

**THE LABYRINTH AS A RITUAL INITIATION
PATTERN IN CHRISTOPHER OKIGBO'S
LABYRINTHS**

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(i)

In *Labyrinths*,¹ Christopher Okigbo traces the path of his growth as an artist. This is a tortuous journey that takes him from 'Heavensgate' to 'Distances'. The poet-protagonist has as the object of his quest a female figure variously referred to as 'Mother Idoto', 'Watermaid', and 'My Lioness'. Union with this figure will lead to fulfilment at both the spiritual and artistic levels. She will serve as the quester's Goddess-Muse. Her mystical quality comes clearly to us through Joseph Campbell's description of the Lady of the House of Sleep:

... She is the paragon of beauty, the reply to all desire, the bliss-bestowing goal of every hero's earthly and unearthly quest. She is mother, sister, mistress, bride. Whatever in the world has ruled, whatever has seemed to promise joy, has been premonitory of her existence—in the deep sleep if not in the cities and forests of the world ...²

Okigbo's protagonist is further distinguished by the fact that he aspires to select and recreate a work of art out of his life. Through his selection of experiences he is in effect the author of the poetry. This is indicated clearly by the poet's recollections of childhood memories as they are presented in 'Heavensgate' as well as by the transformation of actual events into poetry. The writer himself informs us that 'Limits' was composed at the end of a journey of several centuries from Nsukka to Yola,³ and we also know that the surgery under anaesthesia suggested in 'Siren Limits IV' and 'Distances I' did take place.

Furthermore, we notice that in *Labyrinths* events which began merely as separate meaningful experiences are increasingly formed into patterns through the protagonist's propensity to create symbols and see his life as some sort

of archetypal pattern. This last characteristic of the writing brings us to the main consideration of this paper namely, that Okigbo has chosen a form which from time immemorial has been associated with initiation rites. This is the labyrinth, where the principle of initiation is rebirth into a new life by ritual, either at physical birth or death or at any other time.⁴ That the idea of a labyrinth could have influenced Okigbo in the writing of **Labyrinths** is confirmed by the writer himself when he makes direct reference to the labyrinth that Daedalus built in his introduction to the definitive collection of his poems. He also draws attention to an Ibo equivalent:

(... The title may suggest Minos' legendary palace at Cnossus, but the double axe is as much a symbol of sovereignty in traditional Ibo society as in Crete. Besides the long and tortuous passage to the shrine of the 'long-juju' of the Aro Ibos may, perhaps, best be described as a labyrinth.)
(p. xiv)

The Nigerian poet's acquaintance with the Daedalus myth undoubtedly came from his study of Classics at Ibadan.

The relevance of the labyrinthine mode to the experiences of the poet-protagonist in the work under consideration can best be illustrated by means of Maud Bodkin's 'archetypal patterns': 'that within us which leaps in response to the effective presentation in literature of an ancient theme'.⁵ Bodkin further explains that such patterns may be confined to a particular group at a certain time, or may characterize a particular individual, but there are at the same time others of much wider range. It is this 'almost eternal durability' that invites the use of the term archetypal. Thus when a great poet consciously or unconsciously adopts such a pattern to reshape the stories that form the repertoire of his community, it is not his individual sensibility alone that he celebrates, but also the collective insofar as the community can respond adequately to the words and images he uses. The mythopoeic vision of Okigbo consists precisely in this constant reshaping and adaptation of various myths and legends. The main point, however, is that the emotions, facts and experiences which have resulted in a sequence of 'organically related' poems attracted as an accretion

an archetypal pattern which is morphologically similar to them, for the very reason of their similarity. This is the labyrinthine pattern.

We come now to an examination of the labyrinth itself. The most famous structure of this type is, of course, the Cretan model, which, as we have established, Okigbo was familiar with. It was built by the great artificer Daedalus on the orders of King Minos and housed the minotaur. Closely related to it is the legend of Theseus. The Athenian Duke, so the story goes, entered the labyrinth as one of a group of young people who were to be sacrificed to the man-bull. With the help of a thread provided by Princess Ariadne, Theseus made his way out after slaying the monster. His means of escape points to the structural features of the labyrinth: a large and elaborate underground building with winding ways and bewildering twists and turns at the centre of which was the minotaur's lair. Thus the structure provided correlatively obstruction to those who would enter the middle area, and at the same time a conditional penetration. The condition was knowledge of the way, or merely ability to traverse a long course.

It has been discovered in recent years, mainly through the researches of John Layard among the Malekulans of the New Hebrides, that the Cretan labyrinth had been the topography of an initiatory ritual based on bull-worship. The rite was conducted by priest-kings to ensure their renewal and had included (a) lustration; (b) ritual dances; (c) a sacred marriage; (d) ritual rebirths. The labyrinth was also related to descents into the Underworld, and as a symbol, had been stylized as a spiral enclosing a bull.⁶

The idea of a sacred marriage is retained in the modern Cretan maze dance, thought to have been instituted by Theseus at Delos to commemorate his rescue by Ariadne. The dance is further connected with caves and it has been shown that both are relevant to marriage; primarily the divine marriage of the sky with the earth, but secondarily the marriage or cognate 'threshold rites', of human individuals, and correlatively also the converse of marriage rites, at funerals when the dead return to the body of earth, the universal mother.⁷ We find here confirmation of Mircea Eliade's statement that the labyrinth, a ritual transformation of the cavern, was at once a theatre of initiation and a place where the dead were buried. To penetrate the maze

was the equivalent of a mystical return to the Mother, an act consistent with the end pursued in the rites of initiation and funeral obsequies.⁸

