Wilberforce Island Review Volume 21, N0 1, March, 2023

Biblical Prophetic Poetry Tradition in Okigbo's Poetry

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Abstract
This paper carefully situates Okigbo in the prophetic tradition, considering his calling, his message, his audience, and his experiences as a prophet to a nation according to the form of the Old Testament prophetic stool. Prophecy is located in the domain of religion. Among the religions of the world the stool of prophecy is properly developed in Judaism. This has been expanded in Christianity as has been made explicit in the Old Testament. Prophets of the Old Testament are divided into the major prophets and the minor prophets. Using the theory of Comparative Literature, the researcher finds out that Christoper Okigbo followed the same prophetic tradition like the Old Testament prophets. In the Old Testament, the legendary stool of prophecy has both foretelling and forth telling values. The prophet being one with the people interprets both the socio-political situations of the society as well as predicts the events of the future. This is purely from divine inspiration. Christopher Okigbo, a Nigeria poet, who lived between 1930 to 1967, draws from both the Romantic tradition and the ancient prophetic stool in his development of modern poetry. In his poetry, like an Old Testament prophet, he starts with the call, and a prophetic reconciliation with the goddess, Mother Idoto, who commissions him and sends him to his people in "Heavensgate", through: "Limits", "Silences", and "Distances". He interpreted his life and that of his people in the midst of the tortuous journey of Salvation before declaring the impending doom that took away his life, which he had prophesied by himself.
Keywords: Prophesy, Poetry, Tradition, Christopher Okigbo

Biblical Prophetic Tradition in Okigbo Poetry

Christopher Ifekandu Okigbo was born on 16thAugust, 1930 at Ojoto a tropical forest East of Onitsha the trading city near the River Niger. The neighbouring towns of Ojoto includes: Nnewi, Obosi, Nkpor, Umuoji and Oba. Obi Nwakanma has observed that, "Ojoto men and women like Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria are known for being restless and adventurous" (1). Chris Okigbo lost his mother Anna in 1935 at Amawbia before his family moved to Adazi in 1936. Okigbo completed his standard six at St. Joseph's School Asaba. He had his secondary education at Government College Umuahia; while his tertiary education was at University College Ibadan.

Prophecy is located in the domain of religion. Among the religions of the world, prophetic stool is properly developed in Judaism. This has been expanded in Christianity as has been made explicit in the Old Testament. Prophecy in the Old

Testament has been ranked in the triple calling of priest, prophet and king. Prophecy does not only entail foretelling. It also includes an aspect of forth telling. While foretelling involves predicting the future, forth telling uses the socio-political equations to interpret the situations and warn the people of the repercussions and consequences of their action. An Old Testament prophet is accredited based on his calling, message, and the fulfillment of such message among the audience. Okigbo though not an Old Testament person, has the paradigm to be classified a prophet, considering his calling, message and its fulfillment. In some cases in the Old Testament records, the responsibility of priest, king and prophet may be endowed in one single person; often times three individuals may take the roles according to the direction of Yahweh. In 1 kings 19:15-16

> The lord said to Elijah, go back the way you came, and go to the desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. Also anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet (NIV).

The separation of the monarchy from the priest and prophet was more pronounced in the 8th century. However, the first person to be called a prophet from the Bible is Moses (Gen 20:7 cf Psalms 105:15). Moses himself gave the prophetic stool its nominative form, life pattern and standard for future prophet as Douglas et al have noted, "every feature which characterized the true prophet of Yahweh in the classical tradition of Old Testament prophecy is found first in Moses" (975). These features of the Old Testament prophets include: a specific and personal call from God, this initiative establishes the prophet as the mouth piece of Yahweh. The prophet awareness of the history of his (people) audience, the social and ethical concern of himself and the social welfare of the people remains integral to his ministry as a prophet. There is also a combination of the act of proclamation and prediction of the prophet. Other features that characterized the Old Testament prophet include: the use of symbols and their intercessory roles as mediators between God and the people.

