

Trauma and History in Ben Okri's Fiction

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Abstract

In his Azaro Trilogy, Nigerian writer Ben Okri describes a fantastic but painful world in the style of magical realism. Through the miserable life of Azaro's family against poverty and the political power struggle between the Party of the Rich and the Party of the Poor in pre-independence days, the trilogy traces the causes of Nigerian political chaos to the heritages of colonialism and regionalism, and foretells the impending nightmarish civil war. By exploring these historical issues, Okri reveals how Nigeria has been traumatized by British colonizers and how the dispossessed are oppressed by the rich, at the same time he attempts to search for some solutions to the present problems of Nigeria.

Key words: Okri; Colonialism; Regionalism; The civil war; Trauma

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INTRODUCTION

Africa, the supposedly cradle of human life in anthropological studies, bears a heavy burden of long traumatized history of slavery and colonialism. Even today, many countries, though they won their political independence in the wake of the Second World War, are still grappling with a variety of problems: political, social,

ethnic, religious and diplomatic, as in the cases of Ghana, Uganda, Sudan, etc.. Similar problems plague Nigeria, the most populous nation-state in Africa. Its tribalism, racism, political corruption and economic dispossession are at the core of Nigerian social chaos and they are the repeated concerns of contemporary Nigerian literature as in the writings of Amos Tutuola (1920-1997), Wole Soyinka (1934-), Chinua Achebe (1930-), Ben Okri (1959-). The representative writer of the young generation, Ben Okri inherits the older writers' social conscience and historical consciousness, assuming the writer's duty to unearth the problems with Nigeria and to call up Nigerian people's awareness of their past as a guide to their present. Okri's fictional world is fraught with violence, corruption, death, ghosts, and legends, through which Okri examines the roots of political turmoil of Nigeria and searches for solutions to its present problems. His representative work, the Azaro trilogy, set in the background of pre-independence days, traces the causes of social chaos to British colonization and regionalism and at the same time foretells the impending civil war as the outcome of political and tribal struggles.

1. NIGERIAN INDEPENDENCE FROM BRITISH COLONIZATION

In pre-colonial days, Nigeria was made up of empires and state-towns in different regions such as the empire of Hausa in the north, the Jukun empire in the Middle Belt, the Yoruba empire of Oyo in the south, and the small-scaled state-town societies of the Igbo, Isoko, and Urhobo in the east, etc.. Both the centralized states and the noncentralized state-towns had developed their political, social, cultural and artistic structures to a sophisticated level. For centuries, their economic life mainly depended on the local resources, such as farming and cattle-rearing in the north, fishing along the coast and river banks. Regional trading provided them with the stuff unavailable

within each region. The trans-Saharan trade linked Nigeria with North Africa, the Nile valley and, indirectly, Europe and brought Islam to Nigerian life as well. Since 1486 when the Portuguese first made their presence on the coast south of Benin, later joined by the British, French and Dutch, the trade centre of Nigeria had gradually shifted from the north to the south. The increasing demand of labour in the Americas motivated the Europeans to target their trading commodities from pepper, cloths, beads and ivory to slaves. The slave trade then became the kernel of Euro-Nigerian trade well into the nineteenth century. The chiefs and merchants along Nigerian coastline acted as the middlemen for European traders in exchange for imported goods. The slave trade brought about a huge population loss and affected deeply the cultural, political and social lives of Nigeria, e.g. the introduction of Christianity to the belief system, the adoption of European languages in trading communities, the reshaping of economic activities and its consequential alternation of power structure.

In the 19th century, the development of humanitarian movements urged for the abolition of slave trade and slavery. To maintain their economic interest in Western Africa, the British were more deeply involved in local affairs. By the end of the nineteenth century, Britain, following the resolution reached at the Berlin Conference of 1884-85, legitimized its primacy on the Niger in the European "Scramble for Africa". Between 1885 and 1906, the British brought different regions of Nigeria under their control through military force or "pacification campaigns".

