

## **Aesthetics and Rituals in African Poetry : A reading of Achebe, Soyinka & Okigbo's poems**

**Kouadio Guillaume YAO**

*Université Alassane Ouattara-Bouaké*

*guillaumek40@gmail.com*

*Assistant at the Alassane Ouattara- Bouaké University (CI)*

*African Literature and Civilization of English-Speaking Countries*

*(Poetry).*

### **Abstract**

*Modern African poetry, particularly Nigerian poetry, does not conform to Western standards. It is inspired by local imagination and imported strategies and styles. It is also free from classical structures and themes. It draws on local cultural and artistic resources. Thus, Nigerian poets insert elements of "ritual" into their writing in order to inscribe African poetic art into the universal artistic pantheon and thereby prolong and preserve African poetic art. This involves the restitution of a particular artistic practice of the poet himself and his community, taking into account the socio-cultural and historical context. Poetry also circulates in oral practices as well as in rituals. In our analysis, we have shown the elements of ritual in poetry; then, how Nigerian poets artistically present ritual in poetry; and finally, we have proposed ideo-aesthetics as a revolutionary artistic approach. As a methodical approach, we referred to the ideo-aesthetics of Nigerian critic Udentia O. Udentia, which consists of analysing African works from a purely African and revolutionary theory. This approach breaks with canonical theories, giving rise to an aesthetic revolution. We based our study on three collections of poems by Nigerian authors: *Beware Soul Brother* (1972) by Chinua Achebe, *Idanre* (1989) by Wole Soyinka, and *Labyrinths* (1971) by Christopher Okigbo. As leading figures in Nigerian literature, their works reflect an imagination unique to modern African poetic art.*

**Keywords:** *ritual, poetry, ideo-aesthetics*

### **Résumé**

*La poésie africaine moderne notamment nigériane ne s'accommode par des canons occidentaux. Elle est une écriture inspirée de l'imaginaire local et des stratégies et de styles importés. Elle est, par ailleurs, affranchie des*

*structures et thématiques classiques. Elle puise dans la réserve culturelle et artistique locale. Ainsi, les poètes nigériens insèrent les éléments du 'rituel' dans leur écriture pour inscrire l'art poétique africain dans le panthéon universel artistique et par-là prolonger et préserver l'art poétique africain. Cela implique la restitution d'une pratique artistique particulière du poète lui-même et de sa communauté prenant en compte le contexte socio-culturel et historique. La poésie circule également dans les pratiques orales comme dans les rituels. Dans notre analyse, nous avons montré les éléments du rituel dans le poème ; ensuite, comment les poètes nigériens présentent de manière artistique le rituel dans le poème ; et enfin, nous avons proposé l'idéo-esthétique comme une approche révolutionnaire artistique. Comme approche méthodique, nous avons fait référence à l'idéo-esthétique du critique nigérian, Udentia O. Udentia, qui consiste à analyser les œuvres africaines à partir d'une théorie purement africaine et révolutionnaire. Cette approche rompt les théories canoniques engendrant une révolution esthétique. Nous avons assis notre étude sur trois recueils de poèmes d'auteurs nigériens, Beware Soul Brother (1972) de Chinua Achebe, Idanre (1989) de Wole Soyinka, and Labyrinths (1971) de Christopher Okigbo. Grandes figures de la littérature nigérienne, leurs œuvres reflètent un imaginaire propre à l'art poétique moderne africain.*

**Mots clés :** rituel, poésie, idéo-esthétique

## **Introduction**

Ritual is a component of conventions, discourses and objects structured according to codes and symbols rooted in a belief in invisible but powerful beings. It is also perceived as a commemoration identified with religious practice. In other words, it refers to precepts and customs determined by tradition and characterised by sacredness. It differs from ordinary practices. It is therefore a special activity. It is also found in poetic activity in general, and in African and Nigerian poetry in particular. While the first generation of African writers and poets identified with their white masters, the second ones were characterised by a redefinition of the poetic enterprise. Indeed, the latter incorporated traditional elements into their poetic imagination, thus creating a form of poetry detached from European models – a ritual poetry. Ritual poetry thus

encompasses the lives of the local gods, places, animate and inanimate objects. It is the continuity of the socio-cultural and artistic life of endogenous communities in the postcolonial era. In that vein, Kolawole (1990) and Ogunjimi and Na'allah (1994) acknowledge that African oral poetry is based on structure, content, language and musical accompaniment. They argue that African oral poetry is defined by themes. And, this categorisation is based on content. They therefore distinguish oral poetry according to the following models: 'religious poetry, incantatory poetry, salutation or praise poetry, funeral poetry, occupation poetry, heroic poetry, topical poetry, lullaby and occasional poetry.' (Quoted by Auwal Ibrahim Amba, 2021: 12). There is a form of ritual in these types of poetic practice.