Mathew Aronold made meaningful efforts in English world and emphasized strongly the significance of the comparative approach to literary works. He wrote in a letter in 1848, that, "every critic should try and possess one great literature at least besides his own and more the unlike his own, the better. Thus, he pioneered the comparative criticism in England and gave inspiration to other critics

to work on this new discipline (3). Salahuddin MohdShamsuddin sees Comparative Literature as a branch of Literary Theory that;

> Examines the aspects of convergence among the literatures in their different languages and many images of their links in the present or past, and impacts of these historical links and their manifestation, whether they are related to the general artistic assets of the literary genres or literary schools or intellectual currents or to the nature of the topics, attitudes and peoples that are treated and simulated in the literature or they belong to the issues of the technical drafting and partial ideas in the literary work or belong to the different images of the country reflected in the literature of the other nations, as the technical connections that link the peoples and nations on the basis of humanitarian relations that vary depending on the images and the writers (82).

Etymologically, the term comparative literature denotes any literary work or works when compared with any other literary work or works. Hence, comparative literature is the study of inter-relationship between any two or more than two significant literary works or literatures. It is essential that while making comparative study we must take the sources, themes, myths, forms, artistic strategies, social and religious movements and trends into consideration (1). Because as Shamsuddin, notes,

> Its scope encompasses the totality of human experiences into its embrace, and thus all internal human relationships among the various parts of the world are realized, through the critical approach to literatures under comparative study. It helps to vanish narrow national and international boundaries, and in place of that universality of human relationships emerges out. Thus, the term comparative literature includes comparative study of regional literatures, national literatures, and international literatures (1).

Hence our focus remains to juxtapose the prophetic poetry of Okigbo side by side the Old Testament prophetic tradition. Every Old Testament prophet was chosen from among his people, and often sent back to prophesy among his people. Apart from the three minor prophets: Obadiah, Jonah and Nehum whose messages were

directed to Gentile nations, all other prophets usually spoke from the standpoint of their own people, even when the Gentiles nations were mentioned, they were addressed in their relationship with the nation of Israel. John Philip have observed that, their themes were many and varied, but apart from the initial, immediate and partial fulfillment of the predictions, the prophecies focused on events that concern them and their people. For the Old Testament prophets, they are focused on the first and second coming of Christ.

Okigbo like the Old Testament prophets had his calling to the prophetic stool in 1960, when he began work on "Heavensgate". In which he expresses this divine encounter with the goddess "Mother Idoto",

> Before you, Mother Idoto,
> naked I stand
> Before your watery presence
> a prodigal
> leaning on an oil bean,
> Lost in your legend (3).

Idoto is the major river in Ojoto. Ojoto which is made up of eight clans: Ire, where Ajani shrine that habours the goddess Idoto is located. Others are Ezeke, Umuechem, Ezema, Ojo, Enugo, Ndiabo, and Umuezema. Ojo is the clan that gave birth to Christopher okigbo (Nwakanma, 1). Nwakanma has observed that, the "River Ojoto carves its path through these kindred communities" (2). Nwaeze, Okigbo's maternal uncle was the priest of Ajani shrine. Christopher Okigbo having grown partly at his maternal home was familiar with the worship of Idoto the water goddess of Oto. He knew the objects of her worship, including the oil bean that line the track to the shrine. Nwakanma maintains that, "As a child, Christopher Okigbo experienced the mystery of Idoto's worship. Growing among the customs of this community, he could sense the profound power of the goddess Idoto" (2). Okigbo like Isaiah sees himself in the presence of his god. As can be seen in Isaiah 6:1-3:

> In the year that king Uzziah died I saw the lord, seated on a throne high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: with two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: Holy, holy holy, is the Lord Almighty, the whole earth is full of his glory" (NIV).