Once the British secured their colonial power, they implemented the philosophy of "indirect rule" in Nigeria, that is the British dominated Nigeria via traditional rulers with colonial officials giving advices to local rulers so as to "minimize direct contacts with the majority of the population" (Falola, 1999, p. 70). Since "indirect rule" favoured the control of the traditional rulers who were unresponsive to political and economic changes in the country and it disregarded the political realities of small-scale societies, the young educated elites who were denied inclusion in the management of their towns pressed for a change of the country.

Although the colonial rule saw the development of infrastructure to facilitate the trade between Nigeria and other nations, the expansion of educational facilities, the improvement of health service and the creation of new cities, colonial economy, Toyin Falola (1999) concludes, was essentially exploitative with a focus on exports as the "mechanism for wealth transfer from Nigeria to Europe" (p. 76). To the mother country, Nigeria should maintain its status as a financially self-sufficient colony, a producer of raw materials, and a consumer of imported finished products. The dependence of economy on agriculture rendered it vulnerable to the fluctuation of world market and the threats of poor weather and insects. Nigerian economy was severely attacked by the Great Depression in the late 1920s and 1930s. Unemployment, racial

discrimination, forced labour and taxation gave rise to the outcry for self-government. Three major political organizations – the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), the Northern People's Congress (NPC), and the Action Group (AG) – were instrumental in leading the nationalist movements. At the close of World War II, the demand for Nigerian independence was stronger especially with Nigerian soldiers who fought for the allies and were affected by western ideals of liberty and equality. The necessity of decolonization was intensified by the two new superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union which had no colonies in Africa. Under these circumstances, the Labour Party whose leaders were sympathetic with the colonies started its process of decolonization in Africa (Falola, 1999, pp. 22-93).

However, decolonization and the sequential independence were never an easy affair in Nigeria due to its complex regionalism and tribalism. Regionalism took its root from colonialism which "perpetuated the idea of federalism and separate regional autonomy" (Neher, 1999, p. 85) rather than unite the ethnically-based regions into a politically unified country over its sixty years' governing. Motivated by regional feelings, the political parties became the agencies of tribalism. NPC representing the northern Islamists of Hausa-Fulani, AG the western Yoruba, and NCNC the eastern Igbo were more and more concerned about their respective narrow gains from independence instead of pan-Nigerian issues. While the conservative north was worried about the domination by the more westernized south, the minority groups within each region feared the domination by the larger. Therefore, the move toward national independence was delayed several times. After a series of conferences and compromises, the 1959 general elections finally saw the coalition of NPC and NCNC and the formation of the first government of Nigeria with Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa (1912-1966) as the Prime Minister and Nnamdi Azikiwe (1904-1996) as the Governor-General. On October 1st, 1960, Nigeria declared its independence.

Decolonization and political campaigns for elections provide the historical backgrounds of the Azaro trilogy: *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches*. The trilogy centers on the life of one Nigerian ghetto family with Azaro as the protagonist and narrative focalizer. The story develops by two lines: one is from the mythical dimension about Azaro and his parents' constant fight with the messengers from the spirit world, particularly with the three-headed spirit and the four-headed spirit, because Azaro is a spirit-child who has promised his spirit companions to return as soon as possible to the world of the spirit; the other from the realistic dimension about the painful struggle of the dispossessed against poverty at a time of political campaigns between the Party of the Rich and the Party of the Poor for the general elections of the new government. These two lines, together with a sideline about a bar owner

Madame Koto's ascendancy to power, her pregnancy and final assassination, connect the three books into one epic narrative of Nigerian contemporary history.

The beginning chapter of *The Famished Road* narrates in biblical language a story of creation. "IN THE BEGINNING there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry" (Okri, 1993a, p. 3). In the legend the hungry road devours the weary travellers to fill its insatiable stomach, likewise, the impoverished life in Nigeria weighs down the hapless ghetto-dwellers. So the spirit-children, or in Yoruba tradition *abiku*, living in the idyllic land of beginnings, refuse to be born to the world of the Living. They make pacts with their spirit companions that they will return to the spirit world at the first opportunity and those who break the pact will be "assailed by hallucinations and haunted by their companions" (p. 4). Azaro who does not know how many times he has been born and has died young chooses to stay this time because he has grown tired of coming and going and because he wants to "taste of this world, to feel it, suffer it, know it, to love it, to make a valuable contribution to it, and to have that sublime mood of eternity in me as I live the life to come" (p. 5). Most importantly, it is because of the bruised face of the woman who might have given birth to him several times that he decides to stay. He wants to make her happy. Azaro's decision initiates him into a life of riddles which only the dead can answer.