The relationship in Okigbo's poetry between the protagonist's personal quest and his striving for a poetic voice has been pointed out by Izevbaye in an article entitled 'Okigbo's Portrait of the Artist as a Sunbird ...'.⁹ The initiation pattern, with its emphasis on ritual, is referred to but not fully explored because the critic warily restricts himself to an examination of 'Heavensgate', an occasional comment anticipating fulfilment in 'Distances'. The next major critical work (apart from Sunday Anozie's attempt at biographical criticism) is Annemarie Heywood's 'The Ritual and the Plot; the Critic and Okigbo's **Labyrinths**'.¹⁰ The importance of this article for my paper is two-fold. First, it adequately surveys the amount of critical writing that has been devoted to Okigbo's poetry, and secondly, pointing out the limitations thereof, it offers a more comprehensive approach. This takes two forms: (a) a blueprint for the isolation of those elements of Okigbo's style that point to his ritualistic use of language and (b) the suggestion that the 'plot' enacted in **Labyrinths** is consistent with the heroic monomyth as outlined by Joseph Campbell.

There is no basic difference between Annemarie Heywood's approach and mine as far as the second aspect is concerned. However, two things are worth pointing out: (a) that whereas hers remains an outline, mine is detailed examination; (b) my analysis seeks to remain closer to the labyrinth rites (lustration, ritual sacrifice, rebirth, etc.) than does hers. Indeed she fails to recognize the intimate connection between the maze and the hero's self-initiation.

My approach to Okigbo's style is determined by the desire to examine the way the writer's technique reflects his view of literature as a cult. A brief look will be taken at the influence of the French Symbolist movement to which Okigbo has been shown to be partly indebted. The main attraction of the movement is to be found in Anthur Symons' statement that Symbolism constituted a new kind of religion, with all the duties and responsibilities of the sacred ritual.¹¹

(ii)

The very first poem in 'Heavensgate', judiciously entitled 'Overture' by Ulli Beier and Gerald Moore in their anthology,¹² serves to present in microcosm the major themes of the entire collection.

At the beginning of his quest, the poet-protagonist calls upon the goddess of his people, 'Mother Idoto', one of a series of female figures that are going to act as the object of his search in the course of **Labyrinths**. The metaphor 'prodigal' defines the direction of the protagonist's journey (a kind of homecoming) and, with the help of the phrase 'on barefoot' underlines his penitent attitude towards the goddess. That the initiate must pass through a purification rite is suggested by his nakedness:

Before you, mother Idoto,
Naked I stand;
before your watery presence,
a prodigal (p. 3)

The hero's role as a 'watchman for the watchword' recalls the sibyl's advice to Aeneas before the latter's underworld journey to find 'a golden bough' that will serve him as a passport. One also recognizes in 'password' that exclusive feature of the tactical labyrinth (and consequently initiation rites) which allows entry or participation on the right terms. The poet-protagonist's quest is thus in an important sense a search for the 'password' into Heaven, the last word being a symbol of full initiation.

The subsequent sections of 'Passage' are important in two respects: (a) they take us back to the protagonist's childhood and point to an early sense of destiny or vocation; (b) they begin to identify the problems that led to the hero's strong desire to return to the traditional fold or some modified form of it. In terms reminiscent of Plato's account of the birth of the human soul, the chaos of childhood and the associated emotion of fear are expressed here as 'Dark waters of the beginning'. A harmless natural occurrence like the rainbow here takes on the menacing feature of a boa constrictor. The protagonist's future role as a poet is revealed in his early longing for solitude and his identification with 'a wagtail' and a 'sunbird'. He sees himself as a 'young bird at the passage' and the generally plaintive tone of the poetry

A. Nazombe is suggested in the line 'to mourn a mother on a spray'. As we shall see, the bird imagery used here is central to a proper understanding of the poet-protagonist's role in 'Limits' VIII, X and XII.

The next instance of ritualist significance in 'Heavensgate' is the movement entitled 'Initiation'. The first selection is devoted to Christian baptism, obviously the poet-protagonist's own. That Okigbo should regard it as a form of initiation is in itself significant and justifies an examination of the poems in that light. The 'Scar of the crucifix' in the first stanza ironically refers to baptism as branding, evocative of the procedure in slave markets. The reference is to the 'marking' of Catechumens with the sign of the cross in Catholic baptism, a rite of appropriation by the deity and of incorporation into the community of the faithful.

The word 'mystery' opening the second stanza, is again significant; for it comes from a Greek word which means 'shut' in the ancient sense of a series of rites belonging to a secret and esoteric religion closed to all but the initiated.¹³ Thus Christian baptism also reveals something of a 'password'.

Then we come to the 'waters of the genesis', which apart from recalling 'Dark waters of the beginning', points to baptism as initiation by rebirth. E.O. James says this in an article on early Christian practice: 'Catechumens underwent their baptismal rebirth in the waters of regeneration, whence they emerged as new creatures, as from a spotless womb ...'¹⁴ We thus have in baptism a fusion of three elements of the labyrinth ritual: purification, ritual death and rebirth.