Hence, he saw himself before Idoto's watery presence as a prodigal. The use of the word, 'prodigal" by Okigbo is a Christian nomenclature that describes a returning sinner. Isaiah in his case says. "Woe to me!" I cried. I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among the people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King the Lord Almighty (Isaiah 6:5 NIV). Okigbo with all the vestment of a priest of Idoto is set to pay the ultimate price of repentance for the remission of sin and salvation of his people;

> Under your power I
> on barefoot,
> Watchman for the watchword
> at Heavensgate;
> out of the depth my cry
> give ear and hearken …. (Heavensgate 4).

The call of every prophet is with an encounter. Philips maintains that,

> The prophets often fail to understand all of their own utterances, for the burdens they delivered sometimes had a double fulfillment: an initial and partial fulfillment close to the time the words were uttered, and a later, more complete fulfillment, at a remote date (123).

Comparative Literature theory paints the function of Arts in their relations with each other, and explains the direction of this function, and leads to the mutual understanding among the peoples and convergence in their intellectual heritage, then it - after all - helps to bring out the national literatures from the isolation, to be seen as the parts of a general building, which is the literary heritage of the world as the whole (85). Touria Nakkouch observes that;

> Comparative Literature may take one of two different routes: in the first, it functions in a framework between two or more national literatures; in the second, it functions in a framework outside literary boundary between literature and other areas and disciplines of human expression. Whether it works from within a language, thus exerting its intrinsic analytic prerogative; or between languages, thus making use of translation to elucidate the conditions, strategies and limits of mutual understanding between languages it is,

> above all, an art/act of understanding. As such, it requires creativity and it foregrounds the role of readers and their participative approach. This act of participative interpretation is centred in the contingency and limits of translation (11).

Steiner maintains that the above can be clear from word-to-word correspondence to the "freest imitation of metaphor adaptation" (11). As a reaction to the narrow traditional frame of reference of Comparative Literature, it was deemed that the inter-influences between a literary text and an ensemble of artistic variants which this text inspires across time and genres would pave the way for a more open cross cultural poetics.

So, like the Old Testament prophets, Okigbo has a call from "Mother Idoto" whom Joseph Campbell describes as a Lady of the House of sleep.

> … she is a paragon of beauty, the reply of all desire, the bliss-bestowing goal of every hero's earthly and unearthly quest. She is mother, sister, mistress, and 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 forest of the world (2).

Mother, sister, mistress, and bride are anthropomorphic words Okigbo applied in the veneration of this goddess of the river. In the African Traditional religion each priest is attached to a deity whom he serves all through his life. Idoto is a female goddess served by Okigbo's maternal uncle who took over from Okigbo's grandfather Ikejiofor. Nwakama says that, "the river itself, Idoto's habitation, is the sacred source, the site of communal ritual and worship … Ukpaka Oto is the male archetype and alter ego to the feminine (2). A. O. Iwuagwu opines that, "the family kinship is very strong in the Igbo concept". A person can draw either from the patrilineal side or the matrilineal side. Each family is expected to maintain this intricate link and solidarity with the deity. Most importantly the deity is free to choose his priest from anyone among the members of the family link. Every member of the family has the right and obligation to the family god.

Beyond the above, the concept of prophecy is not foreign to the Igbo traditional religion; UdobataOnunwa opines that, "Prophets occupy important position in African traditional religion just like Priests, medicine men, diviners and

other religious specialists." (58) Although, like diviners and Medicine men, prophets are not loudly developed. This is because the nature of prophecy and the prophetic roles are being performed by the diviners who interpret as well as predict for the people and society. More so, as Onunwa maintains that,

> As a religion of the community rather than that of an individual, the traditional religion was such that no one could detach himself from the religion of his people, for to do so is to be severed from his roots, his foundations, the context of his security, his kinship and the entire group of those who make him aware of his own existence … besides, since the traditional religion is not primarily a missionary or evangelical faith, its liturgy is more of ritual performance than a proclamation of well-articulated and systematic doctrine to non-member; because the religious expression is full of ritual offerings (59).