The beauty, peace, and joy in the land of the Unborn give way to the squalor, confusion, and anguish in a nameless city of Nigeria. Chaos, filth, destitution and despair define the life of the poor people in a city compound. Azaro's father makes little money as a load carrier in the lorry, and his mother hawks at the market her boxes of cheap stuff always on a quite empty stomach. The burdened life is made more intolerable by politics. The Party of the Rich and the Party of the Poor vie for the public support. They propagandize their political objectives and entice the people to vote for them, but in corrupt ways. The Party of the Rich distributes sour milk among the compound people, which results in a mass illness. When a politician from the Party of the Poor discredits the Party of the Rich for being responsible for the bad milk, his shoutings betray the lies of his party, "We are your friends. We will bring you electircity and bad roads. Not good milk, I mean good roads, not bad milk" (p. 153). Though Azaro's understanding of political machinations only stays at the level of party competition, Madame Koto's change of fortune tells him one message that she becomes rich after getting associated with the Party of the Rich. Her palm-wine bar goes through several decorations, and with each decoration her wealth and power swell. In contrast, there is no improvement to the living of the impoverished. The compound children

are characterized by tattered clothes, big stomachs and barefoot. To quell his hunger, Azaro has to ask Mum to tell the story of a man without a stomach.

Ben Okri details the agonizing poverty of the compound people, but the politicians do nothing to change the situation except making some empty promises or distributing sour milk or powder. Like Caryl Phillips, Okri makes use of his fiction as a platform to articulate his political view and to expose political vices and tricks. In the trilogy, he portrays the photographer Jeremiah as a character of political consciousness. With his camera, he records the miserable compound life and the chaos of political campaigns. The Photographer tells Azaro that politicians are no different from the rats, "They are like bad politicians and imperialists and rich people... They eat up property. They eat up everything in sight. And one day when they are hungry they will eat us up" (p. 233). Dad also realizes the hypocrisy of politics, and he denounces both parties for poisoning the minds of the people. In his platonic mind, he should organize his own party on behalf of the beggars. Yet no one takes his words seriously. Many of the compound people are subject to the power of the Party of the Rich, but their conversion brings them only some meager food. They are still excluded from the future of the country. They have no idea why the political rally is postponed so many times and so long. From time to time the two parties visit the compound for their propaganda, create some chaos among the people, and leave. No one knows the time of their next show. Such a situation continues for a couple of years and at the end of the third book *Infinite Riches*, the much delayed elections are said to be approaching after the assassination of Madame Koto at the rally by the people from her own party who think that she has betrayed the party principles.

The two political associations are nonexistent in Nigeria, but the conflicts between the Party of the Rich and the Party of the Poor and the political dissension within one party as seen in Madame Koto's death are evidently a reflection of Nigerian political arena in pre-independence days. The three major parties NPC, AG and NCNC competed for power "within the bounds of an electoral system" (Falola, 1999, p. 92) and political agitation was common on a nation-wide scale. As Toyin Falola (1999) puts it, "the enemy to fight was no longer the colonial government, which had indicated strong signs of dismantling itself, but fellow Nigerians" (p. 92). Regional loyalty and political gains became the greatest obstacles for the establishment of a centralized government. It took about 15 years for Nigeria to acquire national sovereignty after 1945. In the trilogy, the last chapter but one in *Infinite Riches* ends with the following sentences:

We had hardly recovered from that shock when, on another morning, on awakening, we found that the much delayed elections were upon us. The elections would seal the fate of the unborn nation. (Okri, 1998, p. 337)

In consideration of the repeated clamours of politicians

that the elections would be held, it might be safe to deduce that the compound people are once again misled into believing that the two parties would not come to intimidate them for voting. Therefore this ending creates an illusion in the reader that Nigerian people are deeply caught in an endless cycle of political struggles.