For the poet-protagonist's skeptical cast of mind, however, the principles of the new life are self-contradictory ('Life without sin, without/life'). It is in fact a trap, and we move here to another level of labyrinth symbolism represented by such geometrical figures as 'Orthocentre', 'Square', 'the rhombus' and the 'quadrangle'. As Achebe points out, Okigbo is using these figures to show the different degrees of rigidity in the Christian faith.¹⁵ The square shape produces the greatest rigidity ('Square yields the moron,/fanatics and priests and popes,/organizing secretaries and/party managers'). For the poet-protagonist then, Christianity represents an inadequate answer to the fulness and variety of life.

Complementing spiritual initiation is entry into the art of prophecy and poetry. Thus from the half-demented village minstrel Jadum, the young Okigbo grasps the subtle relationship between poetry and madness. I would agree with Anozie that Jadum's is an initiation into the kind of madness which only poets and minstrels know.¹⁶ This is madness 'fraught with prophecy and warning'. Okigbo adopts precisely this type of attitude to his audience in **Path of Thunder**.

The closing section of 'Initiations', "from Upandru", takes the form of a dialogue between the young poet and the village explainer. The conversation is very much like an exchange of riddles. The explainer, clearly steeped in the use of words, tries to determine the protagonist's competence:

who could jump your eye,
your mind-window,

And I said:
The prophet only the poet. (p. 9)

It is clear from this that Okigbo sees an important link between prophecy and poetry. This is what the explainer defines as 'logistics'. According to Anozie, this is the logical connection between poetic insight and the language by which it is expressed.¹⁷ However, a great deal of Okigbo's poetry shows that the connection needn't be logical. Echeruo is closer to the mark when he describes Okigbo's as 'poetry of responses to pattern and organization'.¹⁸ From the above poem, one can tell that the poet is concerned with formulating some kind of aesthetics. That is why Okigbo goes back to these sages from childhood life for inspiration.

The next movement in 'Heavensgate' reintroduces the female figure who is at the centre of the poet-protagonist's quest. If she was 'Mother Idoto' in 'Passage', here she takes the form of a 'Watermaid'. One recognizes in this Muselike character the Ibo **Mmuo mmili**, 'Spirit of the water', or 'Mammywota'. Her counterparts in English literature are, among others, the Lady of the lake and Robert Graves' **White Goddess**.

In the first section of the movement, the young poet awaits inspiration. Eyes 'of the prodigal' (another link with

'Passage') shoot upwards 'where stars will fall from'. 'Stars' suggest illumination, inspiration or blessings, and the term ushers in the complex light imagery that pervades the poems in *Labyrinths*. The speaker then refers to a 'secret' which he has 'planted into beachsand' and which 'now breaks'. The idea of secrecy is in keeping with 'password', 'mystery', terms the previous poems have led us to associate with the hero's initiation. It must be noted that here the process takes on an intensely personal - indeed primordial-significance, as the last couplet clearly shows:

Shadow of rain over sunbeaten beach,
shadow of rain over man with woman. (p. 10)

In the remaining sections of 'Watermaid', the poet presents a dramatic description of a brief encounter with his Muse, a figure who calls to mind the 'mother-goddess from the sea depths' that Bodkin relates, through Thetis in the *Iliad* and Venus in the *Aeneid*, to Ishtar, moon-deity, mother and earth-goddess.¹⁹ To the Roman Catholic Okigbo, her figure becomes assimilated to that of the Blessed Virgin Mary ('wearing white light about her' and 'crowned with moonlight').

Although the Muse responds to the prodigal's cry, the revelation is too transient to be of any real value to the poet-protagonist who now watches the ungathered harvest disappearing:

Downward ...
the waves distil her;
gold crop
sinking ungathered. (p. 11)

Thus the experience in the poem has the quality of a partial epiphany. It points to the need for a further process of lustration.

The ritual uncleanliness of the candidate for initiation is the consequence of having gone through the wrong penitential rite, namely an adapted form of Christian confession. It now remains for him to find a more congenial ritual process. This he does to a certain extent in the movement significantly entitled 'Lustra'.

Okigbo himself has described the ceremonies here as 'the rites I perform periodically'.²⁰ In 'Lustra' then, the

candidate discovers that sacrifice is the necessary act for purgation which is in turn essential for full initiation. We find here not only images of cleansing ('body and soul whitewashed in moon dew') but also of rebirth, simultaneously expressed by the line 'to where springs the fountain'. The recurrent phrase 'so would I' effectively conveys the poet-protagonist's renewed determination to gain acceptance by his Muse:

So would I from my eye the mist
 So would I
 thro' moonmist to hilltop
 there for the cleansing. (p. 14)

Significantly, the ceremonial offerings ('a new laid egg' and 'a white hen') are also, according to Okigbo himself, symbols of the poem itself.²¹ The next section of 'Lustra' continues the process of purification with the mention of Kola and vegetable offerings. Here, however, what is clearly a traditional Ibo rite is juxtaposed with Christian Holy week practice, a reminder that 'Heavensgate' was initially conceived as an Easter sequence:

The flower weeps, unbruised,
 for him who was silenced
 whose advent dumb-bells celebrate
 in dim light with wine song: (p. 15)

A curious feature of the poem is Okigbo's rendering of the 'wine song' in the second stanza: 'Messiah will come again/After the argument in heaven/messiah will come again'. The solemn tone of the rest of the poem here gives way to parody. This could be either a sudden resumption of the cynical attitude to Christianity adopted in 'Initiations' or Okigbo's expression, in a manner similar to that of Okot p'Bitek's in *Song of Lawino*, of the meaninglessness of certain Christian prayers and formulae to African congregations.