The prophetic roles may have been played by the diviners, soothsayers or priests. Onunwa confirms this, thus: "In Igbo land, it might have possibly been that in the distant past those who spent time on the practice of divination, might have performed some prophetic work at certain times of the year, especially when they were inspired" (61). Divination plays an important role in the traditional Igbo endeavour as to explain mysteries, interpret issues as well as predict and control space-time and events around him. Instead of prophecy, divination featured prominently in the religious worship of the Igbo society more than prophecy. Jude Aguwa suggests that, the emphasis of divination over prophecy may be because they are being controlled by one deity "Agwu". "Agwu is the patron spirit of herbal medicine and divination. It also inspires intellectual and artistic activities as well as many other human values" (16).

However, Onunwa maintains that; "Those prophets who did not combine prophecy with Afa Divinatory practices and soothsaying saw themselves most of the time as advocates of moral rectitude and crusaders of social justice within the community." (65) This is because, they do not attract clients, because their condemnation of the social evils made them enemies of those who were indulging in those evils they condemn (65). However, some of their proclamations were fulfilled in their own time, while some were fulfilled several years after they died. Examples of such prophets are "Amuma in Achi, North-Igbo Area", "Amuma in Nnewi", "AmumaNnobi" and others (Onunwa, 65). Also, in the Bible, there is a

strong correlation between poetry and prophecy. David Noel Freedman has noted that,

> The correlation between poetry and prophecy is maintained in the biblical tradition. David is credited with the composition of several poems which are preserved in 2 Samuel (the lament over Saul and Jonathan, the lament over Abner, the Psalm of salvation 2 Samuel 22 - Psalm 18 and the Testament of David. 2 Samuel 23:1-7) as well as almost half of the Psalms (21).

Generally speaking, careful studies of the Old Testament prophets reveal a flow from prose to poetry. Also in Igbo traditional religion, poetry remains the language of ritual and prayers. The priest may choose to talk to the people in prose, but poetry remains the language of the gods. In other words, Okigbo from his link is from the linage of priests of mother Idoto, as an Igbo prophet may not be popular as he does not combine it with divination. He has a calling like the Old Testament prophet followed the process of penitence for both his sins and the sins of his people properly expressed in the 'Passage' and other parts of the "Heavensgate".

Another integral aspect that distinguishes a prophet is the message he bears. Egudu Romanus defines poetry as a method of expression (2). Not all expression in poetry is prophecy. There is a great difference between the message and the method. Other methods can be used for the same message, but for a message to be prophecy, it must have prophetic code. In the Old Testament, it is "Thus says the Lord" or others. Beyond the prophetic formularies, the fulfillment of the prophecies remains fundamental in asserting the integrity of the prophet. The prophet may use symbols, drama, songs or others, yet his intercessory roles, interpretation of the societal equation different from the popular myopic views of the multitude and predicting the future events, form the cardinal point of the prophetic stool distinguishes both the prophet and the message of prophecy.

Christopher Okigbo prophesied between 1960 and 1967, during the reign of Nnamdi Azikiwe and Tafawa Belawa, and Yakubu Gowon. This is the early post independent era in Nigeria. The nation was still grasping with the transition to self-rule and the ethnic bigotry with its nepotic tendencies that resulted to a civil war. Nigerian nation was given an opportunity to take certain national decision as a heterogeneous independent nation saddled with British interest and the interests of other world powers. The message of Christopher Okigbo was build on two pillars:

his life as a son of a headmaster as well as his development under the tortuous colonial rule and the fate of the Nigerian nation as a heterogeneous entity grasping with self rule and nepotic bigotry. Nwakanma summarizes it thus: "Christopher Okigbo was thus born straight into that world of imperial domination, events in life, and in the life of his generation, would constrict the unique context through which he evolved emotionally and intellectually to apprehend a world in spiritual conflict" (9).

