

# Hybridity in Ben Okri's *Abiku* Trilogy

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## ABSTRACT

In its narrative style as well as in its cultural environment, magical realism provides the optimal literary field to respond to the cultural issues and conditions that traverse contemporary postcolonial society. For example, the codification in the magical-realist narrative of both colonial and postcolonial discourses, involved in a dialectical struggle, reflects many of the problematic relations existing between colonizer and colonized in postcolonial culture. This leads to the investigation of hybridity as an important trope in the ongoing process of literary and cultural decolonization. This article explores the function of hybridity in three novels by Ben Okri, showing how, through the destabilization of such spaces as the real and the imaginary, the new and the old, and the self and the other, a third space emerges where irreconcilable perspectives and contradictory properties coexist, although problematically. In this sense, the fictional space, time and characters displace polar oppositions and make it difficult to conceive of any version of reality as having a greater claim to absolute truth or unique referentiality. Consequently, and in theoretical and political terms, what magical realism tries to do here is replacing the dominant culture and its version of truth by a new mode of perception that opens up various levels of thought and accepts the possibility of many truths to be considered simultaneously and not hierarchically.

**Keywords:** magical realism, hybridity, colonialism, postcolonialism, culture

## La Hibridización en la trilogía *Abiku* de Ben Okri

## RESUMEN

En su estilo narrativo como en su entorno cultural, el realismo mágico proporciona el terreno literario óptimo para responder a las cuestiones culturales y las condiciones que atraviesan la sociedad postcolonial contemporánea. Por ejemplo, la codificación en la narrativa mágico-realista del discurso colonial y el discurso poscolonial, ambos involucrados en una pugna dialéctica, refleja muchas de las relaciones problemáticas que existen entre el colonizador y el colonizado en la cultura poscolonial. Esto conduce a la investigación de la hibridización como un tropo importante en el continuo proceso de descolonización literaria y cultural. Este artículo pretende explorar el funcionamiento de la hibridización en tres novelas de Ben Okri mostrando cómo, a través de la desestabilización de tales espacios como lo real y lo imaginario, lo nuevo y lo viejo, y el yo y el otro, se crea un tercer espacio donde las perspectivas irreconcilables y las propiedades contradictorias coexisten, aunque problemáticamente. En este sentido, el espacio ficticio, el tiempo y los personajes desplazan las oposiciones polares y hacen que sea difícil concebir cualquier versión de la realidad como teniendo una demanda mayor a la verdad absoluta o referencialidad única. Consecuentemente, y en términos teóricos y políticos, lo que el realismo mágico trata de hacer aquí es la sustitución de la cultura dominante y su

versión de la verdad por un nuevo modo de percepción que abre diferentes niveles de pensamiento y acepta la posibilidad de considerar varias verdades simultáneamente y no jerárquicamente.

**Palabras clave:** realismo mágico, hibridización, colonialismo, poscolonialismo, cultura

**SUMMARY:** 1. Introduction, 2. Hybridity in Ben Okri's *Abiku* Trilogy, 3. Conclusion.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Many interpretations given to literary magical realism coalesce around seeing it as the planetary site of mixture and fusion of disparate elements. Stephen Slemon (1995: 410) speaks of the impossibility of naturalizing magical realist texts to any established system of representation. Anne C. Hegerfeldt (2005: 70) contends that magical realism refuses to fit into an existing canon of genres and modes. Brenda Cooper explains that

A syncretism between paradoxical dimensions of life and death, historical reality and magic, science and religion, characterizes the plots, themes and narrative structures of magical realist novels. In other words, urban and rural, Western and indigenous, black, white and Mestizo—this cultural, economic and political cacophony is the amphitheatre in which magical realist fictions are performed. (Cooper 1998: 32)

This cross-pollination of elements from traditionally irreconcilable perspectives leads to the invocation of Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity. The concept points towards a new definition of culture that favours in-between spaces, translation, and renegotiation of cultural meanings to fixed identities or Manichaeian positions (Bhabha 1994: 28).

As such, hybridity brings into view deeper and truer realities than those depicted by the ethnographic literary authority of Western realist representation. Thanks to that cultural hybridity, magical realism is now increasingly recognized as a leading genre in postcolonial fiction, allowing for the voices and traditions of formerly colonized cultures to emerge into the global literary arena as a cultural corrective against the accepted conventions of realist narrative.