The three Nigerian poets of our corpus was no random or arbitrary choice. Wole Soyinka is best known for his dramatic inventiveness; Chinua Achebe is renowned for the power of his novelistic writing; Christopher Okigbo, meanwhile, is established for his great poetic artistry. Obi Nwakanma (2010: xvii) points out that all three poets belonged to the Mbari Club (an artistic, intellectual and creative space in Nigeria) created in 1961 by Ulli Beier. They were born and raised in the same country, Nigeria. As peers, they even attended the same schools and universities. They share the same cultural and intellectual background.

Poetry has long been considered by European critics as a written artistic practice that follows a metrical logic. However, African poetry is fundamentally oral, in which ritual circulates as an aesthetic pattern of African art. It therefore seeks to break away from European models by drawing on the resources of oral art. It aims to be all together indigenous, authentic with some flavor of openness to euromodernist and western aesthetics. This attempt is an approach that allows African poetry to be modern and autonomous.

Modern written African poetry is characterised by particular features such as the inclusion of tools and elements taken from traditional heritage. It draws on local structures. Not all poetry, particularly African poetry, necessarily follows a versified or metrical structure. Chinweizu and *al.* state that ‘within the European culture of African schools, the notion reigned that poetry was something written, which had metre, rhyme and stanzaic form’ (1980 : 151). According to European perception, poetry is written and takes forms such as ‘sonnet, rhyme royal, sestina, ballade, villanelle or rondeau’ (1980 :151). However, we believe that African poetry, although oral, is rich in artistic and aesthetic resources. Ritual poetry is not versified ; it is rather fluid and does not follow any rigid structure.

To analyse the texts of our three poets, we will refer to an African theoretical approach developed by Udentia O. Udentia (2015), referred to as “ideo-aesthetics” which links “ideo”, which refers to “idea” or “ideology”, with aesthetics, the philosophy of beauty and art. It describes how ideological foundations have an impact and manifest themselves through aesthetic phenomena such as art, design and cultural practices. We apply it here to analyse how forms and ideas are shaped by latent ideologies, which alternatively consolidate them.

This theory envisages a revolutionary aesthetic in relation to African literature. The Nigerian critic writes that ‘revolutionary aesthetics is the most concrete and deep-rooted tradition of literary discourse and an ideo-aesthetics method, which has the capacity for growth, enrichment and expansion’ (2015 : 7-8). He goes on to add that ‘revolutionary aesthetics, apprehended in its dialectical connection with socio-political realities of our continent, and shorn of all confusing dogmas and myths, is the main determinant of the world literary process, of the African Literary Process’ (2015 : 8). In an interview, Nnorom Azuonye, considering ‘the perceived idiosyncrasies of the second and third

generation Nigerian writers,' stated that 'revolutionary aesthetics' is 'the defining identity' (Quoted by Udentia O. Udentia, 2015 : 25).

The analysis of these three poems, *Beware Soul Brother* (1972) by Chinua Achebe, *Idanre* (1989) by Wole Soyinka, and *Labyrinths* (1971) by Christopher Okigbo, aims, first, to decipher the elements that refer to ritual, and then, their symbolic, social and artistic function.

In our study, we will first endeavour to recall ritual in African poetry, then the poetic art of the Nigerian troika, and finally, show that the ideo-aesthetics is an effective approach to revolutionising African poetry.

### **1. Poetry between indigenous rituals and creation**

One characteristic of traditional way of life is the holistic nature of its world-view, social practices, artistic and intellectual representations. Thus art is not conceived out of belief systems, cosmological symbolism and political systems. In that, art is closely related to local indigenous beliefs for which it serves as a means of expression. E. B. O Akporobaro, as for him, "literature need not be what is written only, but all verbal creations written or spoken which are artistically projected... products of the creative use of imagination by artists of the spoken word in pre-literate communities'" (2005 : 31).

African poetic writing draws on elements from the traditional living contexts which implies referring to local artistic practices and socio-cultural themes. It is an artistic practice in which everything has a life: the living and the dead, drums, rivers, stones, places of worship and all objects, whether speaking or not. When African poets write, they do not intend to follow a metrical logic. Rather, they artistically and aesthetically recreate a particular language that emanates from a daily habit or practice

that has ultimately become unique. Among the elements that refer to “ritual”, we have been able to identify a few that run through African poetry, particularly Nigerian poetry. In that perspective, R. Neogy & P. Theroux wrote that, to the question ‘what is African literature ?’, Okigbo suggested that “if any writing was going to be African it would have to have its roots in the African soil” (1997 : 221).

In Chinua Achebe's *Beware Soul Brother* (1972), although the work deals with the Biafran civil war, we encounter patterns of ritual as a guarantee of the preservation of Igbo culture in particular, and African culture in general. The work explores Igbo cultural and artistic practices in a poetic manner.