An apt study of Okigbo's message will classify his poem thus: the prophet and his calling. This is made up of "Heavensgate", "limits", "silence" and "distances" and the prophet and his nation, which is contained in "Path of thunder". Messages in the Old Testament prophecies take different shape and forms depending on what Yahweh wants to achieve. In most cases, the prophet lives out the message in his daily life activities. He might act it as a drama, or deliver it as a teaching in a class, or sing it as a song. In most cases the life of the prophet and his messages are inseparable. More important in the Old Testament prophetic messages is the use of symbols. Douglas et al made it explicate that;

> The prophet was first a man of the word of God. Even when he seemed to undertake other functions, such as the elaborate "miming" of Ezekiel, it was subordinate to the interest of bringing the word of God to his fellow men. This word was not, so to speak, a mere passive opinion as though God were anxious simply that men should be aware how he saw matters before they decided for themselves. It was rather the prophets' conviction that the proclamation of God's word radically changed the whole situation (976).

An understanding of these prophetic approaches will help in understanding Christopher Okigbo's message as a prophet. The message of Okigbo remains an unequivocal sermon to the Nigerian nation. His message is not separated from his life. First, his childhood experiences in the worship of the goddess mother Idoto, his experience from the life and death of his dear mother Anna whom he made his muse and his patron saint, and the life and activities of his headmaster father. These can be described as his period of innocence under the tutelage of colonial system. These messages are drawn from nostalgic recollection of the experiences at the altar of mother Idoto, the sincerity of the penitent worshippers who stand naked before the benevolent goddess in absolute dependence and desire for the saving grace before her watery presence. Okigbo juxtaposes these with the Christians of the day

from the colonial missionaries to the African adherents and discovered the insincerity among the Christians who in spite of what they claim in whites and well-dressed clothes are hiding a lot of wickedness and unrepentant heart, a fact he expresses in the rain and sun allegory;

> Rain and sun in single combat:
> On one leg standing,
> in silence at the passage,
> the young bird at the passage.
> Silence FACES at crossroad:
> festivity in black…
> faces of black like long black
> column of ants,
> behind the bell tower
> into the hot garden
> where all roads meet:
> festivity in black …
> O Anna at the knobs of the panel oblong
> hear us at crossroads at the great hinges
> where the players of loft pipe organs
> rehearse old lovely fragment, alone (the passage 5).

The syncretic nature of religion in the colonial and postcolonial era in Africa is so alarming. There is a mixture of the Christian worship and the old African Traditional Religion. These experiences are recaptured by Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus,* where when Ezeulu refuses to eat the yam as a result of his imprisonment, the traditional faithful joins the church not because they repented, but in order to harvest their yams. Even Ezeulu has sent Odouche his son to church to be his eyes. Eugene in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* too, in spite of his deep-rooted Catholicism spares time to maintain their family deity. Isaiah's response to the syncretic society of Judah in Isaiah chapter 1 verse 12 to 17 is a replica of Okigbo's message.

> When you come to appear before me, who asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New moons, Sabbaths and convocations I cannot bear your evil assemblies. Your New Moon festivals and your anointed feasts My soul hates. They have become a burden to me I am weary of bearing them when you spread out your hands in prayers. I will hide

> my eyes from you even if you offer many prayers I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight. Stop doing wrong learn to do right, seek justice encourage the oppressed. Defend the fatherless, plead the case of the widow (NIV).

The prophet Isaiah shows picture of a people whose lives, if not cautioned is capable of ruining both the people's political and social aspiration. Okigbo sees the same in the Nigerian nation; hence he calls upon Anna his patron saint and epitome of righteousness to hear his supplications. The life and death of Anna, Okigbo's mother to Christopher is a punishment to humanity.

She was taken out of a world full of wickedness to an eternal rest of bliss. In 1935 Anna Okigbo died at Amawbia of Cholera, Nwakanma's account sounds lucid, "Anna's death had been sudden and unexpected. She had not been ill previously and her death had come quickly. She had slumped down that morning while preparing her children for school and making breakfast. When she collapsed, the alarm was quickly raised. a desperate effort to revive her proved fruitless." (10) Nwakanma adds that, the school master, Okigbo's father was inconsolable. He wept bitterly for his dear wife. His children joined, soon mourners, who had been touched by Anna's death surrounded them (10).

