

A NEW MASK FOR OLORUN: THE SYNCRETIC MYTHOPOEIA OF THE AFRICAN NOVEL OF THE 20TH CENTURY

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*Abstract: Yorubá culture, Igbo traditions and the tragedies of the apartheid and postcolonial period have collided in a titanic battle from which African literature emerged as an anomic construct. The representatives of the post-colonial syncretism share the same reservoir of myths, the same vision on the recognition of a self-defining African literature. The archetypal characters of the African writers of the 20th century have their roots in the Yorubá narratives, but their modality of interacting in a Western framework inscribes them in the transcultural, syncretic realm, giving birth to a dynamic cultural consciousness in its attempt to explain and express a between-the-worlds identity. Our analysis will approach the creation of "post-colonial" deities in the African space, as an act of re-mythologization of old gods, and their transference in a space alien to them within which they must re-define themselves in order to confer their shattered universe a new coherence. The magical, syncretic, but deeply resonant African realism gives voice to the gods created and re-created in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and In Arcadia, creates a language for the "destiny-god" of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Matigari*, follows the odyssey of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* of Amos Tutuola, and balances the three-world Icarus Girl of Helen Oyeyemi. In their construction of a new self and a new discourse in front of their "post-colonial" gods, the shared landmarks of the three African writers summon the mythic elements of the Yorubá culture (the social reinvestment of abiku, "the forest of gods" and the road as a "newly-bred" god, the commoner as a supernatural enforcer of the new order). The paper attempts to advance the culturally identified representation of the colonial trauma, felt as such at the most profound levels of consciousness, in those places where only the literary transcript of dissolution and social trauma may find meaning and expression. The journey of the myth in itself represents the journey of the ancient Africa, from the ancestor worship of Yorubá masquerades to the influence of the Western perspectives on life and becoming, and in the process, Africa's literary documents arrive at their place in the history of writing. The core concept of the paper remains the myth, but its features acquire the dimension of a social cry, the utterance of a national soul in search of its gods and their counseling. As a syncretic construct, the African myth is fragmented, and in its disrupted fabric our research will try to identify the echoes of the clash of the two cultures - African and Western - and its cultural aftermath.*

Keywords: syncretism, mythopoeia, social identity, Yorubá culture, African magical realism.

In the vibrant history of African literature, one motif emerges with an open potentiality: the myth. The relation between the trauma of the colonial and post-colonial periods and the process of redefining a national identity could be viewed as a coping strategy, a protective mechanism meant to guard between the victim and the trauma he/she was subject to. African literature proves that one of its most powerful resources in devising the tools of self-assertion is the myth. And not the myth *per se*, because every people inherits a mythological structure, by the mythology of the resilience in which the originality of the African pursue is rooted.

The five levels of engagement of an origin myth are, as Clio Mănescu concluded, the sacred level, the social level, the gnoseological and the poetical level.¹ Analyzing the determinants of the African mythical structures, we discern the accent on the social level. The new script of the myth must respond to an adjustment of the social rationality. The

¹ Clio Mănescu, *Mitul antic elen și dramaturgia contemporană*, București: Univers, 1977.

mythicization of the inexplicable reality answers to the need of cosmic order, of referential systems meant to explain the deeds of the African history.

The re-mythicization of the archaic African myths constitutes the response of the African society to the trauma of colonization and of the Western modernity, perceived as alienating and corrupting processes that tend to sever the hybridized social and, by consequence, the literary product, from their roots. Speaking about the “consciousness of the loss of the eternal essence of his being,” Wole Soyinka was advancing a concept which constitutes the core presumption on which the becoming of the myth proceeds, the “fragmentation of essence from self.”² In this “fragmentation,” the Nigerian writer discovers the efficacy of the ritual and of its interpreters, the myths.

As such, we pursue the trajectory followed by one of the most relevant entities of the African mythos, the post-colonial *abiku*, in a journey between worlds, a “famished road” interconnecting the substance and the expression of the myth. Okri’s *abiku* is a hybrid form, challenging the old rule of never embracing the worldly realm, and renouncing or denouncing the role played by the *abiku* in African folklore: one of an observer, never a doer. The sacred *abiku* leaves the sacred time in the perils of an imposed alteration, only to redefine itself in a form within which the former structure could still be recognized. The re-mythicization of Okri’s *abiku*, along with the cases of Oyeyemi’s *Icarus Girl* and Tutuola’s *Palm Wine Drinkard*, restructure the prototype of African *myth* into a hybrid expression, one which could be chosen for expressing the historical epoch of Africanism.