Besides political corruption and treachery, Ben Okri explores the other source of Nigerian troubles, colonialism. Much of his reflection on colonialism is to be found in *Infinite Riches*. In each of *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*, there is a vision and a story concerning the white presence in Nigeria. In *The Famished Road*, at Madame Koto's bar, the best location for the merging of the esoteric and the real, Azaro has a vision of Nigerian past through the duiker's eyes, in which he sees the ghost ships bearing "mirrors and guns and strange texts untouched by the salt of the Atlantic," witnesses "the destruction of great shrines, the death of mighty trees" (Okri, 1993a, p. 457), hears the earth cry and finds the people grow smaller in being and the death of their ways and philosophies. The vision in *Songs of Enchantment* is made possible through the eyes of the Masquerade standing before Madame Koto's bar. One of the scenes played out before him is the "invisible Masquerades of the Western world...their worshippers of order, money, desire, power, and world domination" (Okri, 1993c, p. 115). These two visions lay bare the western greed for conquering Africa with force and the ruins European penetration has done to African land and people. In a different light, the two stories reveal the trauma western intrusion inflicts upon its own people. Mum's story in *The Famished Road* relates a white man's bewilderment at being unable to leave Africa, and he later realizes that "The only way to get out of Africa is to get Africa out of you" (p. 483). In *Songs of Enchantment*, Dad tells a story about the history of his three-legged chair which belongs to an Englishman who fails to acclimatize himself in Africa and dies of malaria. The two stories confirm the idea that the perpetrators of colonialism are its own victims in that they have to live with physical, cultural and emotional detachment from homeland and to undergo the trial of foreign climate and the torture of conscience. With these visions and stories, Azaro's understanding of Nigerian troubles reaches a new dimension beyond the domestic disturbance. But due to the little narrative space Okri designs for them, they are more likely to be drowned in the grand narrative of the political rally in the first two books. The issue of colonialism does not get its proportionate treatment. *Infinite Riches* makes up for this lack with sufficient details about colonial rule.

In *Infinite Riches*, Azaro's ideological mind is more mature and penetrating. Here, Azaro often makes use of his magical power of an abiku, willing his spirit to fly from his body so as to see people and things elsewhere

and to enter the dreams of other people. Thereupon the limited first-person focalizer acquires the advantage of a God-like focalizer, offering a panoramic vision of every character's mentality and activity. Several times, he is in the dreams of the English Governor-General. In one of his dreams, the Governor-General is "destroying all the documents. Burning all the evidence. Shredding history" (Okri, 1998, p. 11). The documents he burns are the crucial papers concerning the governance of Nigeria, "the evidence of important negotiations, the notes about dividing up the country, the new map of the nation, the redrawn boundaries, memos about meetings with religious leaders and political figures" (p. 36). This dream points to one fact that the British would not leave Nigeria empty-handedly. Before the end of colonial administration, the British schemed to protect their economic and other interests unaffected by the decolonization. Through the cooperation with "the emerging Nigerian comprador bourgeoisie", the British would be able to implement a sort of post-colonial economic system "with continuing export production, and the withdrawal of foreign business from traditional fields into the more modern sectors of the economy" (Falola, 1999, p. 93). At this point, Azaro clarifies the part the British have played in traumatizing Nigeria such as disuniting the nation and exploiting its resources. Instead of simply listing the facts as he does in the first two books, Azaro begins to make judgement on the Governor's deeds. He realizes that the island across the ocean is "where many of our troubles began" (Okri, 1998, p. 11).

