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## Folklore and society in transition: A study of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and *The Famished Road*

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Folklore is found to be a favourite indigenous resource for an African novelist that s/he draws on for moulding the aesthetic concerns in novel writing. Considerable critical interest has grown around analysing the nuances of oral tradition, society and the novel in the context of Africa. Critics like Obiechina confirm that the oral tradition has survived in West Africa in spite of the introduction of 'writing' as a Western phenomenon and a foreign tradition which it bears. In West Africa (like other parts of the continent), elements of folklore such as stories, proverbs, dance, song, rituals, and ceremonies provide a medium for experiencing reality. This paper is an attempt to study the importance and use of folklore in the writings of two novelists hailing from Nigeria, namely Amos Tutuola and Ben Okri through a reading of their select novels. Separated by decades, folklore is found to play an integral part in their writings, though their use of this resource is intricate and varied. A writer does not write in vacuum; both Tutuola and Okri are acutely alive to their contemporary realities. This study is focussed on Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and Okri's *The Famished Road* to show how the folklore is employed in their novels to comment on different times and changing situations.

**Key words:** Folklore, oral tradition, West-African writings.

### INTRODUCTION

This paper analyses the significance of folkloric elements markedly apparent in the chosen novels of Amos Tutuola and Ben Okri to show how folklore serves as tool for self-expression and how it is employed (in the novels) to reflect the changing social and cultural scenario. By incorporating the oral traditions of West Africa in their writing, these writers have created a body of literature that distinctly expresses a West African consciousness and sensibility. Both the writers' use of folklore is intricate and varied. Hence any analysis of the selected novels is incomplete without an understanding of the unique sensibility that each of them brings to bear on their utilisation and employment of folklore and indigenous resources vis-à-vis their times and changing social situation. That the oral tradition is crucial in shaping creative literature by West African writers could be understood with reference to the conference of teachers

of English held in the Institute of Education and the Department of English, University of Ibadan, between 26 April and 1 May 1965, "The traditional material of folktale, myth and legend is so intimately connected with the life of Africa, that some knowledge of it is necessary to have an intelligent understanding of certain areas of African creative writing" and that quite a few writers of today must be influenced consciously or otherwise by the work of traditional artists like story-tellers and praise singers.<sup>1</sup>

In the influential essay "The Novelist as Teacher" Chinua Achebe manifestly expresses his belief that the task of a novelist in an African country like Nigeria is to teach. That is, s/he has a particular responsibility to shape the social and moral values of a society—the philosophy, beauty, poetry and dignity of which have been downgraded by longstanding years of Eurocentric fabrication<sup>2</sup>. Achebe's Kenyan counterpart, Ngũgĩ wa

Thiongo writes in a more polemical vein entrusting upon the novelist the arduous and challenging task to play the role of a pathfinder of the society<sup>3</sup>. One could say that, as pathfinders in the newly independent states of Africa, s/he is to provide a proper direction (through the art of writing) to the society for expressing its ethos and adequately reflect the tendencies of the new society in which they live.

Although the occurrences, experiences, ramifications, and implications of the colonial encounter are different in the different colonies, all of them have one abiding commonality. This common element could be identified as change; in other words, the changes at various levels of society arising out of cultural contact or interaction. Resultant of the colonial experience, none of the colonies could remain immune to acculturation nor could go back to their so called pristine precolonial condition. Changes are found to occur at the level of culture, politics and economy and the novelist is required to reflect the new tendencies of the new age. Under the circumstances, the task of a novelist to teach and to function as pathfinder assumes immense significance and enormous dimensions. To perform such a challenging task, a host of writers including Achebe and Ngugi<sup>4</sup> are found to have taken recourse to folklore or indigenous resources.

Whether the motive of Tutuola and Okri as novelists is only to teach or instruct (as Achebe urges) is a debatable issue. However, a reading of the selected texts in this paper shows that their effort is to present a different way of perceiving the world via myths, legends, stories, riddles—all of which are aspects of folklore. Keeping Ngugi's edict in mind, one could say that the vigour of folklore in their writings lends an African character to the novels. A writer does not write in vacuum; both Tutuola and Okri are acutely alive to their contemporary realities. This study shows that as socially conscientious writers, their use of folklore serves to depict and comment on different times and changing situations.