*Metaphysical discourse in Africa must be based on the African perception of reality as determined by a history, geographical circumstances, and such cultural phenomena as religion, thought system and linguistic conventions entrenched in the African worldview. This implies that most metaphysical discourses on the continent have certain common features. Central to African metaphysics are religious beliefs related to the African conception of God, the universe and their interrelations. Further notions such as spirit, causality, person, space and time, and reality in their various conceptions play a significant role in the life of Africans as they grapple with existential realities beyond phenomena such as religion, ancestral veneration, witchcraft, magic, etc.*³

Amos Tutuola has been characterized by EN Obiechina as representative for a transitional phase “from a purely oral narrative tradition to a purely literary narrative transition.”⁴ And his originality is considered to reside in bridging the old and the new world, transferring the attributes from the ritualistic pursuits of the African worshiper into the literary

² Wole Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture*, Ibadan: New Horn press, 1988, p. 30.

³ Lebisa J. Teffo, Abraham PJ Roux, *Metaphysical Thinking in Africa*, in PH Coetzee and APJ Roux (eds.), *The African Philosophy Reader*, 2nd edition, Cape Town: Oxford University Press of Southern Africa Ltd., 2003, pp. 195-196.

⁴ EN Obiechina, *Amos Tutuola and the Oral Tradition*, in Bernth Lindfors (ed.): *Critical Perspectives on Amos Tutuola*, Heinemann, pp. 84-105, cited in Brenda Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction. Seeing with a third eye*, London-New York: Routledge, 1998, p. 42.

inscriptions. For Amos Tutuola, the spiritual world speaks with “a thousand petrol drums,”⁵ sees with eyes “which brought out a flood-light like mercury in colour.”⁶

We are tempted to interpret *The Drinkard* as a “modern” Ulysses, but even if his journey is one of self-discovering and accumulation of knowledge, this Ulysses has inherited not the historical moment proper but the ancient mythical expressions as his “modern” history, a timeless unraveling of an arrested becoming.

The Drinkard may be interpreted as an “archetypal approach”, essentially non-historical, of the departure from the authority of the literary forms of the colonial period, and “revealing an African alternative to the realist conventions of the rationalist tradition.”⁷ In this process of alternative literary expressions, Amos Tutuola demolishes the myth of the godly warrior in order to recreate a new instance of seeker, as a solution within the anchorage to the new historical developments. One of the first recognized African writers, Tutuola reclaims, through his story-telling and myth-creation fables, the right to react to the exterior events distorting the inner understanding of the African self.

The Palm-Wine Drinkard is an answer to the basic level of pertinence called Myth. But this mustn't be understood as a descent into the underworld, but only the perception of the mystery of the bush, a fearful realm, the locus of the spirits and the evil encounters for Yoruba people.

The works of Amos Tutuola are considered to represent the precursor to African magical realism proper⁸. Tutuola sends his “god” into the world in order to re-discover the meaning of his god-like existence: the palm-wine tapster, because the palm wine drunkard ceases to be the god, the myth, in the absence of his means of conversion.

After the seventh month that I had left my home town, I reached a town and went to an old man, this old man was not a really man, he was a god and he was eating with his wife when I reached there. When I entered the house I saluted both of them, they answered me well, although nobody should enter his house like that as he was a god, but I myself was a god and juju-man. Then I told the old man (god) that I am looking for my palm-wine tapster who had died in my town some time ago, he did not answer my question but asked me first what was my name? I replied that my name was “Father of gods who could do everything in this world.”⁹

The novel is written as a legend, as we accompany *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* on his road to Death. Death in itself is invested with mundane features: when the Drinkard arrived to his home, he “was not at home by that time, he was in his yam garden,” and it isn't Death the one to announce it passing by the home of the mortal, but the Drinkard announces his arrival by beating a drum, the most significant musical object in the African world. Death poses a quintessential question: “Is that man still alive or dead?” The Drinkard and Death are equal opponents, and the strings that bond the mortal to the realm of Death are the same that bond Death to the reality of living, the ties of earth and its nourishment. The ropes of the yams are

⁵ Amos Tutuola, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard and My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, New York: Grove Press, 1994, p. 205.