Another case in point of Azaro's criticism of white men's Eurocentric ideology is the issue over history. In the talk between two white men, they see Nigeria a nation without history, without talent for order and sense of responsibility, Nigerian people "a younger brother of the human race" (p. 268). This view is reinforced in the Governor-General's dream in which "Africa was inhabited not by human beings but by a monstrous variation of black insects" (p. 122). As he rewrites the history of Nigeria, he starts it with the arrival of Europeans on African shores. In his rendition of history, there is a clear dichotomy between European civilization and African civilization with the European time being longer and African being shorter, European destiny being brighter and African dimmer. The Governor's act of rewriting corresponds to what Edward Said says about the arbitrary designation of cultural superiority, "cultures have always been inclined to impose complete transformations on other cultures, receiving these other cultures, not as they are but as, for the benefit of the receiver, they ought to be" (Said, *Orientalism*, 1978, p. 67). Naturally, the hegemonic European culture regards all the non-European cultures and peoples backward, inferior, filthy, undisciplined and childlike.

Sarcastically, when the Governor is busy with

transforming the “really passionate dreams” of Nigeria into “the long silences” (Okri, 1998, p. 110) and depriving Nigeria of “language, of poetry, of stories, of architecture, of civic laws, of social organization, of art, science, mathematics, sculpture, abstract conception, and philosophy...of history, of civilization and, unintentionally, of humanity too” (p. 111), an old Nigerian woman who resides in the deep forest presses on with the weaving of Nigerian “true secret history”:

A history that was frightening and wondrous, bloody and comic, labyrinthine, circular, always turning, always surprising, with events becoming signs, and signs becoming reality... She recorded bawdy ancient jokes, drinking songs, riddles... She recorded wonderful forms of divination by numbers and cowries and signs...advancements in music, a delightful contrapuntal bar and tone system...oral poems of famous bards whose words had entered communal memory...impromptu poems with measured stresses composed by women on their journey between two kings. She recorded stories and myths and philosophical disquisitions on the relativities of African Time and Space...theories of Art and Sculpture, the secret methods of bronze casting...a brief nightmare of colonization, and eventual, surprising, renaissance. (pp. 112-4)

Whatever has been denied in the written documents of the British Governor is reclaimed in the old woman's woven tapestry. Okri's juxtaposition of the two versions of history subverts the European text of Africa and conveys the message to Nigerians that their culture and history should not be submerged by the overwhelming influence of colonialism.

It is of great significance that Okri sets the trilogy in pre-independence days. This period marks the transition of Nigeria from colonialism to political sovereignty and serves as a good temporal joint between Nigerian past and future. It is not an exaggeration to say that all the major troubles of Nigeria are converged at this stage. Besides his attempt to write an epic of his country like Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1927-) does in *Hundred Years of Solitude*, I think Okri intends more to search for some solutions than to represent history for its own sake. The imaginations of Azaro's father about the future country might be what Okri thinks Nigeria should consider seriously, though some of them sound too idealistic. In his conjured country of which he is the ruler, everyone would have access to education; everyone would “be completely aware of what is going on in the world, be versed in tribal, national, continental, and international events, history, poetry, and science” (Okri, 1993a, p. 409); and poor people would participate in government affairs, and so on.

2. NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said (1994) defines nationalism as a “mobilizing force that coalesced into resistance against an alien and occupying empire on the part of people possessing a common history, religion, and language” (p. 223). Inspired by the spirit of nationalism,

the colonies could successfully rid their territories of the colonial rule, yet nationalism itself has remained “a problematic enterprise” in that its leaders were more than often elites who have been exposed to western education, thus the products of the colonial power. Once colonialism was erased, nationalists were likely to “replace the old colonial force with a new class-based and ultimately exploitative one, which replicated the old colonial structures in new terms” (p. 223). And nationalism, left to itself after independence, tended to “crumble into regionalism” with the old conflicts between regions being repeated and privileges being monopolized by one people over another. Said's study of nationalism fits the case of Nigeria.