### Tutuola and Okri as novelists

Notwithstanding their common Nigerian background, the dissimilarities between Amos Tutuola and Ben Okri are self evident. They belong to two different times and two different generations. The former is remarkably, yet controversially famed to be one of the pioneers of novel writing in Nigeria; whereas, the latter received international renown with the Booker Prize in 1991. Tutuola's engagement with writing happens at a time when Nigeria was still a colony. Okri as a writer represents the Nigerian diaspora in the U.K. As a diasporic writer, Okri's literary engagement with postcolonialism has produced novels that are ironic and complex; Tutuola, on the other hand, had a smattering of academic instruction and therefore, as pointed out by a host of earlier critics<sup>5</sup>, his writings tend to be less affected by the established literary

conventions and norms of the times. However, later trends in reading Tutuola have done much to challenge this position. Seen in retrospect, Tutuola could be seen as the inaugurator of an alternative mode of realism (as a reaction to the more popular convention of social realism frequently used by his contemporaries) in Nigeria and by extension in Africa. This makes one recall Okri's words, "...we need to keep looking at the world with new eyes" (*Songs of Enchantment* 23). An exploration of Tutuola's novels emphasizes his relevance today, giving him a strong foothold amidst the concerns of contemporary postcolonial critics and theorists vis-à-vis the tropes of liminality and identity<sup>6</sup>. Gerald Moore (1962) once claimed in the book *Seven African Writers* that Tutuola's style was a dead end for African literature because it would not be imitated. However, Okri's oeuvre of novels starting from his magnum opus *The Famished Road*, through its sequels *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches* has turned Tutuola's so-called dead end into a new vista for exploring new aesthetic directions based on a broader understanding of African folklore, and less dependence on imitation of the European novel. Both Okri and Tutuola share a common resource which takes into account elements from the traditional metaphysical belief system blending them with aspects of the real, the esoteric and the supernatural. This is seen in the way these writers employ episodic narrative structures and mythic landscapes populated with animist deities, supernatural beings, and ghosts of the ancestors. A study of the application of folklore in the selected novels of these two writers leads to new insights and broader perspectives.

### Significance of folklore in the written medium

The term folklore, as Ekwutosi Onwuke<sup>7</sup> observes, has acquired a variety of meanings down the ages. However, in common parlance, the term folklore could be understood to denote the traditional expression of a people as seen in their proverbs, songs, tales, legends, myths and riddles. In the African context, the folklore could be said to form an inviolable part of the life of the community. It is a favourite recreation to many people and a means of educating the young, especially within the fold of the community. The folklore in traditional African societies has a highly educative value. It imparts knowledge on the groups' history, values of warfare, morals, wise sayings etc. Emmanuel Obiechina maintains that the folklore "embodies the values and attitudes (of a people) in its proverbs and fossilised saying, its belief in myths and religion, and its consciousness of its historical life, collective outlook and ethics, in its legends, folktales and other forms of oral literature."<sup>8</sup> From its very nature then, the folklore, notwithstanding its racial and communal background, educates one in the way of life of a people—the societal set-up, social values, taboos, sanctions and

others. Obiechina goes on to say that even the introduction of elements of the Western literary culture has merely modified traditional oral culture but has not destroyed the consciousness deriving from tradition. This paper shows that writers like Tutuola and Okri who attempt to represent West African cultural life within a contemporary or historical setting via the novel, attempt to do so through the oral tradition of West Africa, because it best expresses the West African consciousness and sensibility. In other words, the writers are involved in transporting the oral tradition of West Africa into a non-native literary tradition.

Both Onwukwe and Obiechina rightly argue that the hold of the folklore is not restricted to the villages. Even city dwellers partake of the pleasures of the folklore because they constantly visit their villages on festivities, week ends and vacations. This explains the presence of folkloric materials in the novels of many African writers who are city dwellers (like Okri). The folklore then could be seen to form a part of the modern life in Africa.

Critics and academicians have shown a keen interest and explored various nuances of the relation between oral tradition, society and the novel in African contexts. They have analysed how elements of folklore provide a medium for stylistic experimentation expanding the horizons of aesthetic concerns in novel writing in Africa. William Bascom's stance that in non-literate societies the folklore is virtually identical with culture; whereas in a technologically advanced literate society, it is only a fragment of culture, could serve as an index for examination of folk materials in the African novel<sup>9</sup>. The novel in Africa is an outgrowth of a society in which oral traditions still form a living reality. By 'living' is meant that oral traditions are a vital part of day-to-day life of the people. Emmanuel Obiechina in his book *Culture, Tradition, and Society in the West African Novel* confirms that the oral tradition has survived in West Africa in spite of the introduction of Western writing and the foreign tradition which it bears. Elements of folklore such as stories, proverbs, dance, songs still perform a significant role in shaping the values, beliefs, actions and behaviour of the people. Traditional forms, rituals, ceremonies provide a framework for experiencing reality. In contemporary Nigeria, these forms continue to mould the sensibility of most Nigerians, not merely of the illiterate majority but also of the educated elite<sup>10</sup>. Thus, for the Nigerian writers, the folklore is not a mere aesthetic device; it serves as a means to enliven an entire value system and world-view.