⁶ Amos Tutuola, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

⁷ F. Abiola Irele, Simon Gikandi, *The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature*, Vol. 1, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 479.

⁸ F. Abiola Irele, *African Novel*, Cambridge Companions, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 162.

⁹ Amos Tutuola, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

the Drinkard's weapons, and we acknowledge the development of the myth of the primordial man, in search of his destiny. Returning home, the Drinkard discovers that Death is not the answer to the finitude of his journey; it's only one expression of it. Death receives its toll, as "[the drunkard] threw down Death before [the old man's] door and at the same time that [the Drinkard] threw him [the Death] down, the net cut into pieces and Death found his way out."¹⁰ During his journey, the hero assumes the appearance of other beings, preserving the consciousness of a human being. This kind of metamorphosis, otherwise restricted only to supernatural beings, is endowing now a regular human, part of the staging of the new myth.

In the drinkard's experiences we observe, as Caroline Rooney underlined,

*a dual consciousness at work, that of a person who does not fade away in magically or empathetically be(com)ing a cow, and that of what is experienced in this being a cow. [...] This [is] a means of indicating that affective identification need not entail the loss of the ego to that which takes the self over.*¹¹

Being captive within other forms of matter constitutes the medium through which the Drinkard would emerge transformed, invested with a kind of understanding the creative empathy. Tutuola's hero is surrounded by a surreal textuality, and this allegorical expression constructs not only the act of birth of a myth, but also the annihilation of one, as in the case of the "Complete Gentleman", who becomes a skull, a dead undead as the beauty is perishable and only remembered.

The hybrid "half-baby" represents an in-between landmark, one which could be forged only by the beating of the Drum, the dance of the Dance and the sing of the Song, the Yoruba rituals invested with the power to make people commune with the gods.

Tutuola's Drinkard does not achieve the status of a godly creature but he enjoys the freedom of inhabiting or, more precise, passing through, the forest of demons and the bushes of spirits. He sees with the eyes of the post-colonial era the manifestations of the pre-colonial mythology.

But how does the post-colonial trauma affect the African child? Why the child? Because the child is a potentiality, and history could be written in them sitting at the border between the bush and the road.

The African child is a traumatized child. No doubt that an analysis of the children's literature in the African space would reveal, beyond the loss of the innocence, a forced maturity yet to be acknowledged by the traditional perspective upon the African familial universe.

But the child of the African literature must be understood as a different concept from that of the Western acceptance, not only because he/she has suffered, not because of his/her dependence of traditions and customs in developing a personality, but because he/she is approaching in the re-negotiation of an identity, the possibility, the *abiku* re-collected and re-shaped in an active force of the re-drawing of an African figure, as under the hands of the potential Jess of Helen Oyeyemi. *The Icarus Girl*, described as a "ghost story," is balanced on

¹⁰ Amos Tutuola, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

¹¹ Caroline Rooney, *African Literature, Animism and Politics*, Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures, New York and London: Routledge, 2003, p. 147.

the border between realism and magic, in “what we might call Tutuola-territory – a world of signs rooted in Yoruba cosmology.”¹²

*“Third generation Nigerian writers are drawing on rich literary and cultural tradition when adopting the child figure in their texts. The figure of the child occupies a critical position in African and Nigerian literature. [...] many of the classic anticolonial texts deployed the perspective of a child protagonist to showcase and resist colonial violence.”*¹³

Oyeyemi introduces the Doppelgänger TillyTilly not as a stranger or a harbinger, as in its usual acceptance, but as another self, the African image in the mirror, a representation of the ancient inheritance for her mother. The twins’ myth interpenetrates with the *abiku* myth in order to symbolize a possibility of adapting to the new world of “betweens.”