Okigbo in the "passage" represents the funeral procession. The solemnity of the faithful and the evil ordeal of death are ironically laid side by side. As a little child, the persona is not allowed to be at the centre of the events, but listening from afar, he heard the disharmony of the religious activities, "For we are listening in cornfields among the wind players, listening to the wind learning over its loveliest fragment…"

James Okigbo, the head master father of Christopher Okigbo was not mentioned in the poems of Okigbo. He was strict, disciplined and dedicated to duty. This commitment to duty made him scatter the children to boarding schools and other places and homes after the death of his wife (10). Nwakanma said this about him, "faced with the unanticipated problem of raising a family of very young children without his wife, the head master nearly disappeared. His professional commitment to the catholic mission schools at a most active and demanding phase of his career presented a dilemma for a single parent" (12-13). This background experiences are replicated in the poet's fear of uncertainty;

> And I said:
> The prophet only the poet

And he said: logistics.
(which is what poetry is)
He said to the ram: Disarm
And I said
Except by rooting,
Who could pluck yam tubers from their base?
And there are here
The errors of the rendering… (Initiations... 9)

Hence mother Idoto becomes a surrogate mother in Okigbo's poetic consciousness, while Anna assumes a perpetual patron saint, powerful presence reified into the goddess, an integral object of worship and epitome of righteousness.

Christopher Okigbo had his secondary education at Government College, Umuahia. This is an all-boys' boarding school. Government College Umuahia is one of the colonial masters' schools established for the children of African elites and colonial expatriates of the Eastern Nigeria in 1929. It is a colonial model school. This is one the schools set to train future leaders of the nation. The poet, prophet sees the pattern of their training and figures the manner of leadership they will give the nation in future. The attitude of the teachers towards students, senior students and the subjugation of the junior students by the seniors as against the ideal policies projected by the school authorities are not in synergy;

Chorus: Dumb-Bells outside the gates in hallow seascapes without memory, we carry Each of us an urn of native Earth, a double handful anciently gathered
And by salt months by yellow Sand banks sprinkled with memories are spread to the night airs our silence, Suffused in this fragrance of divers melodies….
Chorus: We carry in our worlds that flourish Our worlds that have failed (Lament of Silent Sisters, 41).

As a prophet, he makes it explicit that "This is our swan song // This is the sign of our spirit"/ of course, whatever is happening is "unseen shadows like long-fingered winds // plucked from our strings // (41). It is at this poem "Lament of the Silent Sisters" that the poet introduces the word "detonators" in his poems.

What cast-iron steps cascading down the valley All forged into thunder of tanks; And detonators cannoned into splintered flames, In this jubilee-dance of fire flies! (40)

For Christopher Okigbo, the political cum leadership quagmire of the nation has its root from the colonial foundation of the elites and the pattern of training cum orientation got from the colonial masters.

Okigbo was admitted into the university college Ibadan in1950. This college produced the earliest graduates of the nation. The education of these graduates was tailored in the form that even though they excelled, they would not be separated from the colonial superiority mentality. Even when they spoke the white man's language correctly, they were discredited with the accent flaws. They were forced to mimic the colonial masters in every nook and cranny of life to be confirmed educated. Most of them ended in the limbo of becoming neither a white man nor a black man. They ended up replicating the colonial subjugation on their African brother.

A fact that was strongly challenged by the Negritude movement. This situation strongly endangered the African personality, creating a race within the African race. The prophet saw this coming earlier before independence hence he shouts;

> For in the inflorescence of the white Chambers, a voice, voice, from very far away, Chanted, and the chamber descanted, the birthday of the earth, Paddled me home through some dark Labyrinth from laughter to the dream (Distances 51).