In a similar vein, critics like Eustace Palmer in *The Growth of the African Novel*; Ngugi in *Decolonising the Mind*, Dathorne (1976) in *African Literature in the Twentieth Century*; Ato Quayson in *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writings*, Anjali Gera in *Three Great African Novelists*; and others, have drawn a nexus between the introduction of literacy and the rise of the novel in Africa (as a novel is meant to be read).

Quayson's work is particularly important for this study because it brings together the writings of Tutuola and Okri to interrogate the role of indigenous belief systems and their moral particularities. Owoeye Dorojaiye Kehinde's (2011) *Intertextuality and the Novels of Amos Tutuola and Ben Okri* explores the theoretical notions of intertextuality to explicate the role of an African traditional system as an inherent organising factor in Tutuola and Okri's world. Paulin J. Hountondji (2005) in *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* provides a theoretical strand that African philosophy, which exists in the form of a literature, is a fusion of myth and reality. His standpoint proves to be useful in analysing the selected novels wherein the writers present a world of deities, spirits, fables and animist beings juxtaposed with the world of humans.

On the other hand, John Ramsaran (1995) in "African Twilight: Folktale and Myth in Nigerian Literature" opines that the folktale is the most neglected aspect in the developing literature of West Africa, although it is a most vigorous form of expression in the cultural life of the people. This, he argues, is because of the age old association of the folktale with a largely non-literate society, that the sophisticated writers deliberately tend to by-pass it<sup>11</sup>. This point of view totally ignores the significance of folk tradition as one of the major impulses of literature. This stance could be stemmed with a reference to Tutuola's statement that serves to emphasise the irrevocable presence of folk elements in writing, "I wrote *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* for the people of the other countries to read the Yoruba folklores [...]. My purpose of writing is to make other people to understand more about Yoruba people and in fact they have already understood more than ever before." (Tutuola quoted in Lindfors, 1975: 229)." This shows that Tutuola's role is that of an artist in a society heading towards literacy—a society in transition. In such a changing society, Tutuola, the novelist is seen committed towards preservation of cultural values. He achieves this by infusing elements of folklore (oral tradition) within the receptacle of the novel (written medium). Writing on the threshold of the twenty first century (another transitional period), Ben Okri is found to employ the folklore to analyse the fate of Nigeria as a nation and to present a critique of contemporary socio-political reality.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted for the study is largely analytical. This involves a textual analysis of aspects of folklore viz. myths, legends, riddles, story-telling, and others, as found in the chosen novels to validate the significance of folk tradition in African literature. It makes an analytical study of the chosen novels with a view to determining the importance of folklore within the written medium in the African context. The two writers, Tutuola and Okri are separated by decades; but irrespective of the time factor in their writings, both are found to rely heavily on folk tradition for the expression of their socio-cultural ethos. An attempt is made to arrive at a

comprehensive analysis of the influence of folklore as a reservoir of cultural ethos that also enriches the novel in Africa. Moreover, a comparative approach is adopted to highlight the points of contact and departure between these two writers in their use of folklore vis-à-vis the changing times and changing social scenario.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From a reading of Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, it is found that story-telling, which is an essential aspect of folklore, holds the narrative together. The narrator strikes an immediate rapport with the reader as a story teller does with his listeners. The sentences are long with a few breaks (full stops) in an attempt to hold the attention of the readers (listeners) which is a requisite element in good story telling. To suggest a flow/continuity between ideas and sentences, Tutuola makes abundant use of words like 'as', 'so', 'but', 'then', 'after' in the beginning and within sentences<sup>12</sup>:

*So my father gave me a palm-tree farm which was nine miles square and it contained 560,000 palm-trees, and this palm-wine tapster was tapping one hundred and fifty kegs of palm wine every morning, but before 2 o'clock P.M., I would have drunk all of it; after that he would go and tap another 75 kegs in the evening which I would be drinking till morning. So my friends were unaccountable by that time and they were drinking palm-wine with me from morning till a late hour in the night (The Palm-Wine Drinkard 191-192).*

The study shows that the novel abounds with sentences and ideas conjoined in this manner. The narrator functions as a traditional story teller in a world of readers. The study shows that the frame narrative embeds a number of minor narratives that expand the framework of the novel. Some of these digressive minor narratives are the episodes with the Complete Gentleman; the Three Good Creatures; the Wraith Island; the Journey to the Unreturnable Heavens Town, the Faithful Mother in the White Tree, the Red People in the Red Town, the Invisible Pawn, the Wise King, the Drinkard and his Tapster in the Deads' Town, the episode in the Hungry Creature's stomach, the Mountain Creatures in the Unknown Mountain, the famine in his native town and his role in helping the townspeople.