*“Her name was Fern”, TillyTilly whispered in Jess’s ear, as Jess began to fall away from the room, fall into sleep. “Your twin’s name was Fern. They didn’t get to choose a proper name for her, a Yoruba name, because she was born already dead, just after you were born. You have been so empty, Jessy, without your twin: you have had no one to walk your three worlds with you. I know – I am the same. I have been just like you for such a long time! But now I am Fern, I am your sister, and you are my twin... I’ll look after you, Jess...”*¹⁴

Fern and Jessamy form the African identity called Wuraola, but by means of a self-generated spirit, in the sense of the self, a process that would create the post-modern myth of the complete traveler through the worlds: the post-colonial, the ancient African and the self-defining world.

We encounter in Oyeyemi’s story an *abiku* who torments its companion, a reclusive and elusive entity which proclaims at every step that it is the sole detainer of the true knowledge, the sole protector in a world of “metissaged” creatures.

If for the other African actors on the literary scene, life flows between two worlds, for Jessamy, her coming of age is a coming into a multiple identity, a fluid one, which speaks three languages and inhabits three dimensions. The recourse intended by her mother in order to restore the disrupted balance by the twins’ birth is an animistic one, by ritual and recession to the traditional cults.

Three worlds! Jess lives in three worlds. She lives in this world, and she lives in the spirit world, and she lives in the Bush. She’s abiku, she always would have known! The spirits tell her things. Fern tells her things. We should’ve... we should’ve d-d-done ibeji carving for her! We should’ve... oh, oh... Mama! Mummy-mi, help me...*¹⁵

¹² Jane Bryce, „Half and Half Children”: *Third-Generation Women Writers and the New Nigerian Novel*, Indiana University Press, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20109578>, p. 6.

¹³ Madeleine Hron, “Ora Na-Azu Nwa”: *The Figure of the Child in Third-Generation Nigerian Novels*, *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 39, No. 2, Nigeria’s Third-Generation Novel: Preliminary Theoretical Engagements (Summer, 2008), pp. 27-48, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20109577>.

¹⁴ Helen Oyeyemi, *The Icarus Girl*, Anchor Books. A Division of Random House, Inc., New York: 2006, p. 96.

* Ibeji carving, a wooden symbol of a dead twin, meant to alleviate the evilness of the departed. Primary source: Ere Ibeji, <www.randafricanart.com/Yoruba_Ibeji_2.html>.

¹⁵ Helen Oyeyemi, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

As David Rudd highlighted, “the constructed child, as *tabula rasa* – an empty being on which society attempts to inscribe a particular identity – becomes in that very process, the constructive child and sameness is disruptive.”¹⁶ Jessamy is the result of an interplay, a complex and dangerous “carving” taking place within her identity, and the terror of not knowing the origins, nor the destination of this journey makes her “scream, long and loud, as the silent, never-ending torrent of reddish black erupted from that awful mouth, and engulfed her, baptizing her in its madness.”¹⁷

Oyeyemi’s “truth” about the intersections between reality and myth, allegory and magic, slaves and gods, England and Nigeria. There [are] only fleeting inter-permeations and re-arrangements into no predictable patterns,”¹⁸ which usually present an aspect that will drive the reader to another metamorphosis, another stage of development, and, at the same time, another gate to the understanding of the collective psyche of the hybrid and syncretic Africa.

But maybe the richest plethora of mythical creations and alterations of the old myths is to be found in the works of Ben Okri, the proponent of African magical realism.

Okri’s *abiku* is the first instance of the myth that transgresses the grounds in which it was founded. This *abiku* cherishes the liaison formed with the humans and acknowledges its desire to remain in the realm of the developing history in order to witness and remember the changes that the postcolonial era has brought upon the timeless inscriptions on the African wall. The bond between the land of the gods and spirits and the land of the passers becomes fragile and corrupted. Ben Okri views this process as degradation, but also as the possible distillation of the new African identity.

The negative dimensions of the classical *abiku* are reconverted and transferred to a surreal being governed by the desire to interiorize the action forbidden to the African oral culture spirits. This re-mythicization of the traditional Ifa gods has its sources in the struggle between the core self and the hybridity born as an aftermath of the colonial period. The new *abiku* must answer to these challenges and indeed it does this by renouncing the realm of the equilibrium and perpetual happiness.