This mentality borrowed from the colonial education remains arch-hill of the African post-colonial period. Okigbo saw it vividly in;

> DEATH LAY in ambush that evening in that island;
> Voice sought its echo that evening in that island….
> It was an evening without flesh or skeleton; An evening with no silver bells to its tale; Without lanterns an evening without age or memory-For we are talking of such commonplaces; and on the blink of such great events…
> And in the freezing tuberoses of the white chamber, eyes that had lost their animal colour, havoc of eyes of Incandescent rays, pinned me, cold, to the marble stretcher (Distance 11,54).

The expectations of the political class at the eve of Nigeria independence is far from what prophet persona envisages. The so anticipated freedom is without flesh or

skeleton. It has neither flesh to build it up nor skeleton to stand. The country is not prepared for the independence because of her cultural and tribal heterogeneity. The evening is without lantern for light. The major issues that are meant to sustain the joys of the independence are not properly settled, hence, the foretelling of doom as prophesied in the "Path of Thunder".

"Path of Thunder" is the most lucid and eloquent prophecy of Christopher Okigbo. This section of *the Labyrinth* is subtitled, "Poems prophesying war". It is published posthumously. In other words, Okigbo completed the writing but could not publish it like others, before joining the Biafra Army in which he sacrificially submits to the cause of his father land and was killed at the Nsukka sector, Opi junction to be precise, on 20th September, 1967.

This section of Okigbo's poetry reflects all the aspect of prophecy in the Old Testament prophetic tradition. In it is the art of foretelling and forth-telling with the use of symbols. The intercessory role of the prophet as well as the self-sacrifice, Emmanuel N. Obiefuna has noted that is "The idea of the poet as an inspired performer, a composite prophet or seer priest and madman, is much older than the Romantic Movement itself and is quite familiar in different culture of the world." (207). Obiefuna also notes that Okigbo in line with other poets of the Romantic tradition functioned as priest, prophet and legislator for mankind, as a man speaking to other men with a voice of moral authority strengthened by heightened sensibility (207).

However, Philips has observed that one of the major characters of the prophet is that their piercing eyes see farther into the future than ordinary persons, they see to the time of the end, and they interpret the socio-political equation beyond the immediate events of the contemporary. Edward B. Pollard says that, the prophet grasps the inner truth of things in the midst of perverse generation, and brings that truth home to men's business and their bosoms (328). "Path of Thunder" is not dated like the other poems in the *Labyrinths*, but its events reflect Nigeria between 1966 and 1967. Kofi Awoonor says, Okigbo in "Path of Thunder" shows that, "The obvious derivatives are missing, and the poet, firmly in control, speaks with an urgency that is as raw as it also shares his prophetic role" (222).

This collection is made up of: "Thunder can break", "Elegy of the wind", "Come Thunder", "Hurrah for Thunder", "Elegy for silt-drum" and "Elegy for Alto". Okigbo saw the quagmiric political situation as a "Miracle of Thunder". This Thunder can speak; hence it has spoken and left no signatures broken. Pollard maintains that, "it is a fact worthy of note that poet and prophet have both been lovers of freedom. Both are restless under unjust laws, or the tyranny of dead and

meaningless customs: and each is a law unto himself" (331). Hence, they resort to interpreting the situation with words that will awaken the society.

Amadioha is the god of Thunder, it is also the god of justice, and the prophet saw the political tricks as such that is capable of inviting thunder. Thunder is the symbol of Amadioha's justice: in "Thunder can break", he notes the presence of Obduracy, a disease of the elephant, which is stubbornness and determination not to change mind about something in spite of the imminent consequence; hence in "Come Thunder" he invites thunder since they are unrepentant. By inviting Thunder to settle the differences, he also warns the jubilant, that the thunder is not a respecter of persons. "Remember, o dancers,// the thunder among the clouds"

Among the Igbos, Amadioha's wrath always meet the evil irrespective of class or creed, hence, he says to the dancers "Remember o dancers the lighting // beyond the earth". When the Thunder has done the deed, he says Hurrah for thunder. Prophets feel elated whenever their words come to fulfillment. Awoonor maintains that, "Come Thunder" foreshadows the great upheavals of Nigeria's sad history" (222).