It is found that the role of these digressive episodes is to postpone the central quest (that is, the search for the tapster) and to bring about a transformation in the Drinkard. The postponement takes place on account of the time required by the drinkard to solve various issues and face new circumstances in every episode. Therefore, this postponement is important because the time spent in between helps to bring about the desired changes in the drinkard's personality. For instance, the three years spent in his in-laws' town helps to change the drinkard from a lazy to a hardworking man. In this context, it is useful to refer to Anjali Gera's observation that one social ethic which recurs in Tutuola's novels is the Yoruba concept of

labour. According to this, no individual has the right to appropriate the labour of another<sup>13</sup>. If the Yoruba work ethics says that labour is to be rewarded and sloth punished, the individuals who defy this value of the community are to turn over a new leaf in the Tutuolan world. It is seen that after going through an odyssey of hardships, the values of his community are instilled in the drinkard. In the 'Wraith-Island' the drinkard becomes a farmer and plants many kinds of crops—a task which he had never performed while in his native town. Moreover, when they are rendered penniless after wilfully abandoning the half-bodied child, the drinkard (now as an enterprising man) successfully runs a ferry business along with his wife for one month and is able to earn a lot of profit.

The study also shows that as Tutuola reworks upon the tales of his community, he makes abundant references to modern gadgets. The entry of these appliances in the day to day life of the African communities is an indicator of influence of the Western culture and changing times. The drinkard's son, the half-bodied baby, for instance, speaks with the voice of a telephone. Again in another episode when it becomes difficult for the couple to travel both on road on account of havoc created by gangs of highwaymen and in bush because of unaccountable boa constrictors and dangerous spirits, the drinkard transforms himself into a "big bird like an aeroplane" (*The Palm-Wine Drinkard* 223) and flies away with his wife. In the White tree with the faithful mother they get treated in a hospital of the wounds inflicted by the creatures of the unreturnable Heaven's town.

Ekwutosi Onwukwe aptly states that myths abound all over the world and their function is to explain things—natural phenomena, origins of things and apparent mysteries in the human world<sup>14</sup>. The episode with the old man is an oblique rendition of the story of death's entry to the world. Therefore, with this story, Tutuola explores another element of the folklore—the myth. Myth-like elements are also found to operate in other minor narratives. In the episode where the famine occurs, there is a story about the origin of famine as a consequence of rivalry between 'Land' and 'Heaven'. The manner of narrating this story has the affect of a myth upon the listeners/readers, "In the olden days, both Land and Heaven were tight friends as they were once human beings..." (*The Palm-Wine Drinkard* 296). Again, the story of the origin of the human race is found in the episode with the 'Red Creatures' which is also narrated in the manner of a myth, "...in the olden days...the eyes of all the human-beings were on our knees...we were walking backwards and not forwards as nowadays..." (*The Palm-Wine Drinkard* 255). Since myth has universal accept-ability and is popularly believed to be true, hence to emphasize on the veracity of his myth-like stories, Tutuola repeats them across texts. The same story of all creatures having their eyes on the knees is repeated in his next novel *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*.

Tutuola, the story-teller par excellence, as Anjali Gera calls him<sup>15</sup>, is found to retain and heighten the interest of his listeners in the story by leaving a lot to the readers' imagination. This is done by his typical "I could not describe them here" after detailing certain aspects of a place or a curious creature (the hungry creature, the red fish and red bird, the unreturnable Heaven's town, the creatures inside the bag of the huge monster on their return journey from the Dead's town and others). The study shows that this pattern is uniformly maintained throughout the text.

Riddles which are an integral aspect of folklore are found in abundance in the novel. For instance when the Red Lady takes them to the Red King, the wife says that this journey would be "a fear of heart, but would not be dangerous to the heart" (*The Palm Wine Drinkard* 292). The implication of this riddle is understood after the drinkard kills the two fearful (the Red Fish and the Red Bird) creatures and saves the people of the Red town without himself suffering any harm. Seen in retrospect, Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* could be said to have anticipated postmodern tendencies. In a very striking incident, the drinkard gets utterly confused as he is asked to judge two cases. Unable to pass a judgement, he calls upon his readers/listeners to come up with an acceptable solution. By leaving these stories open-ended, Tutuola anticipates readers'/listeners' participation to construct the stories. This expands the scope of his stories and also shows that there is room for manipulation<sup>16</sup>, "So I shall be very grateful if anyone who reads this story-book can judge one or both cases and send the judgement to me as early as possible..." (*The Palm-Wine Drinkard* 292; emphasis mine). This extract also shows that Tutuola regards his work as a story-book and indeed *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* teems with stories drawn from the folklore of West Africa.