In the present essay, I will analyse how hybridity manifests itself in Ben Okri's *abiku* trilogy, which comprises *The Famished Road* (1992) and its sequels *Songs of Enchantment* (1993) and *Infinite Riches* (1998). At the same time, I will show that hybridity in the trilogy challenges the cultural and literary limits established by both colonial discourse and reactionary attitudes to it.

## 2. HYBRIDITY IN THE TRILOGY

It is difficult to reduce novels that have the floating aura of a dream to the description of themes and techniques or to any one specific problem without making them impossible to read. Okri himself has compared *The Famished Road*, and by extension its sequels *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinte Riches*, to music, to a noise that resists being read as an ordinary text:

But it's difficult for me at this stage to say anything very coherent about this book, probably because it's not meant to be coherent. It's against the perception of the world as being coherent and therefore readable as a text. The world isn't really a text ... It's more than a text. It's more akin to music. (Wilkinson 1992: 84)

This view explains the trilogy's presentation of the most astounding manifestations of living forces in all the dimensions of material life and also within death, discarding, above all, any imposition of a centre-oriented angle of vision. Thus the novels adopt several viewpoints simultaneously and delight in highlighting the richness and variety of a hybrid world through fixing the gap between the most obvious polarities and foregrounding the syncretism of disparate elements. Technology and magic, modern and ancient, urban and rural, Western and indigenous, are the amphitheatre in which the novels are performed. The interplay of these paradoxical dimensions gives the novels an open form and, more importantly, reveals the writer's concern with issues of borders, change, and mixing, implied in his famous phrase "many rivers meet in me" (Jaggi 2007: 12), which is Okri's response to the monologic discourse of totalitarian power.

In the trilogy, this is reflected in the very nature of its *abiku* protagonist. Being a "liminality incarnate" (Deandrea 2002: 53), spirit and child, combining the bright wisdom of someone who has lived many lives with the innocence of a seven-year-old boy, and possessing both a long historical awareness and a delighted capacity for surprise, Azaro crosses boundaries on every page of the three novels. Of himself he says:

I, the spirit-child, who knows something of the bright heavens, of shallow and mythic glories, I saw it all. I, who can travel in the corridors of minds, play in the interspaces, dance to the seductive whispering of spirits, slip through the eye of a sacrificial needle, and who finds great cities in the narrow space of palm kernels. (Okri 1998: 368)

Azaro bears witness to a universe of action located simultaneously within both the earthly world and that of spirits and the dead to the extent that his helplessness in the face of the shifts between the two realms is a conscious state of being. He describes himself as "an unwilling adventurer into chaos and sunlight, into the dreams of the

living and the dead" (Okri 1993: 4), and later acknowledges that "with no choice . . . I began to mutate" (Okri 1993: 43).

Azaro's only friend, Ade, has a twofold identity, too, since he lingers in the world of humans with half his being remaining always in the spirit world. But whereas Azaro cares much for the mundane affairs of the world, "Ade did not want to live any more, he did not like the weight of the world, the terror of the earth's time" (Okri 1992:486).

As the bulk of the narrative gradually unfolds, Azaro's *abiku* condition becomes increasingly contagious, and so does his liminality. Okri asks: "Isn't it just possible that we are all *abikus*" (Wilkinson 1992: 84)? Everything is connected (Okri 1993: 147). We contain the whole universe (Okri 1993: 133). Everything is permeable as one can penetrate the spirits of things and can be penetrated by them (Okri 1993: 123). Commenting on this state of psychic interpenetration, Renato Oliva remarks:

The ego's outer limits shift and may easily be transgressed, for the conscious ego is constantly invaded by unconscious content, the individual unconscious of each one of us being in constant communication with the individual unconscious of others, and is lost in the vast sea of the collective unconscious. Others can enter us and our dreams, just as we can enter them and their dreams. (Oliva 1999: 190)

Azaro sees Mum's dreams (Okri 1992: 478) and accompanies Dad in his visions (Okri 1992: 494). He flies in and out of the dreams of the living, the dead and fellow spirits (Okri 1993: 275). Madame Koto's dreams are the cause of children's nightmares (Okri 1992: 480). Dreams are transferable from one person to another (Okri 1992: 255) and all have the capacity to dream at the same time (Okri 1993: 251). This is how Okri compensates for people's failure to be attuned to one another and to their immediate surroundings in real life.

