, The Man, His Work and His Ideas*. or Jameson, Fredric. *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*. Vol. 312. Princeton UP, 1974.

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