Achebe’s poetry does not follow metrical logic, but rather the rhythm of organic music, created from the movement of the body born of drumbeats. Thus, the poet proclaims that ‘we are men of soul/ men of song we measure out / our joys and agonies/ too, our long, long passion week/ in paces of the dance... the dirge of the soulful *abia* drums...’ (1972 : 29). If the poet chooses to make his poetry resonate to the tempo and cadence of dance steps and drumbeats, it is because they better transcribe the local and African poetic language in general. They preserve the soul of African society and thereby reveal the substance of a unique artistic expression.

The poet, although greatly influenced by the Judeo-Christian religion, remains attached to his local deities. He writes that ‘Our ancestors, soul brother, were wiser/ than is often made out. Remember/ they gave Ala, great goddess/ of their earth, sovereignty too over/ their arts for they understood...’ (1972 : 29). Symbolically, the sovereignty given to Ala, as goddess of the earth, fertility, justice and morality, testifies to her role as the instigator of artistic and poetic creation. She reminds us that the earth is not only the soil on which plants grow, but also the space where dance steps are created that realise the true measure of

indigenous poetry. The poem “Beware, Soul Brother” deals with the core essence of Achebe’s poetic work.

As for Wole Soyinka, he was the first African writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986. Art, history and the place of the artist in society are major themes explored by the Nigerian writer. Soyinka is more prolific in the dramatic arts. However, his writing also extends to poetry. In his artistic creation, he highlights his rich Yoruba culture by employing European forms for the quality of certain cultural and aesthetic aspects. Ibrahim notes that in 1967, Soyinka wrote *Idanre*, ‘a long poem in which he first presents a sustained literary treatment of Ogun, the Yoruba god of iron, as a metaphor for societal collapse and regeneration’ (2021 : 125). Ogun is the main figure or pattern in Soyinka’s poetic work and his source of inspiration. This entity is the god of iron and metallurgy, a figure of “artistic and technological creativity” (Ibrahim, 2021 :127). Soyinka writes that ‘Ogun is still on such/ Combattant angles, poised to a fresh descent’ // ‘This night, I have set the Iron One against/ All wayward bolts’ (1989 : 67). The verse indicates the omnipresent and inexhaustible nature of the god of iron, and at the same time presents him as an invincible deity that even natural entities cannot destroy.

Ogun’s presence in the work is a ritual act insofar as it refers to the divinity of a society and a community. It is not so much the evocation of Ogun that transforms the space of the poem into a ritual, but rather the function assigned to the Yoruba god in a poetic text. Symbolically, Ogun embodies an African soul capable of ensuring spiritual strength and social abundance.

In addition to these two important figures in the African literary scene, Christopher Okigbo is considered by critics to be one of the finest writers of the twentieth century. He died on the battlefield in Nsukka during the Biafran War. His poetic writing is mixed and heterogeneous. Having been exposed to a universal

library, his poetry shows a strong influence from Sumerian poetic art, English classicism, American beat poetry, Black African poetry and, above all, various elements and patterns from the Igbo cultural sphere. R. Fraser reminds that for Okigbo, “to be a writer was to partake in an international community of letters” (1986 : 104).

Samrat Banerjee reveals that ‘while Achebe's poetic voice is ambiguous and dialectical, Christopher Okigbo’s verse is esoteric, ritualistic and almost cryptic in style. His music is incantatory, almost like a “mantra” casting a hypnotic spell on the mind of the listener’ (2016 : 462).

The ritualistic aspect of Okigbo's poetry stems from his Igbo cultural heritage. He did not abandon the traditional resources that inform artistic practice, even though he was exposed to European forms and styles for a long time. For Okoye-Ugwu, ‘the poetry of Christopher Okigbo is a long mythic journey’ (2021 : 2). As for Nwakanma, ‘Okigbo's poetry is an elaborate ritual which reveals the complex dimensions of his experience of life’ (2010 : 82).

The quality of Soyinka, Achebe and Okigbo’s poetry lies in the local space. Their poetry reflects the African artistic imagination. All three pursue a goal: to preserve and continue the inventive treasure of their community through their artistic creation.

## **2. The poetic art of the Nigerian troika**

The poems we analyse in this study have this in common: the exploration of ritual in poetic creation. They did not, of course, agree to address ritualistic features, but since they belong to the same socio-cultural area, their writings echo each other.

Let us begin with Wole Soyinka, whose work *Idanre* reminds us of the art of the Yoruba bard. In the preface to *Idanre*, Soyinka writes what follows :

*Idanre* was born of two separate halves of the same experience. The first was a visit to the rock hills of that name, a god-infused grazing of primal giants and mastodons, petrified through some strange history, suckled by mists and clouds (...). *Idanre* is the record of that walk through the woods on the outskirts of Molete, a pilgrimage to *Idanre* in company of presences such as dilate the head and erase known worlds (1989 : 63).