The predisposition of Azaro's people to be contaminated by each other's dreams and consciousnesses is paralleled by the border-position of the ghetto. The latter is located "at the margin of the city absorbing the rural migrant population," where the ideas of modernity are rapidly assimilated, "but traditional belief systems are continually activated to make meaning of the ghetto experience and to forge productive alliances" (Quayson 1995: 115).

The cacophony of the ghetto, characteristic of the borderline existence of most if not all magical realist contexts, elicits a sense of the closeness of the prehistoric, mythical past to modern life and scientific thought that one witnesses, for instance, in Madame Koto's bar. Here, like in a cultural "third space," the bush and the road, the spirit world and the world of the living meet together with their residents—the spirits, the ghosts, the herbalists, the witches, the new politicians, the thugs, the prostitutes, the animals, and the ghetto's poor inhabitants—to negotiate their incommensurable differences. "As in Bhabha's border interstices, this is the zone of the mutant and the hybrid . . . and where Okri, master builder, constructs other . . . conflicting meanings"

(Cooper 1998:83). In the bar, beings “embody traits that cannot be traced to a single source or comprehensible point of origin” (Danow 1995: 72-73). On one occasion, Azaro realizes that many of the customers are not human beings, but “spirits who had borrowed bits of human beings to partake of human reality. They say spirits do that sometimes. They do it because they get tired of being just spirits” (Okri 1992: 136). In the bar, Azaro meets both scheming politicians and “a massive chicken without feathers [which] . . . sat next to me and ordered palm-wine and peppersoup” (Okri 1992: 59). There, he also gets acquainted with other hybrid identities including prostitutes who have legs of goats, women who are chimeras with legs of spiders and birds, innocent-looking men who are satyrs and minotaurs with the cloven hoofs of bulls, and animals who are part-time human beings (Okri 1992: 460).

In this mosaic of hybrid identities, boundaries overlap making it difficult to classify influences and traits as strictly belonging to one point of reference. With respect to this, Durix asserts that “any representation is the result of unstable, imperfect mergers whose validity stems from their transformational potential rather than from any spurious sense of ‘purity’” (Durix 1998: 153).

The bar has yet other peculiar properties. It seems to confound even one's sense of space because its physical location is never static: “the bar had moved deep into the forest and all the customers were animals and birds” (Okri 1992: 59-60). Again, following its customers' mutations and exchange of bizarre deformations, the bar moves once more: “The mutant customers made the bar feel entirely different. They conferred on everything a dull yellow light. The bar itself gave the impression that it had been transported from its familiar environs of our area to somewhere under the road, under the sea, to a dimly remembered and unwanted landscape” (Okri 1992: 133). Madame Koto's place undergoes continual metamorphosis to the extent that “the bar had changed again” becomes a recurrent phrase in the narrative. The sense of this indeterminate realm is evoked even more powerfully when Azaro says: “I felt on the edge of reality. Madame Koto's bar seemed like a strange fairyland in the real world, a fairyland that no one could see” (Okri 1992: 292).

The events that happen in the bar are an indicator that it is also a barometer of Westernizing changes:

The most extraordinary things were happening in Madame Koto's bar. The first unusual thing was that cables connected to her rooftop now brought electricity. Illiterate crowds gathered in front of the bar to see this new wonder. They saw the cables, the wires, the pylons in the distance, but they did not see the famed electricity. Those who went into the bar, out of curiosity, came out mystified. They couldn't understand how you could have a light brighter than lamps, sealed in glass. They couldn't understand how you couldn't light your cigarette on the glowing bulbs. And worse than all that, it was baffling for them to not be able to see the cause of the illumination. (Okri 1992: 373)

The bar is where Azaro notices a Coca-Cola poster with “the picture of a half-naked white woman with big breasts” (Okri 1992: 215), where people first listen to loud music from a record player (Okri 1992: 373), and where they first celebrate the ritual washing of Madame Koto's car after being baptized by a “great herbalist” (Okri 1992: 380).