The climax of the lustral phase occurs - fittingly-in the last section of 'Lustra'. To the accompaniment of 'long-drums and cannons', the protagonist's spirit is here 'in ascent', an indication of a successful rite. The 'prodigal' is no longer an outsider but a full participant in the 'palm grove' ceremony. It must be noted, however, that the return from exile leads to a religion which, though described in predominantly traditional terms, is essentially personal. This is no doubt the meaning of the second stanza:

I have visited;
on palm beam imprinted
my pentagon - (p. 16)

The emphasis is made again in the opening section of 'Newcomer' when the poet-protagonist asserts: 'my own mask, not ancestral - I sign'. The context of this statement is itself revealing. The protagonist has just caught himself making the sign of the cross on hearing the midday **Angelus**. He then transforms the gesture into one of defiance against the usual response and, as Izevbaye points out, it also serves him as a protective mask to insulate his new individuality from being swamped by communal values.²² Indeed Okigbo himself once said that the personal religion he was trying to evolve combined elements from both paganism and Christianity.²³ The refusal to be tied down to Catholicism is expressed in his appeal to the personal intercessor 'Anne of the panel oblongs' against 'them fucking angels' in what once again appears to be the parody of a prayer, possibly the Hail Mary. The last line, 'my sandhouse and bones', suggests innocence and insecurity.

While the first section of 'Newcomer' merely repeats some of the processes outlined in 'Lustra', the second takes us from the purification rites to a clear anticipation of fulfilment. This link is an occasional poem dedicated to Pius Okigbo's wife at the birth of a baby girl. The tone of the poem is appropriately cheerful and the images are evocative of Spring ('when the draper of May/has sold out fine green garments'; 'and the hillsides have made up their faces,/and the gardens, on their faces a painted smile'). At a deeper level, the 'Newcomer' celebrated in the piece is the poet-protagonist himself after the process of purification, which in this case takes on the significance of rebirth. We are thus prepared for the triumphant mood of the closing section:

I am standing above the noontide
with my head above it;

Under my feet float the waters
Tide blows them under ... (p. 19)

This is not actual fulfilment - though the setting is reminiscent of that in 'Watermaid'. Nevertheless, it marks the successful completion of one 'spiral' of the labyrinth; and this 'spiral'

is the entire sequence 'Heavensgate'. It is up to the next cycle, 'Limits' I - IV to show to what extent the 'epiphany' achieved at the end of 'Heavengate' is valid.

In 'Siren Limits' I, the poet-protagonist once again awaits the descent of his goddess-muse. For the first time, the ritual which the hero has been undertaking is related explicitly to inspiration:

Between sleep and waking,
I hang up my egg-shells
To you of palm grove, (p. 23)

From this point onwards the poet-protagonist is going to preoccupy himself with the problems he faces as a budding artist. It is not surprising therefore that in the second section he appears as a 'shrub among the poplars/Needing more roots/More sap to grow to sunlight'. The protagonist further depicts himself as a split personality with the various selves striving to unite. The mention of 'echoes' suggests that the selves in question are the poets the protagonist imitates, because they represent voices of revelation, pointing the way home to his own voice, his true poetic self. In this respect, the union achieved in the penultimate stanza ('and crowned with one self/the name displays its foliage') is clearly a hope rather than reality; for the process of integration has just begun.

'Limits' III opens with images of a chaotic state, suggesting negligence ('Banks of reed'), destruction and danger ('Mountain of broken bottles'). The refrain 'the mortar is not yet dry ...', borrowed from Ezra Pound, evokes the unready state of the surface on which a work of art was to be produced. Thus, already in the first three lines of the piece, we are given a picture of the unfavourable circumstances in which the poet-protagonist has to operate.

The next stanza contains images of gentle cautious movement which seem to indicate the poet's response to the difficult situation. With the idea of struggle introduced in the line 'Sun's dust of combat', the total impression is one of caution.

Caution changes into despair in the image of singing 'tongue-tied/ without name or audience'. The phrase introduced in Section I to describe the right circumstances

for inspiration ('Between sleeping and waking') is taken up here and given the added significance of a poetic limbo, that period of drought or spiritual dryness preceding fulfilment. This element is represented by the rebirth of the poet's voice:

And voice that is reborn transpires,
Not thro' pores in the flesh,
but the soul's back-bone. (p. 25)

The 'Hurry on down' sequence starting from this point re-establishes the link between the protagonist's quest for a voice and the necessity of ritual, as the process is assimilated to the traditional quinquennial pilgrimage to the sacred waterfront at Asaba. The protagonist is urged to hurry on down 'Thro' the high-arched gate' down to 'the lake'.

