

The mystic drum

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Lyrics" (2011). African Studies Faculty Publication Series. Paper 12.

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Deed. 'The Mystic Drum': Critical Commentary on Gabriel Okra's Love Lyrics: Checksum Ozone, PhD Professor of African & African Diaspora Literatures

Introduction In the course of reading a chapter entitled " Empty and Marvelous" In Alan Watts fascinating book, The Way of Zen (1 957), a serendipitous key was provided, by the following statement from the teachings of Chinese Zen master, I Aching Yuan Weighing (1067-1120), to the structure and meaning of the experience traumatized in Gabriel Okra's most famous love poem, " The Mystic Drum": 2 Before I had studied Zen for thirty years, I saw mountains as mountains and waters as waters.

When I arrived at a more intimate knowledge, I came to the point where I saw the mountains are not at rest. For it's just now that I see mountains once again as mountains and waters once again as waters. What is so readily striking to anyone who has read " The Mystic Drum" is the near perfect dynamic equivalence between the words of Aching Yen and the phraseology of Okra's lyric.

In line with Aching Yuan's statement, the lyric falls into three clearly defined parts? an initial phase of " conventional knowledge," when men are men and

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fishes are fishes (lines 1-15); a median phase of " more intimate knowledge," when men are no longer men and fishes are no longer fishes (lines 16-26); and a final hash of " substantial knowledge," when men are once again men and fishes are once again fishes, with the difference that at this phase, the beloved lady of the lyric is depicted as " standing behind a tree" with " her lips parted in her smile," now " turned cavity belching darkness" (lines 27-41).

The significance of this closing phrase will be discussed in the appropriate slot in the final section of the paper, below. But because of the complexity of the imagery and symbolism by means of which progression of the lover's understanding of the nature of reality is developed, it seems necessary to visit the lyric in its entirety before proceeding to a phase-bypass analysis of its structure: The mystic drum beat in my inside and fishes danced in the rivers and men and women danced on land to the rhythm of my drum But standing behind a tree with leaves around her waist she only smiled with a shake of her head. One of the major schools of Buddhism that originated in 12th-century China with current strongholds in India and Japan, Zen strongly emphasizes enlightenment through meditation and vehemently denies the value of conventional thinking in favor of an attempt to understand the paradoxes of reality by " direct pointing" unfettered by what it sees as arbitrary customary compartmentalizing of phenomena.

Since the middle of the twentieth-century, the exciting and fresh insights provided by Zen masters have been a source of inspiration for many non-Asian writers, artists and intellectuals throughout the world, especially in North America. 2 The present commentary is a revised and updated version <https://assignbuster.com/the-mystic-drum/>

of a paper originally entitled " Zen in African Poetry: Gabriel Okra's 'The Mystic Drum'" and shared privately with several of my students and academic colleagues at Abidjan, Lagos and Nausea (Nigeria) and Boston (Massachusetts), USA.

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angora's Love Poetry: 2 rippling the air with quickened tempo compelling the quick and the dead to dance and sing with their shadows? Then the drum beat with the rhythm of the things of the ground and invoked the eye of the sky the sun and the moon and the river gods and the trees began to dance, the fishes turned men and men turned fishes and things stopped to grow? 10 15 20 25
And then the mystic drum in my inside stopped to beat? and men became men, fishes became fishes and trees, the sun and the moon found their places, and the dead . NET to the ground and things began to grow.

And behind the tree she stood with roots sprouting from her feet and leaves growing on her head and smoke issuing from her nose and her lips parted in her smile Then, then I packed my mystic drum and turned away; never to beat so loud any more. 35 Aching Yuan's Zen experience is epistemological? pertaining to a step-by-step initiation of the passionate lover into an understanding of the nature of reality, in particular " the foundations, scope, and validity of knowledge" (Online Enchant).

It can thus be surmised that " The Mystic Drum" is not just a conventional amatory lyric, revoked by the storm and stress of Okra's passionate love for his adored and adorable second wife (an African-American with Caribbean roots, Diamond Carmichael, who died in Port Harcourt in 1983). 3 It is more

decidedly a philosophical poem in which the dynamics, directions and management of " the mystic drum" of passion that beats in the poet's " inside" are dramatically reenacted, in a tripartite ritual and initiatory pattern reminiscent of Aching Yen.

From a conventional phase, at which the lover's understanding of Okra's first wife, a fellow 'Jog from the Niger Delta and the mother of his son, Dry. Ebb Okra? a clinical psychologist in Randolph, Massachusetts, who lives in Canton, Massachusetts? was divorced when Ebb was only two years old. There is hardly an reference to her in either Okra's lyrics or interviews. Nor do we have any information about the cause of her separation from Okra. Of the nature of knowledge conforms to socially accepted customs of behavior or style (lines 1-15), the lover's progresses through a more intimate phase, at which this knowledge matures from a close, thoroughgoing, personal relationship (lines 16-26), to an ultimate substantial phase, situated in the optimum zone of epistemological perception, at which what the lover has come know about the nature of reality is not only solidly built but considerable in amount or importance (lines 27-41), culminating in the lover's self-imposed decision not to allow his " mystic drum" ever " to beat so loud so loud any more" (line 41).

The poem concludes, in other words, with a firm decision by the lover to put strong reins on the unbridled flights of his amatory imagination, having become wizened by the knowledge and experience he has acquired. Because the tropes (" mystic," " drum," and " inside"), two of which appear in the title of the present paper, are recurrent in all of Okra's love lyrics (" Diamond," "

To Pave," and " The Mystic Drum"), it seems necessary to pause awhile to reflect on their meaning and significance.