Since there is no absolute divide between the world of the living and the world of the dead, even ghosts and spirits are trying to cope with scientific advances and technology. At one time, they emerge from the camera's flash “melted, stunned at [the photographer's] feet” (Okri 1992: 45). But soon after, they adapt to the new technology:

After much prancing and mystery-making, as if he were a magician, the photographer lifted his camera. He was surrounded by little ghosts and spirits. They had climbed on one another to take a closer look at the instrument. They were so fascinated by the camera that they climbed on him and hung on his arms and stood on his head. (Okri 1992: 46)

When technological features fuse with pre-technological ones, science with myth, and human beings with spirits, ghosts and animals, a hybrid “third space” emerges, where “hybrid” does not merely refer to the sum of distinct parts, but to an area of tension where discontinuity and disjuncture reign (Bhabha 1990: 219). In Fiona Coyle's formulation, “the Third Space is an Other space, where alternative structures of authority, and new political initiatives, are established” (2001: 114). In other words, this is not a multicultural view of a world of plural but equal distinctions; rather, it is an alternative to it. It is an instance of an anti-essentialist cultural innovation which demands the presence of both colonial and pre-colonial elements not for the sake of cataloguing them, but to undermine them and give birth to a destabilizing interstitial space. This is how Okri channels African traditional lore into contemporary society and makes of magical realism an indefinite battleground for polarized forces.

Mythology and technology not only coexist in the novel but can also interpenetrate one another positively. In Danow's words, the providence of the one may determine the fate of the other. The white man who meets Mum in the market and who suffers a lack of guiding philosophy finds direction in the message of the archetypal tortoise of traditional wisdom that Mum transmits to him via a riddle. Yet the white man is not entirely bankrupt either. He has something of value to exchange for African knowledge and wisdom: his blue sunglasses. These are a product of Western science and give comfort to Mum, whose tough days in the smoldering sun of the market are improved by them. So certain colonial influences enter the Yoruba universe of power relations and instead of displacing it, they widen its horizons. After all, and unlike some African writers of the first postcolonial generations, Okri believes that trying to invert “*el curso del devenir histórico*” by an infinite longing for roots is “una tentativa irrealizable” (Galván et al. 2012: 77).

More importantly, with Mum's story of the white man, Okri infiltrates the dialectical discourses of identity and problematizes them, rejecting all kinds of predefined essentialist notions. The white man Mum meets in the market seems to be anxious to leave Africa after ten years of futile attempts. Quoting a tortoise, Mum informs him that "the only way to get out of Africa is to get Africa out of you" (Okri 1992: 483). The white man learns the meaning embedded in Mum's riddle—to get out of Africa, one needs to learn to be an African—and the next time he meets Mum, he is transformed into a black Yoruba man with extraordinary powers. The story he tells Mum is:

When I left you, I became feverish in the head and later in a fit of fury over a small thing I killed my African servant. They arrested me.... Then they released me because I was a white man. Then I began to wander about the city naked. Everyone stared at me. They were shocked to see a mad white man in Africa.... Then one day my head cleared. Five hundred years had gone past. The only way to get out of Africa was to become an African.... I got a plane and arrived in England.... Then before I turned seventy I had a heart attack and died.... Time passed. I was born. I became a businessman. And I came to the market today to buy some eels and I saw you. (Okri 1992: 483-84)

In addition to the stylistic value of this story-within-story, which can be considered as a token of Okri's resistance to cultural imperialism and Western literary canon, its ideological load points to a clear celebration of change and transformation resulting from interactions among cultures.

The Governor-General, the highest ranking Queen's representative to the soon-to-be postcolonial nation, is another character that undergoes change and re-evaluation. After eclipsing all the personae in *Infinite Riches* by virtue of his nefariousness, he becomes magically reformed owing to the presence of an angel: "He felt like an African himself and could understand the hidden stories in the fragrance of orange blossoms and agapanthus" (Okri 1998: 187). In his Africanized state, he develops a new self-awareness and is able to explain the change that occurs to him. To borrow his words, because imperialists "set out to dominate the world, they are condemned to live with the negative facts of their domination. They will be changed by the world that they set out to colonize" (Okri 1998: 186). Again, one can sense in the Governor-General's words the power of hybridity which radically disturbs "the dualism between self and other by articulating its contradictions, thus estranging the dominant culture's rules of recognition" (Rose 1995: 367).