In the *Idanre* collection, the poem entitled ‘Of the Road’ recalls the theme of death on the road. Indeed, rather than being a passage, an itinerary or a journey, the road becomes a place of destruction and the end of man. This title also refers to Soyinka's play, *The Road*. These works have been inspired by the recurrence of road accidents in modern Nigeria. Soyinka identifies these accidents with Ogun, the Yoruba god, guardian of road traffic and messenger of the dagger. Thus, he takes his share of deaths in the accidents that occur : ‘Have honeycombed beneath his hills, worked read earth/ Of energies, quarrying rare and urgent ores and paid/ With wrecks of last year’s suppers, paved his road/ With shells, milestones of breathless bones – / Ogun is a demanding god’ (1989 :70).

The road is therefore a place of destruction, an abyss, a precipice. The abysmal experience of the road shook Soyinka and inspired him to translate his trauma into words. The poem “Death in the Dawn” recounts an accident as described in the italicised lines: ‘*Driving to Lago one morning a white cockerel flew out of the dusk and smashed itself against my windscreen.*

*A mile further I came across a motor accident and a freshly dead man in the smash* (1989 : 6).

Local beliefs and superstitions are recaptured in Soyinka's poems as we see with this verse where a road accident is announced by an omen, a first accident of a bird against the windscreen. The stranding of the white cockerel and the sudden death of the man in the crash symbolise the violence of death in road accidents. The poet conveys the fragility of man by identifying him with the fatal collision of an animal. He recommends that : 'Traveller, you must set out/ At dawn. And wipe your feet upon/ The dog-nose wetness of earth' (1989 : 6).

The poet's recommendation to leave at dawn implies that danger may arise at sunrise. At dawn, man can avoid the dangers of the road. One is tempted to say that at dawn, the god Ogun is asleep and cannot have desires for flesh or blood : 'Let sunrise quench your lamps, and watch/ Faint brush pricklings in the sky light/ Cottoned feet to break the early earthworm/ On the hoe. Now shadows stretch with sap/ Not twilight's death and sad prostration (1989 : 6).

The poem serves as a warning about the road. It is the domain par excellence of the god Ogun. There is a ritual in crossing the road that Soyinka transcribes aesthetically. The poet does not praise death by accident, but rather presents the road as the place where the god of iron and war circulates. Through this, Ogun reaps the souls of those who have been in accidents. This sacrificial and ritual act is a pattern that dominates the entire poem :

'Ogun, godfather of all souls who by road/ Made the voyage home, made his being welcome/ Suffused in new powers of night... // Tomorrow they preside, guests unseen/ To whom the rams will bow, and with

open throats/ Quench totemic thirsts, thirst of earth/  
The hems of hidden voices brush all feet/ This night,  
dew-wet with departed breaths' (Soyinka, 1989 :  
71).

Death circulates in the poem as a major theme. As a god, instead of preserving the life of the community, Ogun feeds on flesh and blood to live. Besides, in "In memory of Segun Awolowo", Soyinka recounts in short, concise verses how the son of Chief Obafemi Awolowo met his death in a traffic accident on the Lagos-Ibadan road while going to defend his father in a treason case:

For him who was  
Lifeted on tar sprays  
And gravel rains

In metallic timbres  
Harder than milestone heart

For him who was

The road, the aged road  
Retched on this fresh plunder  
Of my youth  
(1989 : 10).

The account of Segun Awolowo's death is tragic. The brevity of the verses mimics the shock of the accident. The poet himself is in shock as he writes these lines. Compared to the other verses, which are long, the verses about the accident are short. Here again, Ogun is held responsible for Segun's death.

In addition, the poem Koko Oloro (*from a children's propitiation chant*) renews the poet's attachment to childhood. It is a song of childhood and enjoyment. It is presented as a ritual poem:

Dolorous knot  
Plead for me  
Farm or hill  
Plead for me  
Stream and wind  
Take my voice  
Home or road  
Plead for me  
(Soyinka, 1989 : 23)

The refrain 'plead for me' is reminiscent of an appeal to a deity. Although it is a children's song, it reveals man's powerlessness in the face of his destiny and the future. Through this prayer, the poet implores the mercy of the gods, reminding us of the four elements: fire, 'dolorous knot' (line 1), earth, 'farm or hill' (line 3), water and air, 'stream and wind' (line 5), which are the universal philosophical and spiritual beliefs and symbols. These universal forces are coupled with local cosmological symbols to give a unique content to Soyinka's poetry. The local is therefore present in the universal symbolism. This concern for humanity including the indigenous is shared both by Soyinka and Achebe, that other icon of Nigerian literature.

Indeed, Chinua Achebe's poetry deals with the Biafran civil war, it revalues Nigerian culture and identity in particular and African culture and identity in general in post-colonial Africa.