*The spirit-child is an unwilling adventurer into chaos and sunlight, into the dreams of the living and of the dead. Things that are not ready, not willing to be born or to become, things for which adequate preparations have not been made to sustain their momentous births, things that are not resolved, things bound up with failure and with fear of being, they all keep recurring, keep coming back, and in themselves partake of the spirit-child’s condition. They keep coming and going till their time is wright. History itself fully demonstrates how things of the world partake of the condition of the spirit-child.*¹⁹

Abiku [...] seemingly alluding to the precarious position of the child in Nigerian society, condemned to illness, illiteracy, a bleak terrifying life which could succumb only in

¹⁶ David Rudd, *Theorizing and Theory: How Does Children’s Literature Exist?*, Understanding Children’s Literature, Peter Hunt and Millicent Lenz (eds.), 2nd edition, New York: Routledge, 2005, pp. 15-29.

¹⁷ Helen Oyeyemi, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

¹⁸ Brenda Cooper, *The Middle Passage of the Gods and the New Diaspora: Helen Oyeyemi’s „The Opposite House,”* Research in African Literatures, Vol. 40, No. 4, Writing Slavery in(to) the African Diaspora (Winter, 2009), <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40468164>, p. 1117>.

¹⁹ Ben Okri, *The Famished Road*, London: Jonathan Cape (Random House), 1991, p. 386.

death. Okri's *abiku* is the search for an alternative, for an adaptive meaning and an adaptive

....

For Azaro, his in-between existence is not a trap, but the portal to the arresting of time.

The world was still, as if it had momentarily become a picture, as if God were The Great Photographer. The clearing turned into a new world. Out of the flash came the sharp outlines of spirits rising into the air with weary heads. And then they fell down and bounced and floated over the stillness of the world. [...] And when the next explosion came, followed by another blinding flash, the spirits were obliterated."²⁰

The stillness of the utopian code, ruling the world from which Azaro, Okri's *abiku*, desire to depart, is but a calling to the endless death, the universe without depth, an one-dimensional realm on which there is no living, but figural being. The denial of its source definition brings

The spirits of the African mythos are anchored to physical "homes," and the disruption of the modern inventions uproots them, stealing away their referentiality and as such, they are forced to find other means of surviving the history. They re-shape themselves in the passions of the "civilized," industrialized universe of the machine, in roads, in cars, and even in human beings serving them as symbols of the new world.

The roads are assimilated by Okri's *abiku* to some all-inclusive beings, that "seemed to me then to have a cruel and infinite imagination. All the roads multiplied, reproducing themselves, subdividing themselves, turning in to themselves, like snakes, tails in their mouths, twisting themselves into labyrinths."²¹ The roads are hungry of humans, they destroy the world of the spirits, become instilled in the African times, and the only means of surviving this trauma is to assimilate, to interiorize the concept of the road. The result is not a regular one. Okri creates a myth, the strangeness of which is justified by the uncountable deaths it claimed, assimilating identities, destinies, and becoming at every curve something else. Okri provides a way out of this nightmarish modernization: the insatiable appetite of this road will bring it to devour itself. The image challenges the finality of one of the most interesting symbols of philosophy: the snake as completion, because it begs the question: And after the completion, where is the snake supposed to go? Okri responds, "into itself," into its primordial matrix, from which a new cycle will emerge.

As Mark Mathuray noticed, "The impetus towards the intermingling of the referential and the imaginary represents a major trend within African cultural production."²² And Okri brings this trend to its climax, obscuring the traditional boundaries between the spirit world and the livings, interwoven by a singular thread, the modern *abiku*, the universal traveler, in itself an ambiguous character, historian and critic, fighter and observer. "Okri's vision", Mathuray conjectured, "is a swarming, dissonant world of angels and demons".²³

²⁰ Ben Okri, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

²¹ Ben Okri, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

²² Mark Mathuray (ed.), *On the Sacred in African Literature. Old Gods and New Worlds*, New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2009, p. 119.

²³ Mark Mathuray, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

*Angels and demons are amongst us; they take many forms. They can enter us and dwell there for one second or half a lifetime. Sometimes both of them dwell in us together. [...] if your heart is a friend of Time nothing can destroy you. Death has taught me the religion of living – [...] My words are the words of a stranger.*²⁴

This syncretism conveys the proposal of a new mythos, one which could embrace and explain the social indentations and the healing of the influence by “reversing the direction of [Tutuola’s] crossover,”²⁵ understood as the ontological transformation of the human in inhuman, and creating an *abiku* which perceives its own nature as a mere hallucination.