In similar resistance to the quest for uncontaminated roots, Azaro defines the African mode of existence in the world, labelled in *Songs of Enchantment* "the African Way" (Okri 1993: 159) or "the Original Way," (Okri 1993: 160) as "The Way that keeps the mind open to . . . the spirit . . . primed to all the rich possibilities

of living . . . The Way that always, like a river, flows into and flows out of the myriad Ways of the world” (Okri 1993: 159-60).

Okri (1992: 282) has Mum tell another story about the white people who “used to come and learn from us” at a time when Africans “had already gone to the moon and all the great stars”. Africa then is generous enough to welcome the whites and share its knowledge with them. According to Mum, “we taught them how to count. We taught them about the stars. We gave them some of our gods.... But they forgot . . . that we are all brothers and sisters and that black people are the ancestors of the human race. They are not all bad.... Learn from them, but love the world” (Okri 1992: 282).

Mum’s words would rather be taken as faith on the part of Okri in the positive outcome of openness to the world, both Western and non-Western, a position which seems to agree with Okri’s conclusion in his most recent interview that both Nigeria and England have a lot to learn from each other. His words are: “I have . . . found myself in dialogue with these two poles [Nigeria and England], and have come to the tentative conclusion that both poles need each other” (Davis 2011: 62). However, Okri is conscious that his view is more wishful thinking than reality because “at the moment the learning goes only one way. Nigeria is learning from England, but there is a lot England can learn from Nigeria too” (Davis 2011: 62).

Time itself is hybrid in the trilogy. At the same time as the transformation of the white English to a Yoruba man, a new conception of time emerges, a “third time” in Cooper’s terminology (1998: 75), when five hundred years pass in two weeks:

“I met you five hundred years ago,” he said....

I said: “But I only met you two weeks ago.” “Time is not what you think it is,” he said, smiling. (Okri 1992: 483-84)

Such a peculiar sense of time reflects, in effect, a theoretical view long ago propounded by Edmund Roland Leach (1961: 133) who observes that “if there is nothing in the principle of the thing, or in the nature of our experience, to suggest that time must necessarily flow past at constant speed, we are not supposed to think of time as a constant flow at all.”

Okri considers the logic of the linear progression of time espoused by rational, industrialized societies moving from a less to a more advanced stage of development as pure delusion. We learn this through Okri’s description of the road which is still unfinished after thousands of years of construction:

The road is their soul, the soul of their history. That is why, when they have built a long section of it, or forgotten the words of their prophet and begun to think they have completed it, landquakes happen, lightning strikes, invisible volcanoes erupt, rivers descend on them, hurricanes tear up their earth, the road goes mad and twists and destroys itself, or the people become distorted in spirit and start to turn the road into

other things, or the workers go insane, the people start wars, revolts cripple everything and a thousand things distract them and wreck what they have built and a new generation comes along and begins again from the wreckage. (Okri 1992: 329-30)

Later, Okri (1992: 330) confirms that “they will never finish the road that is their soul and they do not know it.” Okri confronts evolutionary theories of growth informing both imperialism and modernization with the Yoruba mythic cognition and African time of eternal recurrence. There is no future climax or end in this African time. Instead, there is only continuity and regenerative transfiguration provided by indigenous forms of knowledge. Azaro accepts the “mystery of births within births, death within births, births within dying” (Okri 1992: 487), and Ade is aware of his several incarnations as priest, musician, prostitute, ruler and wicked warrior (Okri 1992: 481). In *Infinite Riches*, the old woman in the forest who herself has “a strange voice, a voice two hundred and seventy years old” (Okri 1998: 132), writes “stories and myths and philosophical disquisitions on the relativity of African Time” and discovers “how Time is both finite and infinite, how Time curves, how Time also dances” (Okri 1998: 130). Sangari (1987: 176), too, captures the complexity of this magical realist time that “is poised in a liminal space and in an in-between time, which, having broken out of the binary opposition between circular and linear, gives a third space and a different time the chance to emerge.”