The protagonist, neglecting the warning inherent in the refrain, vigorously pursues the 'big white elephant' and the futility of the whole exercise is clearly stated in the Introduction when the poet admits it was a journey in pursuit of an illusion. The last five lines in the poem confirm this, indicating that a state of mind is called for which is appropriate for the reception of poetic inspiration. This is a pointer to the closing section of 'Siren Limits', a poem written after the poet's first operation under general anaesthesia. The female figure of 'Heavensgate' here assumes the aggressive aspect of the Terrible Mother archetype:

Oblong-headed lioness -
No shield is proof against her -
Wound me, O sea-weed
Face, blinded like strong-room - (p. 27)

The poet-protagonist's attitude is clearly submissive. This is in complete contrast to the impatience expressed in the preceding section and recalls Joseph Henderson's statement that the novice for initiation is called upon to give up all wilful ambition and desire and to submit to his ordeal. In fact, Henderson goes on to say, he must be prepared to die, and though the token of his ordeal may be mild or agonizing, the purpose remains the same: to create the symbolic mood of death from which may spring the symbolic rebirth.²⁴ In this respect, 'Siren Limits' IV foreshadows the dismemberment of the hero in 'Distances'. Reintegration

(rebirth) is, on the other hand, anticipated by the stitching up in the final stanza here:

When you have finished
& done up my stitches,
Wake me near the altar
& this poem will be finished ... (loc. cit.)

In this fusion of surgical and sacrificial imagery one finds Okigbo's most explicit statement so far concerning art as ritual and a process of self-immolation. Peter Thomas²⁵ testimony that for the Nigerian writer life too was a poem is relevant; for we detect in the above lines the prophecy of Okigbo's own death.

Though Okigbo's footnotes to 'Limits' V - XII suggest continuity from the previous movement, the protagonist in this sequence assumes more varied identities than ever before. The title 'Fragments out of the Deluge' is a reference to the Sumerian Flood. However, its relevance to the destruction described in this cycle of poems cannot be questioned.

A striking symbol of rebirth in the first section is the 'branch of fennel on an/empty sarcophagus', where the latter recalls the archetypal mother as the original container of all life. Then we have the 'moonlit rains', an image of fertility associated here with Gilgamesh. This is complemented by the transformation, in the closing couplet, of the 'branch of fennel' into 'the new branch of Enkidu'. This last character is identified as 'companion and second self of Gilgamesh'. As Gilgamesh sought immortality after the death of Enkidu, so the poet-protagonist will seek 'otherness' in the next phase of his quest. This becomes clear in the second stanza when the 'lioness' of 'Limits' IV is depicted as 'finishing her rest' after having destroyed the poet-protagonist's second self.

'Limits' VI mysteriously introduces a Christ-figure with appropriate biblical allusions, as the second stanza shows:

*Who would add to your statue,
Or in your village accept you? (p. 29)*

We have here, in addition to the New Testament idea of a prophet being despised by his own people, an expression

of the artist's alienation which has Romantic as well as modern affinities.

The Christ-figure's death (crucifixion) and his replacement take up the rest of the piece, with 'dumb-bells' and the 'hot spoils off the battle' reinforcing the links with the Christian Holy Week drama.

The poet as prophet, an identification established in 'Heavensgate', is further assimilated to the 'Sunbird' in 'Limits' VIII, X, XI and XII which localize the Passion Week ritual. Having warned in vain of the approach of foreign iconoclasts, the Sunbird is himself killed in the sacrilegious destruction of traditional gods and shrines. The biblical casting of lots is reflected in the closing stanza of 'Limits' X, a moving description of the despoliation of the tortoise and the python, the twin gods of Okigbo's home town:

And the ornaments of him,
And the beads about his tail;
And the carapace of her,
And her shell, they divided. (p. 33)

Having in a sense died with the Sunbird, the poet-protagonist rises with him in 'Limits' XIII, the last section of the movement. The rebirth occurs at the spiritual level; for the bird is 'a shadow' outside the window and sings 'from the LIMITS of the dream', 'where the caress does not reach/of *Guernica*'. The last image, a reference to Picasso's portrait of the destruction by General Franco's air force of the defenceless Basque town, summarizes in a word the havoc that has been played in the preceding sections. In this poem, the Sunbird, like the legendary phoenix which arose from its ashes to sing songs of immortality, comes back to life as the poet's source of inspiration (a variant of the Muse) and completes the weaverbird parallel started in 'Limits' I.

In Okigbo's own words, the sequence entitled 'Silences' is an interval between 'Limits' and 'Distances'. This is a clear indication that it is not quite an integral part of the poet-protagonist's quest. The poet makes the point more firmly when, in an interview, he isolates 'Heavensgate', 'Limits' and 'Distances' as the poems that deal with intense, personal experience in a ritualistic manner.²⁶

The sequence, however, is not entirely gratuitous for (a) confirming the partial fulfilment attained in 'Limits' XIII, it constitutes a trial run for the poet's assumption of a public role in **Path of Thunder** (notice the choral nature of the poetry) and (b) there is a consistent labyrinth motif running all through as well as a development of the related theme of martyrdom (ritual death).