In “The Idea of Africa,” VY Mudimbe asserted: “The artists of the present generation are the children of two traditions, two worlds, both of which they challenge, merging mechanics and masks, machines and the memories of gods.”²⁶

Maybe it is highly the time for Olorun** to recover its basic language. Ngugi wa Thiong’o is, in this context, its spear-bearer, because he is the African writer, par excellence, breaking the dependence of the English language in order to “re-educate” himself in writing in Kikūyū***. But beyond this dramatic initiative which would have denied him the recognition, his biblical rhetoric reveals the lasting effect of the European influence and of the tradition in general. This eschatological discourse gave birth to *Matigari*, “a work that can be considered the supreme parable of the «African condition».”²⁷

*Stories about Matigari have more cogency and power than the personality and character of the man himself. Like the body of Christ, the figure of Matigari acquires meaning through the struggle over its interpretation: he can be read as «the One prophesied» (p. 81), as the fictional figure in old folktales (p. 127), as the performer of miracles (pp. 157-158), or as a revolutionary, the worst nightmare of the ruling class (pp. 169-70).*²⁸

Ngugi’s African parable is referential for the creation of a myth. A commoner, albeit a brave one, a fighter for justice like many others in the African history, returns to the space-time fabric of the normality. He tells stories about heroic battles, about freedom and social development and “his eyes shining brightly as if he could see far into the future.”²⁹

*“His melodious voice and his story had been so captivating that Mūriūki and Mgarūro wa Kīrīro did not realize that they had reached the restaurant. His story had transported them to other times long ago when the clashing of warriors’ bows and spears shook trees and mountains to their roots.”*³⁰

²⁴ Ben Okri, *op. cit.*, p. 393.

²⁵ Mark Mathuray, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

²⁶ VY Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994, p. 207, cited in Brenda Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction*, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

** In Yoruba tradition, the ruler of the sky and father of the gods Obatala and Odudua, Heaven and Earth. Source: Encyclopedia Mythica, <www.pantheon.org/articles/o/olorun.html>.

*** The most representative nation of Kenya. Source: www.kenya-information-guide.com/kikuyu-tribe.html.

²⁷ F. Abiola Irele, *The African Imagination. Literature in Africa and The Black Diaspora*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 65.

²⁸ Simon Gikandi, *Ngugi wa Thiong’o*, Cambridge Studies in African and Caribbean Literature, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 234.

²⁹ Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Matigari* (trans. from the Gikūkū by Wangūi wa Goro), Oxford: Heinemann Publishers Ltd., 1989, p. 19.

³⁰ Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

He does not seem to dwell in the same space-time contradictions and extensions as the ordinary human beings. He is never tired, he does not need nourishment, and where his companions the pain of the struggle, Matigari feels the calling of the future.

*Mūriūki felt tired and ached all over. When he looked at Matigari, he could not help wondering: What sort of man is this? I haven't seen him eat or drink anything, and he does not look in the least tired.*³¹

His abandoning the solitude and the safety of the ancient woods serves to a determined purpose, a purpose perceived by Matigari not as heightened by its philosophical ramifications, but as objectively motivated as any other – even if more down-to-earth – reason. “‘Truth seeking justice?’ the peasant mused on the drunkard’s words slowly. ‘Justice seeking truth! The Seeker of Truth and Justice!’”³²

“‘They are looking for a giant of a man,’ the student said, laughter welling up in his throat. But it died as quickly as it rose.”³³ For the Seeker of the Truth and Justice, such evasive concepts in the post-colonial Africa, must be a godly figure, an inhuman creation of an exacerbated and traumatized popular imagination.