Succumbing to linear temporality is a menace to historical memory. The van burnt in the first political riot is a good instance of how the passing of days affects memory and even visibility:

Rain poured on the burnt van, the sun and the dust bleached its paint, and after a while all the big flaking letters of the party's insignia were obliterated, and nothing was left to identify the vehicle, or to rescue it from forgetfulness. It wasn't long before it vanished from the street, not because it was no longer there, diminishing with each day's sun glare, but because we had stopped noticing it altogether. (Okri 1992: 155)

To resist the erasures enacted by the passage of time, “Okri subverts linearity and depicts experiences as synchronicity” (Coundouriotis 2000: 43). Both the past and future are registered in a present which has no thrust in time. Therefore, Okri's characters look overburdened with a felt moment of simultaneity. His protagonist says: “Sometimes I seemed to be living several lives at once. One lifetime flowed into the others and all of them flowed into my childhood” (Okri 1992: 7). Even the transition between corporeal and spiritual existence or between life and death is negated to let Azaro experience both dualities simultaneously. “One world contains glimpses of the other,” Azaro realizes (Okri 1992: 10).

Hybridity in the trilogy is also associated with the prospect of stripping the veil of appearances and experiencing the world without illusions. Okri draws the reader's attention to this trope by enabling Azaro to see with a “third eye”:

And then suddenly, out of the centre of my forehead, an eye opened, and I saw this light to be the brightest, most beautiful thing in the world. It was terribly hot, but it did not burn. It was fearfully radiant, but it did not blind. As the light came closer, I became more afraid. Then my fear turned. The light went into the new eye and into my brain and roved around my spirit and moved in my veins and circulated in my blood and lodged itself in my heart. And my heart burned with a searing agony, as if it were being burnt to ashes within me. As I began to scream, the pain reached its climax and a cool feeling of divine dew spread through me, making the reverse journey of the brilliant light, cooling its flaming passages, till it got back to the centre of my forehead, where it lingered, the feeling of a kiss for ever imprinted, a mystery and a riddle that not even the dead can answer. (Okri 1992: 229)

To see the world with the vision of a “third eye” implies creating a liminal space whose genesis stems from the ability to encompass paradoxes—heat that does not hurt, radiant light that does not blind and extreme pain that turns into a cool feeling. In Cooper’s reading of Okri (1998: 67), this eye can see the kaleidoscope and syncretism of possibilities; it can describe history in the language of magic and dreams; it can access the previous world, the actual one and the one to come. Indeed, in a recent interview, Okri expresses his irritation towards “the reducers of possibilities,” those people who “only see what there appears to be; people who insist that all there is to the world is what you can see. They perpetually resist the possibilities of the imagination. They hold back all kinds of progress with their limitations” (Davis 2011: 62).

The third eye takes different forms in the trilogy, sometimes a mask and sometimes an animal or even an insect. In the middle of one of his journeys, Azaro finds a mask that transforms reality:

Not far from me, like a skull sliced in half and blacked with tar, was a mask that looked frightening from the side, but which was contorted in an ecstatic laughter at the front. It had eyes both daunting and mischievous. Its mouth was big. Its nose was small and delicate. It was the face of one of those paradoxical spirits that move amongst men and trees, carved by an artist who has the gift to see such things and the wisdom to survive them. (Okri 1992: 244)

One possible interpretation is that Okri may be that very artist who carves the mask and gets a full insight into life’s paradoxes and contradictions, especially as lived by his own society. The mask is a hybrid face (Cooper 1998: 100), and looking through it, reveals a different world (Okri 1992: 255). Whether this world is frightening or comforting depends on the perspective from which it is perceived. It can be “big and small, intimidating and funny, threatening but also fun” (Cooper 1998: 100). When Azaro assumes the mask and looks out from its eyes, what he views is exactly a mosaic of disparate connections and syncretisms:

There were beings everywhere in the darkness and the spirits were each of them a sun. They radiated a brilliant copper illumination hard to the eyes. I saw a tiger with silver wings and the teeth of a bull. I saw dogs with tails of snakes and bronze paws. I saw cats with the legs of women, midgets with bright red bumps on their heads. The trees were houses. (Okri 1992: 245)

This spirit of blending and mixture is likewise shared by the nature of the deep forest where Azaro finds the mask and where “a mirage of houses was being built, paths and roads crossed and surrounded the forest in tightening circles, unpainted churches and the whitewashed walls of mosques sprang up where the forest was thickest” (Okri 1992: 242). Still, what is more extraordinary than the presence of unfinished churches and mosques in a place commonly most hospitable to the spirits of African indigenous religions is the paradox of the shifting reality as the boy takes off the mask and wears it again:

The curious thing was that there was something different about the clearing. It was both exactly as I remembered it and different.... I stared about the clearing, trying to isolate what was different about it. I couldn't. So I wore the mask and looked and saw that what was a clearing was in fact a village of spirits.... There were rose-bushes in the radiant square. I saw skyscrapers and flying machines ... and the monument of a black sphinx at the gate of the village. Luminous pilgrims, celebrants in yellow cassocks, made processions in honour of the mysteries of strange gods. I took off the mask, my head turning, the world spinning, my eyes flaming. (Okri 1992: 246)

Right at the heart of this deep forest, the mask reveals a strange interplay between new and old, tradition and burgeoning change within African culture. The village and its indigenous treasury is being watched over by spirits that have to share their space with the mysterious worshippers of new gods; the rose bush, the archetypal plant of English gardens, has found itself a place in the midst of an uncultivated forest, together with planes (flying machines) and skyscrapers; and, to capitalize on the hybrid quality of the reality the mask unveils, there is a black sphinx (part-human, part-animal) at the gate of the village.

In another example of the dialectic of revealing and concealing, Azaro synthesizes pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial histories in a daydream induced by yet another “third eye,” the eye of a duiker as it awaits imminent slaughter in the midst of a political party in Madame Koto's bar:

I saw the forms of serene ancestors, men and women for whom the stars were both words and gods, for whom the world and the sky and the earth were a vast language of dreams and omens.... I ran through the night forests ... where everything dances in an exultation of flame and wisdom. I ran till I came to the Atlantic.... The ghost ships of centuries arrived endlessly on the shores. I saw the flotillas, the gunwales, the spectral great ships and the dozens of rowing boats, bearing the helmeted ones, with mirrors

and guns and strange texts untouched by the salt of the Atlantic.... The white ones, ghost forms on deep nights, stepped on our shores, and I heard the earth cry.... I witnessed the destruction of great shrines, the death of mighty trees that housed centuries of insurgent as well as soothing memories, sacred texts, alchemical secrets of wizards, and potent herbs. I saw the forests die.... I heard the great spirits of the land and forest talking of a temporary exile.... I saw the rising of new houses. I saw new bridges span the air.... As the freedom of space and friendship with the pied kingfisher and other birds became more limited with the new age, something died in me. (Okri 1992: 456-57)

Here, Azaro wanders over historical time and captures a moment when foreign elements are introduced as part of a force that wreaks havoc with the dynamics of cultural mixture by trying to destroy African traditional society and culture. Hence hybridity's opposites of dominance, exclusion of the Other and colonialism proper.

As such, Okri is cautious enough to warn that not any cross-cultural contact is inherently positive or liberating. Sometimes, the assimilation and adaptation of cultural practices, the cross-fertilization of cultures, is eclipsed by the emergence of undesirable incidents and the balance of power relations may easily shift in favor of one culture to the detriment of the other. This can be better made in evidence by scrutinizing how Okri fills his narrative with many unpleasant moments and calamities that cultural interactions happen to bring. Examples are the several disasters caused by the colonial road, electricity and Madame Koto's car. Eventually, the forest rebels against its violation by the construction of modern roads. A storm sweeps away the freshly laid tarmac, and the road-workers and their white overseer are swallowed by the floodwaters from the angry forest (Okri 1992: 287-88). Electric cables are associated with a funeral cortege, mourners and "the prostitute whose body lay charred in the cheap wooden coffin and who had died from electrocution after the wind blew the tent away" (Okri 1992: 484). Finally, Azaro describes how

We heard the whirring engine . . . and saw the two arc lights of [Madame Koto's] car intently bounding towards us, pressing on, growing brighter, flooding us with confusion. Several screams rose at once. . . . Then the car swerved. Panic showed on the driver's face as he seemed to wake up suddenly, and in his awakening he lost control. . . . Finally, the car cut through the crowd, and knocked Ade and one of the beggars sideways. Then the car smashed into the cement platform, into the wall of the compound, and its lights went dead. (Okri 1992: 421)

Hence Okri's loyalty to decolonizing strategies wherever the coexistence of elements taken from different cultures reveals asymmetry in the distribution of socio-political power in the system. In other words, when, in the juxtaposition of values and groups such as the colonizers vs. the colonized, the rich vs. the poor, the politicians vs. the inhabitants or the modern vs. the ancient, a group imposes its hegemony on the other,

Okri avails himself of the resources of magical realism to express a content that is typically anti-hegemonic and postcolonial.