A study of *The Famished Road* illustrates that Ben Okri's effort in this novel is to create a different order of reality from what so far is given by the precursors of the African novel in English. Moving away from the stylistic concerns of his predecessors who advocate social realism, Okri makes use of folklore to depict the functioning of a society heading towards modernisation and a new politico-economic order—a society in transition. If the function of myths, as already expressed above, is to explain natural phenomena and beginning of things, Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* has unmistakably and conspicuously a myth-like beginning, "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" (*The Famished Road* 3). This introductory myth is repeatedly referred to by evoking the origin of the road as a river. In one of his drunken hallucinations, Dad says that "the road changed to a river" (*The Famished Road* 111); during one of his listless wanderings in the forest, Azaro says, "I ran till the road became a river..." (*The Famished Road* 132). On

reaching home, Azaro is severely beaten by Dad who bursts out in an angry tirade against the commonly held notion of the famished nature of the road, "the road swallows people and sometimes at night you can hear them calling for help, begging to be freed from inside its empty stomach" (*The Famished Road* 142). This belief is found to operate in the human world when during his wanderings, Azaro actually comes across a part in the forest where he steps on "an enamel plate of sacrifices to the road...rich with the offerings of fried yams, fish, stewed snails, palm oil, rice and cola nuts" (*The Famished Road* 134). The custom of appeasing the road by offering sacrifices operates viably throughout the novel.

In his journey with the three-headed spirit who lures him to the pleasures of the other world, Azaro says, "The world kept changing. The road began to move. It behaved like a river, and it flowed against the direction of our journey" (*The Famished Road* 376). However, one of the realistic descriptions of the road changing into a river is offered by Azaro during a heavy downpour when water floods the earth.

Catering to the reliability of the myth, the famished nature of the road is brought out during the very same downpour at one of the Road Construction sites where a white man has been inspecting the progress of the work. As he stands on a log of wood placed over the pit where the workers dredge up sand, looking at something through a pair of binoculars, suddenly the earth proves treacherous; he falls into the flooded pit and is devoured by it. In *Infinite Riches*, the road is given a mouth that keeps "opening and shutting" (*Infinite Riches* 17). Like the fluidity of the corporal matter of the spirit-children who could assume numerous forms, "Many of us were birds. We knew no boundaries" (*The Famished Road* 3), the road is also in a state of flux.

As found in Tutuola, with Okri's also, the novel becomes a device for voicing concerns regarding preservation of traditional values and practices which are fast fading in a society moving towards modernisation; both are found to talk about decline and decadence of traditional culture. Okri evokes tradition through the image of an elderly man. Azaro's grandfather is spoken of as a very powerful man; as the priest of the God of Roads, he is able to walk without any aid though completely blind. Voicing Okri's concern, Dad as a mouthpiece 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" (*The Famished Road* 84). In contrast to community life in villages, the city is compared to a veritable 'hell' (*The Famished Road* 83).

The traditional means of entertainment by telling stories, jokes, riddles and the like, is very categorically evoked in the party that Dad and Mum throw celebrating Azaro's return. The oldest man in the compound releases a torrent of proverbs, riddles and anecdotes. In another

instance, Dad very characteristically replies that “life is full of riddles...” (The Famished Road 48)—an observation that is reflective of the cultural life. Paradoxically, it is Mum’s ‘story about the stomach’ that feeds Azaro when they have no food for dinner. Dad is found to narrate his prison experiences in the form of stories to the compound men in a very animated fashion. Stories are found to exist in the bar—of politics, thugs of politicians, businessmen and chiefs spraying money at parties and celebrations. Azaro listens to Mum’s stories of aquamarine beginnings, the wisdom of old songs, songs of work and harvest, and the secrets of heroes. While Mum tells him stories of the community (kept alive through tradition), new stories are woven and songs composed simultaneously in the world outside to mark the ascendancy of the political parties. There is also the story of how death was conquered; the story of the King of the Road, the story of the white people, the story about rain and the rain god and others. It is thus found that stories in *The Famished Road* have several functions to play.