The end of colonialism and the acquisition of independence did not lead Nigeria out of its traumatic past, but plunged it into a new cycle of pathos. To a nation which is multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-religious, and multi-lingual (It is estimated that over 200 groups speak about 250 languages in Nigeria), national unity is hard to achieve. It is with the coalition of the NPC (the Hausa-Fulani-based party in the North) and NCNC (the Igbo-based party in the East) that the first government was established in 1960 and the first Republic was announced in 1963. However, this government took Obafemi Awolowo (1909-1987) and his AG (the Yoruba-based party in the West) as a threat since Awolowo aimed at making AG a national party, “contesting seats in all three regions of the country” (Neher, 1999, p. 92). The central government's support to his party rivals infuriated Awolowo so much so that he created the new Midwestern Region “out of an area that had been supportive to Awolowo in the Western Region” (p. 93). As a result, chief Awolowo and thirty of his followers were arrested and charged with treason during demonstrations in September 1962. This incident is a microcosm of the political and social chaos of Nigeria after its independence. Partisan and regional contests from within and without were common in Nigeria, as Chinua Achebe (1998) sees that the word “tribe” is most expressive of Nigeria's political history: “We did not stand too long in brotherhood. Within six years we were standing or sprawling on a soil soaked in fratricidal blood” (p. 7).

The fratricide Achebe refers to is the Civil War from 1967 to 1970. Since the First Republic failed to maintain peace and order in Nigeria, the army majors took advantage of the disorder and confusion to stage a military coup in January 1966, which brought General I. T. U. Aguiyi-Ironsi (1924-1966) to become the first military head of state. An Igbo himself, General Ironsi's policy favored the better educated Southerners over Northerners. The fear of eastern Igbo domination brought about the protests of the Northerners who killed thousands of Igbos living in the north, and Ironsi was killed during a north-led counter-coup on July 29, 1966. Four days later, Yakubu Gowon (1934-), a northern lieutenant-colonel from the Middle Belt became the new leader of Nigeria. However,

his administration was challenged by Odumegwu Ojukwu (1933-2011), the military governor of the Eastern Region. This time easterners were apprehensive about the northern domination, and the rumor that northern residents had been killed in the east provoked another round of the killing of the Igbo in the north in September and October of 1966. The report placed the number of Igbo who died in the massacre between 7,000 and 50,000. About two million northern Igbo people fled to the east and Igbo in the west also joined in this mass exodus, which posed a great economic problem of refugees to Ojukwu who saw a more urgent need for secession. Therefore, when Gowon attempted to create "twelve new states which cut across the old boundaries and seemed to eliminate the power of the former regions" (Neher, 1999, p. 95), Ojukwu declared on May 30, 1967 that the Eastern Region seceded from the central government and became a sovereign and independent Republic of Biafra. This signified the beginning of the civil war.

The civil war lasted longer than Gowon had thought: "The determination of the Igbo, the contributions of relief agencies to Biafra, and the shortage of managerial and organizational skills in the federal army were some of the reasons for the prolongation" (p. 123). The federal strategy of blockading Igbo heartland and starving the rebels into submission proved successful. In January 1970, Ojukwu escaped and the civil war came to an end.

The civil war is one of the major tragedies in the history of newly independent Nigeria, claiming about a million lives. In the Azaro trilogy and two short stories collected in *Incidents at the Shrine* and *The Stars of the New Curfew*, Ben Okri presents an infernal picture of the war. In the Azaro trilogy, there are a lot of visions about what is to come after decolonization. In *The Famished Road*, Ade, Azaro's companion who is also an abiku but who is fed up with living and is anticipating his return to the kingdom of spirits, tells Azaro about the impending wars, famines, coups, and diseases. Dad in *Infinite Riches* becomes a quasi-prophet, pouring out his visions of "future coups and riots, tribal massacres and famine, plagues of beetles and explosions at oil sites, the genocide of war and the decades of hardship to come" (Okri, 1998, p. 49). Azaro's visions of the war are more concrete and horrible in *Songs of Enchantment*. Take one for example, he foresees a bloody war raging:

A war without beginning and without end, whose origins formed a self-feeding circle like the oroboros. I saw soldiers stick their bayonets into the eyes of their countrymen. I saw bombs explode, laughing, while limbs scattered about the place in unholy jubilation. Blood spurted from the trunks of palm trees. Limbs, intestines, eyeballs and pulped torsos grew from the earth and writhed and crawled amongst the rain-washed undergrowth...The battleground became a liverish carpet of sliced tongues and slug-infested hearts. (Okri, 1993c, p. 90)