Hybridity is likewise present in Okri's treatment of geographical space. As suggested by the title of the first novel in the trilogy, *The Famished Road*, landscape is pivotal in Okri's narrative structure. More precisely, the elaboration of the narrative is predicated on the wanderings of its main characters within and across different geographical sites. As Cooper notes (2001: 284), "Okri liberates his fictional sites from the organicist tradition by rendering them wholly kinetic." Accordingly, Okri's rejection of the premises of narrative realism coincides with his magical tendency to "shift forests and reposition roads" (Cooper 2001: 284) In a changing world context, the transmutation of geographies is particularly meaningful in terms of Okri's belief in the impossibility of separation between local and global spaces and in the interpenetrability of all boundaries. Hence, Okri does not hesitate in pushing his characters beyond local geographies in an attempt to expand the frontiers of an otherwise small village. This is shown by the image of the road towards wisdom and understanding embraced by the king of the spirit world whose genius is the love of transformation and who tells Azaro: "You have to travel many ways before you find the river of your destiny" (Okri 1992: 6).

Wandering the roads of the world is, doubtlessly, at the origin of Azaro's personal quest for the philosophical understanding of the spiritual meaning of life in an environment full of poverty, corruption and thuggery. It is also a prime characteristic of the photographer, the other central figure in the novel. This character is constructed in the tradition of the universal as he is determined to seek his own freedom and a global understanding by traveling "all the roads of the world" and "visiting other continents. Flying around the universe. Seeing what men and women do" (Okri 1992: 262). He intriguingly returns from being "round the universe and back" looking different: "his face shone with health. His eyes were bright. His mood was buoyant as though he had discovered fields of hope somewhere in the night" (Okri 1992: 230-31). All of this makes him share "with the cosmopolitans a global framework that breaks out of the narrow . . . straitjackets" (Cooper 1998: 98), and accentuates the haze of rootlessness and impermanence in Okri's texts.

Like the photographer, other characters in the *abiku* trilogy are keen on crossing geographical boundaries to reach all the extremes of the world even though the whole action is concentrated within the confines of a small village or near it. Ade has been "a murderer in Rome, a poetess in Spain, a falconer among the Aztecs, a whore in Sudan, a priestess in old Kenya, a one-eyed white ship captain who believed in God and wrote beautiful hymns and who made his fortune capturing slaves in the Gold Coast. I even saw a famed samurai warrior in ancient Japan, and a mother of ten in Greece" (Okri 1992: 481). Citations of countries, villages, seas, mountains and other geographical associations reinforce the text's freedom from any notion of secure limits. In this way, the aesthetic premises of magical realism allow Okri to create

hybrid localities through the dissolution of borders which separate cultures and countries.

### 3. CONCLUSION

There is little doubt, in fact, that, though drenched in traditional African folklore, Okri's *abiku* novels offer a mixed message on the question of purity and the quest for tap roots and homogeneity. In the best tradition of an avowed cosmopolitan, Okri depicts a Yoruba intellectual climate which was and still is largely characterized by a dialogic ethos, a constant pursuit to exchange ideas, experience, and material culture. Therefore, a small village becomes the scene of a multifarious cultural traffic and the amphitheatre where the most obvious disparate elements and divergent practices are made to interact. Edges blur between tradition and change, science and myth, old and new and even between the human and the spirit world to create an open-ended postcolonial discourse.

The nature of the trilogy's characters, time, space and the tissue of the plot that connects them suggests fields of possibilities beyond "magic" and "realism." As a result, on almost every page, the reader is invited to engage in a challenging practice of cross-cultural reading between two contradictory codes corresponding to the incompatible logics of capitalist and pre-capitalist societies, which, however conflicting, never fall into an assumed or imposed hierarchy.

The discourse that results from this crossing of cultural lines is neither one of a no man's land nor one that rests on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the comfortable notion of cultural diversity. Rather, it is one that forms the basis of a denunciation of the primordial ideological dogmas celebrated by both the imperialistic logos and reactionary attitudes to it. Such a discourse opens up the possibility of a new definition of culture which does not need to choose between consecrated versions of metropolitan forms and representations of essentialist alternatives.

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