The novel, above all, throbs with stories about Madame Koto—stories that verge on myth. The display of drama outside her bar where she tosses and hurls off a rowdy customer transforms her to an awful figure. It is from this point onwards that she is given the status of a figure in a myth. The myths and stories surrounding her life are so numerous and fabulous that they serve to distort for ever the people’s perception of her reality. The myths wherein she is cloistered confer upon her an ambiguous identity. There are conflicting contradictory stories about her—each story presenting a different picture of Madame Koto, “it began to seem that there were many Madame Kotos in existence” (*The Famished Road* 429). At one point, while eating pepper soup in her bar Azaro notices that “she had a little beard” (*The Famished Road* 101). A bearded woman, one could say, is reminiscent of the witches in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and very categorically, a customer affirms this, “She’s a witch” (*The Famished Road* 107) as her photograph emerges as a smudged washed-out monster, a cross between a misbegotten animal and a wood carving.

In the sequels (*Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches*), Madame Koto becomes a living myth. She is mythologised as every one talks about her whereas she herself becomes almost inaccessible and hence invisible. In this context, her proclamation in *The Famished Road* to Azaro that, “Now I am here...tomorrow I am gone” (*The Famished Road* 290) is almost prophetic. Only her powers are felt by the ghetto dwellers. Even her bar assumes an uncanny atmosphere rooted in another world, “Madame Koto’s bar seemed like a strange fairyland in the real world, a fairy land that no one could see” (*The Famished Road* 242); and her death in *Infinite Riches* only serves to magnify her myth. It is seen that along with the new stories (like the story of the blue sunglasses that Mum tells Azaro and his friend Ade) and

songs of a new world, new myths are also created.

Stories serve as a potent tool to lure Azaro back to life from his delirium when the three headed spirit almost succeeds in taking him away to his spirit companions. Dad whispers into his ears, stories about ancestors who had left their original land and made a strange place their home; about his grandfather who fought a spirit of the forest and was made the Priest of the Shrine of Roads; about gods who divided the universe between the land of spirits, the land of humans, and the infinite regions of heavenly beings and who gave in all realms a special homeland for the brave, and others. In the later part of the novel, it is again interesting to see the kind of books that Dad chooses to consolidate his philosophy on building a nation for the poor. Held by the spell of contemplating an utopian ideal for his country, Dad listens to Azaro’s reading of a number of books of different cultures and particularly falls in love with *Arabian Nights*—a story containing many stories.

An important point of departure between the two writers is that unlike Tutuola, Okri is not Yoruba. Notwithstanding this, there are many ways in which his work articulates the same conceptual resource-base, as well as, various aspects of what might be seen as a Yoruba belief system. Ato Quayson opines that this factor has to do “with the development of a broadly Nigerian consciousness in the eyes of the younger generation of Nigerians not only with the spread of education but also with increasing number of them in a diasporic existence outside the country” (Quayson 1997:102). Physical virility, strength and courage is revered in traditional societies as found in the case of the ‘hunters’ in Tutuola’s novels (like *The Brave African Huntress*, *The Wild Hunter in the Bush of Ghosts* and others) or the ‘wrestler’ (Okonkwo) in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Falls Apart* (1958). Though Dad has the potential of both the hunter and the wrestler (earlier in the novel, Dad kills a wild boar to celebrate Azaro’s return; as a boxer he is named Black Tyger in his village), he suffers only shame and humiliation in a society where it is the people with money who can wield power. Unlike Tutuola, the hunter in Okri (Dad) has to toil laboriously to make both ends meet. He lacks the reverence and awe that traditional society confers on hunters. This shows that in a modernised society (a city) the hunter has little role to play; his status has undergone substantial change with change in time and changing cultural values. His energies are now put into earning money to eke out a living. As a fellow in the compound urges Dad, “Why don’t you join the army, use your muscles...It’s only here that you are strong” (*The Famished Road* 80).

The photographer who displays ample courage in recording and preserving the riots against the rulers and atrocities committed by the thugs of the Party of the Rich tells Azaro, “I used to be a hunter” (*The Famished Road* 270). As a hunter, he is a representation of courage. However, his courage is rewarded by wrecking and

breaking down his house and glass cabinet where his photographs are displayed. He is pursued and beaten up by the policemen and thugs of the rich politicians. Dad who loudly declares his political commitments and affinities to the poor, and refuses to vote for the Party of the Rich is tormented in ways more than one. The landlord, an ally of the rich increases their house rent; it becomes impossible for Mum to trade in the market as the thugs pester her on account of Dad's political deviance; the thugs mark their door with a machete and smear it with the blood of a wild boar; above all, the thugs attempt to murder Dad as he refuses to vote for them. The courage of both Dad and the Photographer is crushed to the ground in a society where only money and power can fetch respect. In *Songs of Enchantment*, the hunter who succeeds in killing one of the white antelopes (the antelopes cannot be apprehended by an average man) is run over by a political van. His death could be seen as a very oblique, symbolic and shocking rendition of the new world order of money and politics crushing down the old one.