In 'Lament of the Silent Sisters', the labyrinth is first suggested by the drowning sisters' search for 'compass or cross' instead of 'an escape ladder'. The compass and cross as guiding instrument and religious rallying point respectively perform the role of the ancient golden bough. They symbolize life's power of self-renewal through the faith in which the pilgrim/initiate traverses the depths and wins his way back to light. The link with "golden bough" symbolism is strengthened by the Crier's question: 'Will the water gather us in her sibylline chamber?' recalling the scenes where the sibyl guides Aeneas (bough in hand) through the world of the dead.

Rebirth is hinted at in the third section of the poem when, in the midst of images of death ('This is our swan song/This is our senses' stillness') and despair, the sisters reveal:

In hollow seascapes without memory, we carry
Each of us an urn of native
Earth, a double handful anciently gathered.

.....

We carry in our worlds that flourish
Our worlds that have failed ... (p. 41)

The urn here symbolizes that basic feature of the Great Mother archetype which is containment, while its elements, earth and water (the latter implicit in the circumstances of the poem) are linked to the womb of life. We thus pass from the Terrible Mother aspect of the Feminine archetype, represented by death by drowning, to a promise of the functioning of the Good Mother, related to the mysteries of vegetation, birth, rebirth, and immortality.

Suggestions of martyrdom come from the Crier's lines in the second section: 'They struck him in the ear they struck him in the eye;/They picked his bones for scavenging': This is ritual murder and, taking into consideration Okigbo's statement that 'Lament of the Sisters' was inspired by the events of the day, one can't help identifying the victim with Patrice Lumumba. Accompanying death is the ritual dance: 'this jubilee dance of fireflies' (II) and 'And bearded Judas,/Resplendent among the dancers' (V), the last image beautifully incorporating the theme of betrayal.

'Lament of the Drums' again enacts a ritual dance. This 'feast-of-seven-souls' and 'dance of elephants' is a mortuary rite, as the second stanza in Section II shows:

Long-drums, we awake
Like a shriek of incense,
The unheard sullen shriek
Of the funerary ram: (p. 46)

According to Egudu, this is a typically Ibo sacrifice: '... When an important man in the society dies, his burial and funeral ceremonies are marked by sacrificing rams, cows, and cocks to all the ancestral spirits, one of whom the dead man has become.'²⁷ However, Okigbo's syncretic mind assimilates the ceremony to the ritual origins of Greek tragedy ('The incense of high buskin') and more explicitly to the Sumerian Ishtar's lament for Tammuz. This last element is the burden of the closing sections. The drums (Spirits of the ancestors'), like the women engaged in the seasonal rite of lamentation for the time of death, become one with the goddess who has lost the divine child and husband that made her glad and fertile. There results from this process of assimilation the impassioned expression of a vast, cumulative and timeless collective emotion.

The symbolic death leading to this loud lamentation is first revealed in Section II, implicitly in the allusion to 'a Babylonian Capture' and explicitly in 'The martyrdom/Blended into the chalice vintage'. The latter alludes to Christian practice and automatically elevates the victim to the status of a Christ-figure. Another allusion identifies him in Section III with Palinurus, Aeneas' helmsman, who fell overboard on the voyage to Italy, taking the tiller of the ship with him. In contemporary Nigerian history, this figure is identifiable with Obafemi Awolowo, after

whose imprisonment anarchy prevailed. The sense of chaos comes through the wasteland imagery in Okigbo's version of Ishtar's lament:

The wailing is for the fields of men:

For the barren wedded ones;
For perishing children ...

The wailing is for the Great River:

her pot-bellied watchers
Despoil her ... (p. 50)

Anarchy is also conveyed by the satirical references to 'some strange Celaeno and her harpy crew'. In archetypal terms, the Harpy is femininity in its repellent and frightening aspect: whether as witch, vampire, erinys, lamia, medusa, or whatever other configuration of female horror.²⁸

Thus 'Silences' ends on a note of despair. However, the fusion of human affairs with the movement of the seasons in 'Lament of the Drums' holds out the promise of a regular pattern of life, death and rebirth, foreshadowing the cyclic view of history expressed at the end of **Path of Thunder**:

An old star departs, leaves us here on the shore
Gazing heavenward for a new star approaching;
The new start appears, foreshadows its going
Before a going and coming that goes on forever...
(p. 72)

The first section of 'Distances' brings together important elements from the previous sequences and goes on to summarize the initiation ritual enacted in the whole cycle. The progression from 'Heavensgate' to the present state has been, significantly, 'Through some dark labyrinth, from laughter to the dream'. The 'white chamber' which provides the setting for the poet-protagonist's metamorphosis 'from flesh into phantom' is reminiscent of the operation theatre at the end of 'Siren Limits'. There is a further suggestion that the voice 'from far away' which the protagonist hears is that of the 'Watermaid'. She will lead the neophyte into 'the ant-hill'. This ritual return to the Earth Mother recalls the annual ceremony in honour of the earth deity when the ancestors of the Ibo emerge as **egwugwu** through tiny ant-holes.²⁹

The necessity of symbolic death for full initiation is restated in the second section where the images evoke seclusion and surgery under anaesthesia:

And in the freezing tuberoses of the white
chamber, eyes that had lost their animal
colour, havoc eyes of incandescent rays,
pinned me, cold, to the marble stretcher,

until my eyes lost their blood
and the blood lost its odour, (p. 54)

The process develops into ritual slaughter as the section progresses: 'Death', 'the Chief celebrant', dismembers the protagonist and his fellow 'ministrants'. We have here another example of the Terrible Mother archetype. The ritual dance in which the participants ensnare themselves calls to mind the magical entanglement that the performers of maze dances are supposed to weave as well as the labyrinth in its Borgesian shape of a spider's web.