The African mind is waiting for its modern legend, or for the homogeneity of the syncretic landscape its world is exhibiting, or

*[...] perhaps a miracle. Being let out of prison by an invisible person? Yet even as they headed towards the main road, most of them were wondering: Who was Matigari ma Njirūūngi, a person who could make prison walls open?
From that night, Matigari’ fame spread over all he country. He became a legend. He became a dream. Still the question remained: Who was Matigari ma Njirūūngi?*³⁴

The African way of thinking responds to the basic principle of “the savage mind”, never to be equated to the “scientific thinking”. One reason for this assertion is that “it remains different because its aim is to reach by the shortest possible means a general understanding of the universe – and not only a general but a *total* understanding. That is, it is a way of thinking which must imply that if you don’t understand everything, you don’t explain anything.”³⁵ This refers to the “totalitarian ambition of the savage mind” in discerning the functioning of the world.

Matigari is assimilated with Christ, and his Second Coming is trumpeted as the promised deliverance of the evil, or maybe he is a false prophet, as the priest announces in citing Matthew, chapter, 24 verse 23: “For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets...”³⁶ The Minister for Truth and Justice challenges the myth claiming that it was created by “a group of thieves and murderers – a group of criminals...”, and Ngugi introduces

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 41.

³² Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

³³ Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 66.

³⁵ Claude-Lévi Strauss, *Myth and Meaning*, New York: Schocken Books, 1979, pp. 5-6.

³⁶ Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *op. cit.* p. 105.

to us the question: Is it a myth a legitimized image or an expression of an adaptive modeling of the world?

*A tall, well-built, elderly man stood in the doorway. On his head was a wide-brimmed hat, strapped under his chin, around it was a strap decorated with beads, and an ostrich feather. He wore a knee-length coat, made of leopard skin. He wore corduroy trousers.*³⁷

This image is contradictory and yet, deeply expressive in presenting the present (1970's) state of Africa: an anomic puzzle of African tradition and Western novelty. But he is an impressive individual, demanding and receiving obedience within the powers of his social mandate. "Don't you dare touch me! I am as old as this country,"³⁸ he conjured the element of power, a police officer. He is history: alteration and reconstruction, "fascinated by the yesterday of his people and forgetting the present."³⁹

Matigari becomes the unwanted god, the god who could be erased from the collective identity of the humankind by re-writing the history he belongs to. "Let us with one accord, like loyal parrots, agree that Matigari ma Njirũngi was just a bad dream. That bit of history was just a bad dream, a nightmare in fact. We have qualified professors here who can write new history for us."⁴⁰

As in the case of Christ, counterpoising the fabricated lie to the unlikely event of a new national icon retains a disqualifying strength and it could indeed annihilate the mystical ascendant of the cultural assimilation. But in Africa's case, the socially motivated need of delineation from the post-colonial trauma triggers the acceleration of the mythical process, and, at the same time, the creation of a hybrid descendent of the gods, a figure like Matigari, so alien to its human mold that nobody could identify the reality anymore.

*The songs spread like wildfire in a dry season. They spread through the villages. The people sang them day and night. They would start with the student's song: Even if you kill us, Victory belongs to the people, Victory belongs to the people. They would sing the song of Matigari ma Njirũngi: Show me the way to a man/Whose name is Matigari ma Njirũngi/Who stamps his feet to the rhythm of bells./And the bullets jingle./And the bullets jungle. But who was Matigari ma Njirũngi?*⁴¹

The African Matigari becomes invisible behind the gigantic institution of the folktale hero, and his destiny is fulfilled because he seems to be endowed by his non-authoritative author only with the qualities of a human envelop. He oscillates between being the Keeper of the Peace and The Warrior of Old Ways, and ends up in being a god.

And, for the eyes of the future, "who is Matigari? [...] Is he real or just a figment of people's imagination? Who or what really *is* Matigari ma Njirũngi? Is he a person, or is it a spirit?"⁴²

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 111.

³⁸ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

³⁹ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature and Politics*, London-Ibadan-Nairobi: Heinemann, 1981, p. 44.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 118.

⁴¹ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Matigari, op. cit.*, p. 127.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 170.

Matigari is “the mythical redeemer,” “who could change his shape into anything,”⁴³ the sum of potentialities leaves us with an open ethos of the African recourse to imagination, proving that African creative approach of the 20th century is marked by fluidity, by re-evaluations and re-structuring. It is a history in creation and a social argument for perceiving Africa with its own eyes.

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⁴³ James Ogude, *Ngugi’s Novels and African History. Narrating the Nation*, London-Sterling: Pluto Press, 1999, p. 88.

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