Achebe's poetic expression takes on an ambiguous and dialectical aspect. Duality is one of the characteristics of the local Igbo world. It presents the world as two sides of the same coin. The theme of war and death is prevalent in Achebe's work. Thus, the evocation of Lazarus, a biblical character from the New Testament, transcribes the poet's dual heritage as a Christian and a fervent believer in ancestral practices. For Samrat Banerjee, 'Lazarus' in an almost similar vein portrays

the entanglement of “Good” and ‘Evil’ (2016 : 462). The poem describes an ambiguous scene. The villagers killed a driver after the latter accidentally ran over and killed a native. To their dismay, the dead man rose again. This resurrection prompted them to kill the native again, as if to ‘restore moral order’. This act reveals the ambiguity in the poem:

We know the breath-taking/ joy of his sisters when  
the word/ spread: He is risen! /... So they killed/ him  
a second time that day on the/ threshold of a  
promising resurrection. (1972 : 37-38).

The poet intertwines two different stories, that of Lazarus who died of illness in the New Testament, John 11:1-44, and that of the native who died accidentally. The power of artistic creation lies in the transition from the local story to that of the Bible. Indeed, “his sisters” (verse 2) are Mary and Martha. Then, “they” (verse 32) refers to the villagers who killed the driver who killed a native. The intertwining of these two narratives is the art of the modern and postcolonial poet. Here, while the Bible allows resurrection as a path to salvation, the Igbo see death as a rite of passage, the only way to achieve immortality or become an “ancestor”. For Gikandi, “Achebe’s textual practice seeks not only to mediate the African experience through a different order of discourse, but also to transform and re-invent the African world” (1991 : 31).

Unlike Igbo culture, Yoruba culture accepts resurrection. The phenomenon of the same child dying and returning again and again to torment the mother, known as Abiku, is a recurring theme among the Yoruba people and is featured in Soyinka's poetry. In the poem ‘Abiku,’ we read that : ‘In vain your bangles cast / Charmed circles at my feet/ I am abiku, calling for the first / And the repeated time’ (1989 :30). The return of the same dead child transcends the cyclical space. Here, it is not a question of

a simple phenomenon of birth/death, but of the antagonism between life and death, between night and day, sun and rain.

While in Soyinka's work road accidents do not cause outrage among indigenous communities because they benefit Ogun, in Achebe's work the people avenge the accident victim, and if he recovers, they kill him again. Resurrection, here, is not wanted.

In “Gods, Men and Others”, Achebe revisits a theme that runs through his novels (*Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*, *No Longer at Ease*), in which he discusses the conflicts between Igbo and Christian beliefs and the upheaval of the social order caused by colonisation. His work reveals the world of humans and that of spirits, showing how difficult it is for gods and ancestors to integrate cultural practices into post-colonial societies. In “Penalty of Godhead”, we read that ‘Household gods alone/ frozen in ritual black with blood/ of endless tribute festooned in feathers / perished in the blazing pyre/ of that hut’ (Achebe, 1972 : 45). The loneliness, coldness and peril of the gods is the result of the spiritual void in African societies. Having abandoned their deities to their fate, African communities no longer have any spiritual reference points or anchors. The title of the poem, “Those gods are children”, presents the gods as children who need to be cared for and respected so that they can in turn serve others. Thus, “A fool alone will/ contest the precedence of ancestors/ and gods; the wise wisely/ sing them grandiloquent lullabies/ knowing that they are children/ those omnipotent deities’ (Achebe, 1972 : 46).

The meaning of ritual is emphasised in lines such as ‘the curved side to fine point / of sacrifice ant-hole-size in earth : / come together all-powerful spirits/ and drink ; no need to scramble/ there’s enough for all ! ... the offering yams.../and bring a sacrifice fit/ for the mighty dead ! » (1972 : 46). This invocation is a prayer to the almighty spirits to drink. The drink (wine or liquor) is the inspiration of the gods, like the Greek god

Dionysus or Ogun himself, the god of wine (palmwine). In addition to gladdening the heart of man, drink brings people together. It is also used in festive ceremonies (birthdays, engagements or dowries, annual celebrations, etc.) as well as funerals. Offerings to the dead and ancestors perpetuate the presence of invisible entities that are still useful in African societies.

Moreover, the poem “Lament of the Sacred Python” in Achebe's *Beware, Soul Brother* reminds one of Ezeulu's dream in *Arrow of God*. Indeed, the python is considered a sacred animal in several African communities. It is a non-venomous and harmless snake. Geoffrey Parrinder (1961 : 51) points out that the Ashanti, Ibibio, Igbo and Ijaw peoples consider killing or eating a python to be a sin or violating a taboo. As a consequence, they organise funerals for dead pythons. The british critic adds that ‘any house that a python enters is thought to be blessed, though the prudent householder will steer it away from doing any serious damage’ (Quoted by R. B. McDaniel, 1976 : 101).