In the next section, the dance changes into a pilgrims' procession 'from Dan to Beersheba' and the golden bough appears as the crucifix and the torn branch which the protagonist carries. From this point in 'Distances' the movement is downwards and Stanton³⁰ is certainly right in suggesting that it is a journey to Hell. The entrance to the nether region is described in the opening stanza of 'Distances' IV:

And at the archway
a triangular lintel
of solid alabaster
enclosed in a square
inscribed in a circle
with a hallow centre, ... (p. 57)

The function of this geometrical figure is similar to that of the picture of the Cretan labyrinth on the gate to the Underworld at Cumae. Apart from revealing the complexity of the passage the initiate is to follow, it hints at the ultimate revelation through such seemingly out of place images of light as 'evanescent halo', 'pentecostal orbs/resplendent far distant', and 'an immense crucifix/of phosphorescent mantles'. The prominence of the circle

(it holds everything else) suggests parallels with Chinese mysticism where circular symbols are used to draw 'a **sulcus primigenius**, a magic furrow around the centre, the **templum** or **temenos** of the innermost personality.³¹ Then Tao, the supreme life principle, takes leadership, and opposites are resolved in harmony. The state thus attained is variously described by the Chinese as 'the golden castle', 'the Heavenly Heart', 'the terrace of life', and 'the land without boundaries'.³² The related cave symbolism appears in references to a 'quieting of the spirit' in the place of the ancestors'. This abode is 'a safe within the cave of power, where all that is miraculous returns to its roots'. 'One fans the "fire in the middle of the water", which is in the middle of the cave'.³³ As Knight points out, this is equivalent to the bright light seen beyond the waters of death by Gilgamesh, the mystae in Aristophanes, as well as in Aeneas.³⁴ Similarly, the imprisoned magician-priest Izinacan in Borges' short story "La excritural del Dios" achieves a mystical union with God when he deciphers in the design of spots on the skin of a tiger a wheel (circle) of water and of fire that contains the meaning of the universe. His self has thus undergone death and rebirth.

That Okigbo is working within this mystic tradition is made clear in 'Distances' V, when in a stanza that reinforces the descent into Hell motif, he speaks of 'that sanctuary at the earth's molten bowl'. Reference to ritual is here unusually explicit:

Censers, from the cradle,
of a nameless religion:

each sigh is time's stillness, in the abyss ...

Mated and sealed
In a proud oblation, (p. 58)

This last couplet looks forward to the sacred marriage consummated at the end of 'Distances' VI.

The second stanza is 'Distances' VI is evidently the voice of a sibyl ('Come into my cavern'../'My mouth calls from a cavern ...'), a variant of the 'Watermaid', who introduces the gift of prophecy. The poet-protagonist accepts the Sibyl's invitation ('Skeleton oblong/of my sentient being, I receive you in my perforated/mouth of a stranger') and

the terms he employs to describe her recall the lioness of 'Siren Limits' and 'Death' in 'Distances' II, this time with the Terrible Mother aspect considerably attenuated. Clearly the neophyte has achieved a satisfactory level of acceptance. Final lustration ('I wash my feet in your pure head, O maid') takes place against the background of 'immense corridors', a form of the labyrinth. And then, calling to mind the search of Persephone in the Eleusinian rites, the poet-protagonist wanders on his goddess's 'feverish, solitary shores'.

His expression of full initiation is modelled closely on the symbol used in the rites of the cult of Attis:

I have fed out of the drum
I have drunk out of the cymbal

I have entered your bridal
chamber; ... (p. 60)

Mylonas informs us that drums and cymbals, as well as the bridal chamber were important instruments of the Phrygian cult³⁵ while Van Gennep affirms that eating and drinking from the sacra was the second of four rites (the rest were purification, death and rebirth) that made up the initiation ceremony of the cult.³⁶ Okigbo's emphasis, however, is on the ritual of the sacral marriage. This is the mystical union of the triumphant hero-soul with the Queen Goddess of the World that Joseph Campbell describes as the hero's ultimate adventure.³⁷ This, as he further explains, represents the hero's total mastery of life. His earlier testings retrospectively become symbolical of these crises of realization by means of which his consciousness came to be amplified and made capable of enduring the full possession of the mother-destroyer, his inevitable bride.

Like the first marriage of heaven and earth, the hero's union with the goddess ought to mean the start of a great creative process. In Okigbo's case, this points to the prophetic poems that make up **Path of Thunder**. As Heywood observes, in these poems the hero returns to function in a state of power as shamanistic mythmaker, oracle, prophet, and sacrifice.³⁸

(iii)

Okigbo asserts in an interview that when he started taking poetry seriously in 1958, it was as though he had

felt a sudden call to begin performing his full function as the priest of Idoto.³⁹ Thus for him, the priest and the artist are fundamentally the same person.