Not only these characters foretell the post-independence miseries, Azaro also displays their causes in the form

of several dreams. In the blind old man's dream, he sees the birth of several babies with "different voices, different eyes, different cries, different dreams, similar ancestry, all jostling, all trapped within the same flesh, pulling in conflicting directions" (p. 91). In Madame Koto's dream, he is shocked at finding she gives birth to "three baby Masquerades...who spent their lives divided, warring against each other, fighting for their mother's milk, savaging her breasts, and tearing her apart in a bizarre, incestuous and greedy rage" (p. 142). These two dreams are metaphoric of Nigeria's ethnic disparities and the division of Nigerian territory into three contending regions. Besides the tribal and regional lines of division, Azaro also censures the political corruption as revealed in the dreams of the future rulers of the nation: "They dreamt of power. They dreamt of bottomless coffers to steal from. Houses in every famous city...Power removing them from the consequences of their own actions" (Okri, 1998, p. 11). Their nation-destroying policies and their greed for power and wealth fuel the hatred of people toward one another and ignite the civil war.

In *Songs of Enchantment*, Okri interprets human greed for selfish gains as being accountable for the fall of man and the loss of paradise. Mum has one story about the original paradise where people did not know death or sorrow. Moreover they had no language as such. It is the appearance of a rainbow that started all the troubles. The men argued about the possession of the rainbow, and fightings broke out. After that, men began to know hunger and to have desires for new things: "Corruption came upon the people and grew fat. Diseases dwelled in them and Misery had many children amongst them. The world turned upside down. Creation became confusion" (Okri, 1993c, p. 75). God then sent Death down to "remind people of the miraculous life they had before," but Death disobeyed God and drove people deeper into the darkness. Thus God sent a little bird which turned into a baby to warn Death. At last the bird defeated Death and planted the seed of love in the hearts of the new created people. Mum's parable reworks the Biblical stories of the Fall, the Babel Tower, the Flood and Jesus Christ as the Messiah. According to Robert Fraser (2002), in this creation myth, men "drift away from perfection because they have learned how to speak, and hence to argue" (p. 4). His view of language as "the harbinger of violence" (p. 4) ignores a more important fact in the fall of man, that is the desire for possession precedes naming. Language and naming are an expression of that desire. It is human desires and ambitions that trigger the wars and that make men yield to the power of Death before the Flood and the salvation by the bird of love. Here, Okri suggests that no matter tribalism, regionalism, and partisan competitions, they are all a result of human desires for possession and power.

The civil war has been a nightmarish memory of Okri since quite a few of his relations and friends were killed

from 1967 to 1971. He said in an interview to Nicolas Shakespeare, "My education took place simultaneously with my relations being killed and friends who one day got up in class and went out to fight the war" (Brownstein, 1999, p. 349). In the two civil war stories "Laughter Beneath the Bridge" and "In the Shadow of War", Okri harshly attacks the sense of tribal loyalty, especially through the ghastly picture of death. Set in the early months of the Civil War, "Laughter Beneath the Bridge" captures the cruelty of ethnic hostility. On their way home from the boarding school, the young narrator and his mother are stopped by the soldiers at the checkpoint. To identify themselves as not belonging to the rebel tribe, they have to recite the paternoster in their mother tongue. Mother mumbles in her husband's language instead of her own Igbo, and the narrator narrowly escapes when he shouts the word "shit" in his father's language. Back home, the narrator finds his friend Monica obsessed with the idea of avenging her brother who has been killed and whose body has been dumped into the river by the soldiers. And they notice that the river beneath the bridge is full of "corpses that had swollen huge massive bodies with enormous eyes and bloated cheeks" (Okri, 1993b, p. 18). Later in the masquerade performance, Monica challenges the soldiers who order her to speak in her language. Her rebel language betrays her ethnic origin and she is taken away by the soldiers. Then the narrator hears about her no more. It is not hard to think what would become of Monica. In this story, Okri condemns the brutality of war and the crazy killing of the civilians by the soldiers only on the ground that they do not speak their language.