As the protagonist of the poem, the poet recounts: ‘I was there when lizards / were ones and twos, child / Of sacred father Idemili’ (1972 : 49), with an elegiac voice, ‘Of the dead acknowledged my face/ In broken dirges of fear’ (p.49) ending with a hoarse children's song: ‘Look out, python ! Look out, python !’ (verse 28) and a tone tinged with irony ‘Christians relish python flesh !’ (verse 29). Adeyinka Olaiya (2023) reveals that lizards are often associated with Ogun, the Orisha of iron, warfare, and technology, due to its strength, agility, and resilience. (Cf. <https://ancestrals.com.ng/2023/07/01/the-sacred-lizard-in-igboland-a-reptile-revered-by-umu-akwa-tribe>). In Igbo cosmology, lizards are called “Ngwere” and stand for strength, courage, resilience and dignity in the Uli Art tradition. After losing their tails, they grow another one, thus,

symbolising rebirth or regeneration after losing their tails. They are sacred and represent deities and totems.

The line ‘I was there when lizards / were ones and twos, child’ (verse 1 & 2) is a metaphor for ancient times, or the creation of the world. In the Igbo universe, references to small creatures such as lizards represent primordial things. The line ‘Child / Of sacred father Idemili’ (verse 3) identifies the speaker as the sacred python, symbol of the deity of the Idemili River, which occupies an important place in Igbo beliefs as we can also see in Christopher Okigbo’s poetry.

Christopher Okigbo also uses the figure of the python in *Labyrinths* (1971). Thirsty for a quest for identity, the poet embarks on a spiritual journey to better understand his cultural environment. His poetry is a return to his roots, a journey to reclaim his heritage and a renewal by the earth goddess, Idoto. In a footnote, Okigbo writes that ‘[Idoto] is a village stream. The oilbean, the tortoise and the python are totems for her worship’ (1971 : 3).

Kouadio Guillaume Yao puts that ‘as well as a mother figure, Idoto is also a divine figure, a water spirit. Idoto is the water that purifies, sanctifies and sustains the lives of communities. It symbolises the source of life, a vital space’ (2024 : 155). The cult of Idoto in Okigbo’s hometown is the very essence of the poet’s imagery.

Idoto appears only once in the entire poem. However, she circulates in various forms throughout the rest of the poem. She is at once water, and therefore a fluid body; woman, physical body, and goddess, divine or celestial body. Symbolically, Idoto is a female figure and the python a male figure. These two figures are antagonistic since the python is forbidden from worshipping Idoto. Yet, both occupy the same space – water. In “‘Heavensgate”’, a form of ritual appears:

Rain and sun in single combat ;  
On one leg standing,  
In silence at the passage,  
The young bird at the passage  
(1971 : 4)

In African beliefs, particularly Igbo beliefs, the ‘sun’ refers to direct divine light and the ‘moon’ to reflected light. The latter, a cyclical celestial body, represents death and resurrection. The sun, meanwhile, represents the masculine principle or fire, and the ‘moon’ represents the feminine principle, often associated with water. Thus, ‘Rain and sun in single combat’ (verse 1) may suggest the antagonism between life and death, between decline and resurrection.

Furthermore, Obi Nwakanma (2010:149) reveals that after the death of the poet's mother, the latter did not get along with his stepmother. As a result, he constructed a demarcation from the corridor of the family house to carve a separate space for himself in the corridor. This act was intended to protest against his stepmother and express his independence and individualism. Echoes of this stance appear in lines such as “young bird in the passage” standing on one leg at the passage and mourning “a mother on a spray” (2010: 149). These elements from the past constitute “the central meaning of his poetry” and “Okigbo's figuration of a state of innocence and aesthetic limitations” (2010: 149). The Nigerian critic points out that these verses recall “Okigbo's adolescent act of rebellion, his abdication of his place in the family in defiance of his father and in rejection of his stepmother, his act of separation or self-exile” (2010: 149).

The theme of the road developed by Soyinka appears in Okigbo's work as an inevitable passage, a harsh transition, a stage in human life that cannot be avoided – death. In “The Passage”, the lines ‘SILENT FACES at crossroads: / festivity in black ...’

(1971 : 5) describe a gloomy atmosphere at a crossroads. Indeed, the crossroads is a place of encounter but also of separation. J. Kristeva says in this regard that ‘it is darkness that has given philosophers the material for so many allegories about the dead and tombs’ (1987 : 158). While Soyinka perceives the road as a danger, an abyss, Okigbo considers it a place of mourning and death.

The poem *Lustra* presents a moment of worship. Okigbo inserts elements of worship in the Igbo country into the poem. He describes the moment of an Igbo worship service: ‘Fingers of penitence bring / to a palm grove / vegetable offering with five / fingers of chalk...’ (1971 : 15). Romanus Egudu emphasises that ‘in the Igbo religious system, he [Okigbo] is a priest, a worshipper, who has got all the necessary items for an indigenous kind of sacrifice: ‘vegetable offering’ and “fingers of chalk”’ (1971 : 153). The role of the poet here is akin to that of the priesthood. The poet borrows elements from the Igbo ritual system to transcribe his poetic imagination, thereby emphasising his dual heritage, both local and European.