"Hurrah for Thunder" is the celebration of the four majors. The dancers, as Obiefuna notes, refers to the politicians, the elites, public servants and the exploiting classes, who made common cause with imperialism to snuff out the bright prospect of independence. These were too far gone in corruption to heed to the urgent import of prophecy (234). January, 1966, witnessed the break of "Thunder", as the four majors ably led by Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu toppled the government of the first civilian rule of Nigeria. As Obiefuna have observed, Okigbo, like most of his contemporaries, reflects popular disenchantment with the misrule of the civilian politicians, hence they welcome the change with enthusiasm because of that, even if only for a brief while, called a halt to the anarchy which had immobilized the country (234).

The poet persona while celebrating this development warns the people including himself. "If I don't learn to shut my mouth, I'll soon go to hell (67). "Elegy of the wind" "Elegy for silt-Drum", and, "Elegy for Alto" are poems that tend to mourn the impending devastation of the nation because of the political and nepotic bigotry, which has become a cervix circle in the nation. The poet-prophet sees the crumbling of the great edifice, Nigeria that was celebrated during the independence, and the dissolution of the great pre-independence dream, he says, "The child in me trembles before high shelf//on the wall. The man in me shrinks before the narrow neck of a calabash"// (65).

In "Elegy for silt-Drum' he like Jeremiah in the Bible mourns the unrepentant Nigerian Generals, the politicians and the public servants. Jeremiah

mourns when he saw the unholy alliance of Jehoiakm and the Egyptian against the Babylonian, which Jehoiachin unrepentantly followed, and he shouted in the book of Jeremiah chapter 46. Okigbo on his own raises condolences before the death. In these poems, he intercedes for the nation, when the result is not coming, he starts praying for himself,- "O mother, mother Earth, unbind me; let this be my last testament, let this be" (71). He could not stand it anymore. Of course, it becomes his last testament as he bows at Nsukka sector. Nwakanma notes that;

> The poet had glimpsed the significance of the great event of which he had been part, and which he had witnessed, in the context of that society in rapid transition. The progression of the mood of "Path of Thunder" from Euphoria and jubilation to wary, disillusioned prophecy anticipating an iron dawn aptly records both the collective mood of that period and Okigbo's intense individual perception of events (218).

Okigbo sees the moments of change, and calculates the elements of that change but feels that the equations of the change will not solve the mathematics of the country's problem, he shouts; "THE GLIMPSE of a dream lies smoldering in a cave;//together with the mortally wounded birds. Earth, unbind me; let me be the prodigal; let this be//the ram's ultimate prayer to the tether …" (72) Obiefuna opines that, "The special nature of the relationship of poets of destiny with their peoples aspiration makes it almost inevitable that the world can only have very few such poets at any given moment of history but more so in this modern times" (237).

In conclusion, as Freedman notes, "the question is whether the primary equation of prophecy and poetry holds, and I think, it is safe to say that from the beginnings of prophesy in Israel at least until the exile, poetry was the central medium of prophecy" (22-23). In the Romantic period, the poets also display some level of prophecy in their poetry. However, a prophet is distinguished by his calling, his message, his society and the fulfillment of the message. The prophet may not be a poet, and so proclaim his message in other forms of communication. Poetry remains a way of expression or communication. Okigbo from his calling by mother Idoto, took the stool of prophecy, with a message for the Nigerian nation of his time, which he was an integral part from his experiences. He declares his message within the period including the message of his death. This was published post-humously in his book of poetry. And he chose to declare the message in poetry, yet he followed the prophetic tradition both in the Old Testament and in the Igbo culture and religion while maintaining the Romantic tradition of the poetic literature.

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