In his adoption of established cults, however, the writer is particularly selective. He insists on the personal nature of the religion he has evolved, lending support to Annemarie Heywood's statement that the ritual scenario enacted in **Labyrinths** does not follow any set culture pattern but rather arises from the interaction of his time and place and his individual genius.⁴⁰ In Okigbo then, the public aspect of cult gives way to a private psychological significance. The writer uses it to express the great awe in which he stands of the mystery of himself and of his own real or desired integrity.

One is reminded here of the superhuman figure who is the focal point of so many symbolist novels, plays and stories, the hero possessed of a single-minded search into his own being. As Okigbo explains in the introduction to **Labyrinths**, the poet-protagonist is a personage 'much larger than Orpheus; one with a load of destiny on his head, rather like Gilgamesh, like Aeneas ...' (p. xiv).

The Nigerian writer's cultic view of literature is also reflected in his use of language. One stylistic device he uses frequently is the repetition and parody of Christian prayers and liturgical tropes. The parody of the **Hail Mary** in Okigbo's 'Heavensgate' has already been pointed out. It is difficult, nevertheless, to determine to what extent such distortions are a mere mockery of the Christian faith. One suspects that Okigbo's atrocities of blasphemy are 'directed aggressively against a supernatural enemy who had still some sway in his mind.'⁴¹ Then there is the question of obscurity. Through a polyglot or densely allusive style Okigbo arouses in the imagination of the reader a sense of mystery, that which Mallarme once described as the central concern of poetry. Such use of language also draws its impact from the suggestive power of calling up colours, sounds, smells and emotions. Thus literature, purified of its 'base' elements, enters into the sphere of music, colours, abstract form and mathematics, the values of its words being determined not so much by their precise meanings as by the interplay of their associations. Such a process, in keeping with the Symbolist desire to move away from description and 'themes' entirely and to create 'suggestiveness', musicality,

and pure poetry, is at work in such poems by Okigbo as the closing section of 'Newcomer', 'Silences' and 'Distances' IV:

*The only way to go
through the marble archway
to the catatonic pingpong
of the evanescent halo ... (p. 57)*

Thus inexorably linked with music, words, names and allusions fulfil the role of talismans. As Annemarie Heywood observes, in Okigbo's poetry they are 'concentrations of inner adventure, which now serve to furnish the poet-hero's ritual'.⁴²

(iv)

Starting from the observation that Okigbo in **Labyrinths** charts the progress of his protagonist towards self-fulfilment, this essay has endeavoured to show that the Nigerian writer has resorted to a ritual initiation pattern that corresponds to the sequence of rites in ancient labyrinth practices, namely: lustrations, ritual dances, ritual sacrifices, ritual rebirths and sacred marriages, along with the underlying feature of a descent into the nether world.

In addition to the prominent role played by a female figure (Mother Idoto and Watermaid), I have also drawn attention to the complex of allusions, images and motifs which suggest the physical labyrinth itself. Evidence of the writer's familiarity with such a pattern has been drawn from his classical training, his basically mythopoeic vision as well as from the predominant trends in archaeology and psychology in the Twentieth century.

My analysis of **Labyrinths** has shown that the structure that Okigbo adopts becomes increasingly loose as one moves from 'Heavensgate' to 'Distances' and almost breaks down completely in 'Silences'. This last, a detour from the quest sequence, can be seen as a pregnant pause, a suppression of the initiation ritual prior to its dramatic culmination.

Lustration is the burden of an entire movement in 'Heavensgate' and, accompanied by ritual dancing, anticipates the protagonist's reunion with his 'Watermaid' at the end of the cycle and at the beginning of 'Siren Limits'. Ritual

sacrifice appears in the poet-protagonist's increasing identification with the various Christ-figures in 'Fragments of the Deluge' as well as in the thinly veiled references to historical personages in 'Silences'. The rebirth that each preceding sequence of poems has anticipated coincides with the sacred marriage in 'Distances' VI and looks forward to the period of creativity represented by **Path of Thunder**.

NOTES

1. Christopher Okigbo, **Labyrinths: with Path of Thunder**, London: Heinemann, 1979). All page references are to this edition and are included in the text.
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12. Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier (eds.), **Modern Poetry from Africa**, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963 repr. 1973), p. 133.
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19. Bodkin, **op. cit.**, pp. 153-161.
20. Marjory Whitelaw, 'Interview with Christopher Okigbo, 1965', **Journal of Commonwealth Literature**, No. 9 (July 1970), p. 36.
21. **Ibid.**, p. 37.
22. Izevbaye, **op. cit.**, p. 11.
23. Whitelaw, **op. cit.**, p. 31.
24. Joseph L. Henderson, 'Ancient Myths and Modern man' in **Man and His Symbols**, ed., Carl G. Jung, (London: Pan Books, 1978), p. 124.
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26. Dennis Duerden and Cosmo Pieterse (eds.), **African Writers Talking**, (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1975), p. 144.
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28. Philip Wheelwright, 'The Archetypal Symbol', **Yearbook of Comparative Criticism, Vol. 1: Perspectives on Literary Symbolism**, ed. Joseph Strelka, (Pennsylvania and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1972), p. 232.
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30. Stanton, **op. cit.**, p. 13.
31. Knight, **op. cit.**, p. 166.
32. **Ibid.**
33. **Ibid.**
34. **Ibid.**
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36. Arnold van Gennep, **The Rites of Passage**, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 92.
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