In order to better understand the african poetic art, we need to analyse it through african methods like, for instance, ideo-aesthetics. African poetry is not purely an exclusive issue of form or art. Form is never severed from ideas, beliefs, etc. That is why aesthetics need to be coupled to ideas for an original approach to African poetry.

### **3. Ideo-aesthetics, new perspectives in African poetry in today’s poetry**

Ideo-aesthetics is a literary approach that departs from European conception of art and its criticism. It is part of a revolutionary perspective that overturns imported methods. Udentu O. Udentu recalls that ‘it was adopted as the main method and guiding

philosophy of Soviet Art’ and therefore rejects ‘formalism and subjectivism’ (2015 : 122).

Modern and postcolonial African poetic art accommodates ideoaesthetics insofar as it breaks with European models while seeking its own way of writing, speaking and naming. What characterises modern African poetry, then, is the fact that it does not reproduce the European model. It draws on both the African and European imagination or imported strategies to express its poetry.

Literary criticism has generally followed two destructive ways : focus on form (metrical verses), the syntactical logic of words, phrases, than focus on ideas or content. Marxist criticism and Russian formalism summarize these opposing approaches to satiety. What is proposed here is an approach that tries to reconcile form with ideas. This, to our sense, is ideal to getting to the heart of African poetry where the opposition of form and ideas has no pertinence.

The aesthetics of modern and postcolonial poets have had an impact on third- and fourth-generation writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who describes herself as the goddaughter of Chinua Achebe, whom Nadine Gordimer considers to be the ‘father of modern African literature’ (sunnewonline.comwww.pen.org.org). Adichie was also influenced by Okigbo's diverse writing, inspiring her to write her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, in which the nigeran poet and novelist attempts to imitate one of Okigbo's poems, suggesting that ‘even today, many writers, many of whom were influenced by her work, mourn Okigbo's death’ (Fioupou, 2020: 8, Translation mine).

In “Water Maid” Okigbo writes that : ‘**Bright**/ With the armpit dazzle of a lioness, / **She answers**, / **Wearing** white light about her, / **My lioness**, / Crowned with moonlight’ (1971). Adichie

bluntly substitutes the words she attributes to Okeoma, the protagonist, “**Brown/** With the fish-glow sheen of a mermaid, / **She appears, / Bearing** silver dawn; / And the sun attends her, / **The mermaid/** Who will never be mine (p.51-52) (Quoted by Talon, 2018: 25-26). The form, structure, syntax, punctuation and even typography are borrowed from *Labyrinths* (1971). The strophic arrangement of Okigbo's “Watermaid” is the same as that used by Adichie. The beginnings of the lines of poetry are almost identical.

Furthermore, Ben Okri, one of the poetic voices of the third generation of Nigerian writers, draws inspiration from the typographical aesthetics of Christopher Okigbo's poems. All of Okigbo's poems begin with capital letters. Thus, the beginnings of verses ‘DARK WATERS of the beginning’ (1971 : 4), ‘AND THIS from Jadum’ (p.8), ‘EYE OPEN on the sea’ (p.10), etc. illustrate the influence of Okigbo's writing on Okri, who in turn begins the lines of his novel, *Famished Road*, in capital letters, ‘**IN THE BEGINNING** there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world...’ (1991:3) // ‘**ONE OF THE** reasons I didn’t want to be born became clear to me after I had come into the world...’ (1991 :7). Typography alone is not enough to describe the influence of one writer on another or of one generation on another. The form of writing and the idea behind it give rise to meaning. One of the distinctive features is that all writers, in keeping with the tradition of African poetic writing, draw on elements from the local repertoire.

African poetic works reproduce the structure of rituals in African societies. This is what Udentia O. Udentia's approach consists of: finding an African approach to analysing African works without referring to imported methods. Rightly so, “Luo Plains”, *Kenya*, transcribes a form of traditional poetry – a purely local

poetry, ‘Plague / Of comet tails, of bled horizons / where egrets hone a sky-lane for/ Worlds to turn on pennants’ (Soyinka, 1989 : 9). The poem is structured like spoken language, discontinuous like the beating of a drum. The same structure can be seen in ‘The Last Lamp’, where the adjective is detached from the word it qualifies, creating counter-rejections, suspending the meaning of the poem before delivering it: ‘A pale/ incision in the skin of night/ It dwindled downhill, weaker bled / From pole to passage, dye / And shroud’ (1989 : 18).

The poetic writing of the troika influenced third- and fourth-generation authors such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Ben Okri, Ojaide Tanure, Niyi Osundare, and all Nigerian and African writers who follow the aesthetics, style, and themes explored by second-generation poets.

The poetic voice of the three major modern nigerian writers echoes the traditional art. Now, they use european techniques and styles but the core of their writing is inspired by local elements and resources. Ritual circulates in the poems as the ultimate feature.