The pull towards artefacts of the western culture is seen as in Tutuola. However, in Tutuola the characters are shown to be fairly familiar to their use; while Okri makes his characters bathe in their novelty. In the celebration of Azaro's return, Jeremiah, the photographer is able to draw the attention of the celebration to his camera. They abandon singing and dancing (traditional form of entertainment) to pose for a photograph. That the camera is a new entry in the life of the ghetto is more strongly emphasized when the spirits in the room to display their curiosity:

*After much prancing and mystery making, as if he were a magician, the photographer lifted up 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, hung on his arms and stood on his head (The Famished Road 56).*

Later the camera is regarded as a "magic instrument" that makes things real (*The Famished Road* 213). Again, the first impact of the megaphone on the ghetto dwellers is very vividly described, "the crack of an iron ruler shot through my head and ended between my eyes. The room swayed. The crackling voice outside spoke from an elevated stationary position" (*The Famished Road* 144). At this juncture, reference could be made to Lutz Rohrich's stance that many black people call the radio "the voice of clouds" because of its demonic inexplicability<sup>17</sup>. The connection of electricity (for the first time in the ghetto) in Madame Koto's bar is evoked as performance of a magical feat. The ghetto people are baffled by the unknown and unseen source responsible for the illumination, "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" (*The Famished Road* 427). Further, Madame Koto's car—allegedly the first in the ghetto, gives the impression of the "affectionate face of an enlarged metallic tortoise". The first car-wash is executed in a ceremonious manner with the herbalist chanting prayers and blessings of a long life for the vehicle and people revelling in an intoxicated air of celebration. *Infinite Riches* depicts the incomprehensibility of the complex machinery meant for cutting down trees. This could bring to one's mind the analogy between the 'bicycle' and 'an iron horse' in *Things Fall Apart*.

As both the writers emerge from a common cultural base, that is essentially West African, it is unlikely that one will remain uninfluenced by the other. It is found that Okri's world is heavily influenced by that of Tutuola's. A very conspicuous difference found in the novels of the two writers concerns the setting. In this connection, Lutz Rohrich urges that the local landscape often creates a standard for a region's narratives<sup>18</sup>. While Tutuola's world is populated with bushes, forests, hunters, ghosts, spirits; Okri presents these elements in a more urban setting. Because of cutting down of trees and forests at the behest of urbanisation (at one point Azaro says, "the world of trees and wild bushes was being thinned" p. 281; and further visiting a spot where workers with yellow helmet are connecting the area with electricity, he says, "the forest there has been conquered", p. 319), the spirits and ghosts dwell in human habitation with the human beings in houses and bars and it is therefore justified that only Azaro can see them in these places. This is unlike Tutuola where the territory allocated to humans (town/village) and spirits (bush/forest) is more strictly defined and demarcated. However, the 'marketplace' is one such space where the human world and the spirit world coexist. After making good his escape from the 'goddess of the island', Azaro finds himself in a market and realises that, "it wasn't just humans who came to the market places of the world. Spirits and other beings come there too. They buy and sell, browse and investigate. They wander among the fruits of the earth and sea" (*The Famished Road* 18). This episode culls into memory the marketplace scene in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* where the drinkard meets the Complete Gentleman. Whereas all can see the gentleman in the marketplace in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, it is only Azaro who can distinguish the spirits, as one of them says pointing out to him, "that boy can see us" (*The Famished Road* 18).

Like Tutuola, Okri is often found to edge the stories with a moral lesson. While winding up the story of the King of the Roads, Dad warns Azaro of the perils on the road, "that is why a small boy like you must be very careful how you wander about in this world" (*The Famished Road* 302). An interesting feature found in this story is that under the guise of story-telling, Okri details numerous beliefs associated with sacrifices made to the roads.

Another difference observed is that Tutuola's community has common experience of war, famine and celebration as could be found in the novels chosen for this study. But in case of the younger writer, money and power creates two factions: the Rich and the Poor and their experiences of life are simultaneously different. It is found that in *The Famished Road*, the changing times are correspondingly reflected through changes in Madame Koto's bar. From a thatched hut offering palm-wine with a lizard fetish on the wall meant to attract customers, the bar gradually graduates to a well constructed space selling beer; while the walls are adorned with Coca-Cola posters displaying half-naked white women (also intended to attract customers). The study shows that within the span of the novel the changing times are portrayed through changes in taste and preferences of the society.