The other civil war story "In the Shadow of War" occurs in the last stage of the war when the Biafran side is blockaded and people are starved. The protagonist Omovo, whose adult life is recorded in Okri's novels, *The Landscape Within* and *Dangerous Love*, follows a veiled woman with a basket on her head into the forest and sees that she disappears into a cave. Before long, a group of children "with kwashiorkor stomachs" and women wearing rags lead the woman up the hill. It dawns on Omovo that the woman sends relief goods to the refugees. Near the river, the woman is stopped by the soldiers who have been searching for her. One of them tears off her veil, revealing the disfigured face of the woman. They fire a shot at her when she refuses to answer their questioning. At the moment the woman falls down, some lights shine over the forest, with which Omovo for the first time sees what is floating on the river. It is not the dead animals he has thought, but "the corpses of grown men". A similar sight which confronts the young narrator in "Laughter Beneath the Bridge" unfolds before Omovo, "Their bodies were tangled with river-weed and their eyes were bloated" (Okri, 1988, p. 8). This spine-chilling moment is also the moment of epiphany to Omovo whose knowledge of the war has been limited to the radio news "without

comprehension to the day's casualties" (p. 6). The direct encounter with the corpse and the woman's death lead him out of the shadowy perception into the horrible truth of war. The removal of the woman's veil metaphorically suggests that "the veil, or shadow, of ignorance has been removed from Omovo's eyes" (Brent, 2005). In a violent way, Omovo and the young narrator in "Laughter Beneath the Bridge" learn to grow.

In both story collections, Okri illustrates how the ethnic tensions traumatize the characters to whom "memories of a violent past are forever returning unbidden" (Fraser, 2002, p. 19). Another aftermath of the civil war is that people are more "acutely conscious of the fragility of the social order" (p. 19). As is known, the end of the civil war did not terminate the nightmares of the country. From 1975 to 1998, every few years Nigeria witnessed the alternation between military government and civilian government. It seems that peace and stability are hard to maintain long in this nation of diversities. Okri's civil war stories mirror the general political and social climate of post-independence Nigeria. Simultaneously the shocking experience of reading nightmares would lead contemporary readers into thinking about how to tackle current problems of diversity of different kinds.

CONCLUSION

Poverty and political instability have harrowed the life of Nigerian people for such a long time that existence itself has turned into a nightmare. In Okri's representation of the traumatized people, life and death, facts and illusions, dreams and hallucinations are all intermingled into the domain of their existence. It is hard to distinguish between the everyday and the fantasy as it is hard to present a "coherent picture of Nigerian past" without violence (Hodgkin, 1960, p. 2). The Azaro trilogy are peopled with ghosts and spirits, even the people from the real world are deformed as seen in the beggars, some having rubber-like legs, some twisted necks, others having "both feet behind their heads" or having "one eye much higher up than the other" etc. (Okri, 1993a, p. 416). In the words of Ato Quayson (1997), Okri's narrative stresses "the essential 'ghostliness' of reality not only in terms of its formal strategies of esoteric weaving but also in terms of the delineation of squalor and destitution, these being the new seats of hallucination" (p. 136).

Ghostliness, deformity and hallucination are most conveniently used for the text of trauma. Different from Kazuo Ishiguro and Caryl Phillips, Okri examines the trauma more on the collective level than the individual level. By the Azaro trilogy, Okri seems to dramatize in an epic fashion the life struggle of Nigerian people against the backdrop of history, with Azaro's family as their representatives; it is worth noting that Azaro's parents are unnamed. Despite the lingering sense of endless pathos

at the end of *Infinite Riches* with the premonition that the approaching elections would “seal the fate of the unborn nation” (Okri, 1998, p. 337), Okri does not seal the hope for Nigerian nation. Sometimes Azaro has the feeling that “Maybe one day we will see that beyond our chaos there could always be a new sunlight, and serenity” (Okri, 1993c, p. 297). A wonderful change will come if they know that the road is hungry for transformations and if they keep the road open.

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