## **Conclusion**

This study has enabled us to cross the perspectives of three major modern and postcolonial Nigerian poets. In their artistic production, they incorporate elements from the local domain, such as ritual. Thus, ritual-poem is the expression of a work inspired by the local imagination. This analysis was made possible by Udentia O. Udentia's (2015) methodological approach, “ideo-aesthetics”, which aims to analyse African works from a purely African perspective, thereby revolutionising African poetic art. We then highlighted the traces of ritual in Nigerian poetry. Next, we showed how poets exploit ritual in an artistic and aesthetic approach. Finally, we

established ideo-aesthetics as the ideal way to transform modern African poetic art. Our corpus for this study was *Beware, Soul Brother* (1972) by Chinua Achebe, *Idanre* (1989) by Wole Soyinka, and *Labyrinths* (1971) by Christopher Okigbo. In short, modern Nigerian poetry draws inspiration from the ritualistic universe to produce works whose codes and symbols stem from the imagination of the poet and that of his community. What was traditionally regarded as non literary or poetic become the essence of the poetic form. Thus various oral linguistic devices such as interjections, proper names or deities, clichés, etc. which used to be dismissed as non poetic have become authentic poetical forms. However, true African poetry is that which accommodates all of socio-cultural life with its codes, symbols and beliefs. We must return to all the elements that represent the African universe in order to express the poem in its entirety and completeness.

## **Bibliography**

- ACHEBE Chinua, 1972. *Beware, Soul Brother*, Heinemann, London
- AKPOROBARO F.B.O, 2005. *Introduction to Oral Literature, A literary-descriptive approach*, Princeton Publishing Company, Nigeria
- AMBA Auwal Ibrahim, 202. *Eng 871 Studies in Written African Poetry*, Chris Egharevba (ed.), National Open University of Nigeria, Lagos
- BANERJEE Samrat, 2016. “Voices of the Nigerian Civil War: A Study of select poems of Chinua Achebe and Christopher Okigbo”, *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities*, IV/3, pp. 458-465, India
- FIOUPOU Christiane, 2020. *Christopher Okigbo : Labyrinthes*, édition bilingue, traduit de l’anglais par Christiane Fiou pou.

*Introduction de Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie traduite de l'anglais (Nigeria) par Mona de Pracontal*, Gallimard, Paris

FRASER Robert, 1986. "The Achievement of Christopher Okigbo" in *West African Poetry: A Critical History*, Cambridge [Cambridgeshire], Cambridge University Press, New York

KRISTEVA Julia, 1987. *Soleil noir, Dépression et mélancolie*, Gallimard, Paris

GIKANDI Simon, 1991. "Chinua Achebe and the Post-colonial Esthetic: Writing, Identity, and National Formation", *Studies in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Literature, Special Issue on Africa: Literature and Politics*, University of Massachusetts, Vol. 15, Issue 1, pp.29-41, Boston

MCDANIEL Richard Bryan, 1976. "The Python Episodes in Achebe's Novels", *International Fiction Review*, vol. 3, N°2, pp.100-106

NEOGY Rajat & THEROUX Paul, 1997. "Death of Christopher Okigbo" in *Transition, The Anniversary Issue: Selections from Transition, 1961-1976*, Indiana Press, Vol.76, No. 75, pp. 220-221

NWAKANMA Obi, 2010. *Christopher Okigbo 1930-67, Thirsting for Sunlight*, James Currey, U.K

OKIGBO Christopher, 1971. *Labyrinths with Path of Thunder*, Heinemann, London

OKOYE-UGWU Stella, 2021. "Beyond the limits of the dream": Delineating the Mythic and Ritual Sequence in Okigbo's Poetry", *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, Vol.8, N°1, pp.1-12.

OKRI Ben, 1991. *The Famished Road*, Jonathan Cape, London

OLAIYA Adeyinka, 2023. "The Sacred Lizard In Igboland , Revered By Umu-Ukwa Tribe", July 1, 2023, available on <https://ancestrals.com.ng/2023/07/01/the-sacred-lizard-in-igboland-a-reptile-revered-by-umu-akwa-tribe>, consulted on september 23rd, 2025

- ONWUCHEWKA Chinweizu and *al.*, 1980. *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature*, Fourth Dimension Publishing, Nigeria
- PARRINDER Geoffrey, 1961. *West African Religions*, Epworth Press, London
- SOYINKA Wole, 1989. *Selected Poems : Idanre, A Shuttle in the Crypt, Mandela's Earth*, Methuen, London
- UDENTA O. Udentia, 2015. *Revolutionary Aesthetics and the African Literary Process*, Kraft Books Limited, Ibadan (Nigeria)
- YAO Kouadio Guillaume, 2024. “Allegory of Water in Christopher Okigbo’s Poetry”, *Les Cahiers de l’ACAREF*, 6/15, pp.149-161