### Conclusion

The study shows how the elements of folklore go into the making of the two novels. In both *The Palm Wine Drinkard* and *The Famished Road*, the act of story-telling is highlighted. Stories are found to play a set of functions—to make moral/didactic comments; as a medium of entertainment; to disseminate knowledge about the legends and glories of the past; and the like. The novels serve as receptacles to contain the innumerable and inexhaustible number of folktales and stories. The writers are found to make abundant references to myths and riddles. Particularly in Okri's *The Famished Road*, it is found that myths and stories of the bygone world coexist with the newly created stories and myths of a society under change—a society heading towards a new political order and modernisation. The study reveals that with both Tutuola and Okri the novel becomes a device for voicing concerns relating to preservation of traditional values and practices and apprehension over decline and decadence of traditional culture. In the chosen novels, the gradual and continuous replacement of traditional artefacts by western artefacts is depicted in a very vivid and conspicuous manner to suggest a changing world and time and the corresponding changes in cultural habits and behaviour. Especially in Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard* it is found that the modern gadgets find their way into the retelling of the folktales; thus, Tutuola conditions the old tales to reflect the changing times. A mythic interpretation of the world is found to be a binding factor in the two writers. For, instance, the story of how death came to the world, what could be found in the land of beginnings, the beginning of famine on earth, the reason for the eternal hunger of the road—all allude to a mythic imagination of the writers depicting a celebration of folklore and oral culture and their existence.

The transition from the 'oral' to the 'written' mode and from 'traditional' social set-up to a 'modern' society, in

the context of Africa, is crucial, intricate, controversial and at the same time phenomenal, necessary and significant. A reading of the chosen texts show how these phases of transition have been intensely and vividly reflected by Tutuola and Okri using the folklore vis-à-vis the changing tendencies of changing times. It depicts that irrespective of time, the folklore and its various aspects continue to be a useful resource in moulding an African sensibility in the African novel in English.

### Notes

1. Quoted in *Decolonising the Mind* by Ngugi wa Thiongo (London: James Currey, 1986), p.85.
2. "The Novelist as Teacher" is included in Achebe's *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays, 1975-87*.
3. Ngugi in *Decolonising the Mind*, p. 85. Although Ngugi is substantially concerned with the language issue, such concerns are beyond the scope of this paper.
4. As novelists, both Achebe and Ngugi have demonstrated how this task could be appreciably accomplished. Achebe does it by using narrative to critically reinstate the culture and world view of the colonised to its rightful place; Ngugi, by bringing the genre (novel) closer to recognisably indigenous modes of expression— forms of oral narrative, the conversational tone, the fable, proverbs, songs and others.
5. Babasola Johnson, Eric Larabee, Adrian Roscoe are some who pour acrimonious criticism on Tutuola's style of writing.
6. Critics like David Whittaker are interested in reading Tutuola's novels along these lines.
7. Ekwutosi Onwukwe in "Ibgo Folklore" included in *African Literature Comes of Age*, Ed. C.D. Narasimhaiah and Ernest N. Emenyonu (Mysore: Dhvanyaloka, 1988), p. 1-12.
8. Emmanuel Obiechina in 1975 pg. 27 of his book *Culture, Tradition, and Society in the West African Novel* (1975).
9. William Bascom in *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 5, (New York: The Macmillan Company and the Free Press, 1969), p. 496.
10. Emmanuel Obiechina in 1975 pg. 26 of his book *Culture, Tradition, and Society in the West African Novel* (1975).
11. Ramsaran in "African Twilight: Folktale and Myth in Nigerian Literature", *Ibadan*, No. 15 (March 1963), pp. 17-19.
12. Similarity could be noticed with Raja Rao's (1938) stress in the preface to *Kanthapura* that punctuation marks imbibe break in flow or continuity of narration.
13. Anjali Gera in *Three Great African Novelists*, (2001) p. 38.
14. Ekwutosi Onwukwe in "Ibgo Folklore" included in *African Literature Comes of Age*, Ed. C.D. Narasimhaiah and Ernest N. Emenyonu (Mysore: Dhvanyaloka, 1988),

p. 9.

15. Anjai Gera in Preface to *Three Great African Novelists*, p. vii.

16. Of its many characteristics, a postmodern narrative or literary work tends not to conclude with the neatly tied-up ending and highlights the 'fictionality of fiction'. A detailed study of postmodern literature and postmodernism is made in Linda Hutcheon's (1988,1989) *Politics of Post-modernism* and *Poetics of Postmodernism*.

17. Rohrich p. 144 of *Folktales and Reality* (1991)

18. Rohrich p. 179 of the book *Folktales and Reality* (1991).

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