For Okra, the word " mystic" is indeed connotative of the spiritual, the numinous, the magical, the supernatural, and the shamanistic. But it is more meaningful as a poetic code for the supervisory powers that enable the human personality to tap into hidden strengths buried in the innermost recesses of the psyche. In addition to any other signification carried over by the poet from his theories of Swiss psychiatrist and founder of Analytical Psychology, Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), as comprising the collective unconscious? the innermost recesses of the psyche, populated by archaic or primordial images which Jung calls archetypes and which, as he posits, are shared in common by all humankind. See Ozone (1981), for a more detailed discussion of the collective unconscious and its archetypes, with reference to the poetry of Okra's transnational, modernist, contemporary, Christopher Skibob (193()-1967).

This innermost level of the psyche is operated from the outermost level? the conscious mind (the seat of our everyday thoughts and emotions) ? by the personal unconscious (the seat of repressed traumatic personal experiences or complexes which may be re-lived by the individual if and whenever memories of the original trauma that gave birth to the complex are awakened by new trauma of the same kind). In its relation to " mystic" and " inside," the word " drum," in Okra, generally refers to the vibes felt by an individual when there is an intense surge of subconscious promptings from any of the two levels of his " inside. Further research is needed to ascertain the consistency of all these with the idea of " the inside" in Okra's native 'Jog
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language and traditional system of thought. In "The Mystic Drum" as well as in "Diamond" (a lyric also provoked by Okra's love for Ms. Carmichael) and in "To Pave" (a lyric provoked by the "fire" and "flame" of an unrequited love for a mysterious paramour about whom Okra is most reticent to say anything in interviews with him), the intensity of these subconscious psychic pulsations often reaches fever pitch.

The three lyrics are thus not only of enormous interest as conventional love lyrics, fusing the commonalities of oral-wide traditions of love poetry and the peculiarities of indigenous African love songs performed as part of moonlight dances; they are also worthy of critical analysis as a windows into Okra's struggle for rapprochement with the presiding lady of his poetic inspiration, his muse.

The muse has been described as the source of inspiration that stimulates the art of a poet. In postcolonial discourse, it has been studied as an archetypal female figure (watermark, great mother, earth goddess, water goddess, and dancer) embodying cultural nationalist affections and idealizations of the colonized earth of the poet's Malden (see Thomas, 1968, and Ozone, in Nonnumeric, 2011).

As I have stated in the later citation, 4 For the purposes of the present paper, I retain my earlier understanding of psyche (Ozone, 1981 : 30) as "the totality of the non-physical components of the human personality" (extrapolated from Jung, 1959). 5 In this paper, I use the terms traumatic and trauma to refer to "emotional shock" or "an extremely distressing experience that causes severe emotional shock and may have long-lasting

psychological effects" (online Enchant). Jung defines complexes as " psychic entities that have escaped from the control of unconsciousness and split from it, to lead a separate existence in the dark sphere of the psyche, whence they may at any time hinder or help the conscious performance" (see 7 see Ozone (2006 and 2011). 4 The idea of the muse is often invoked in the scholarship on modern Nigerian literature; but it is often shrouded with a mystique that tends to reduce it to something abstract or far-fetched, or, at any rate, to a kind of African imitation of the classical muses of Greco-Roman antiquity.

But our nascent muse was not only concrete and manifest in our postcolonial practical engagement with our indigenous cultures; she was also an embodiment of the highest cultural ideals of our ancestral traditions as we perceived them in the heyday of colonialism. She appeared to each and every one of us in multifarious guises. But whatever her emanation was, she was unmistakably a personification of the earth of our ancestors? the earth goddess, Ala, the supreme light (chi) that nurtures all creation, an embodiment of the eternal bond that unites the living and the dead.

When our early devotional poems to this great spirit and those of our predecessors and successors are collected and published, readers will be better able to understand the ramifications of the power of this great goddess who appeared to us, as to our predecessors in the early years (Skibob, Window, And, Egged, Insanely, Majoring, Okapi, Kook, etc), as a dancer, spirit maiden, water maid, and other exciting feminine figures? in all cases as embodiments of our communal and individual apprehension of the

superiority of our indigenous cultural heritage to every single superimposition of the postcolonial order.

Like Skibob and other members of the Nausea school of modern Nigerian poetry (see Thomas, 1968 and 1972; Cherub, in Landforms, 1973 and 1974; and Modulator, 1980), Okra is a votary of the watermark or mermaid, whose inspirational "songs" we hear in "The Fisherman's Invocation" (Part II and III) as the voice of a presiding lady (or ladies) of poesy whose presence and participation are repeatedly invoked to mediate the claims of the what is passing (the Back), is passing (the Present) and to come (the Front).

In Part II (The Invocation), the "water song" of an "assembly of mermaid" in linked with the "midwives" that would officiate in the delivery of the Child-Front (the brave new world beyond colonialism)? rubbing "gently down/the back" of the great mother past ("Back), symbolizing age-old traditions: O midwives rub gently down the back of your Back while the sun play his play and the Back dance its dance and assembly of mermaids sing their bubbling water song beneath the river waves.

And in Part III (The Child-Front), "the mermaids" are invoked to participate in the shaping of the future as cleansing agencies that must "carry... On their songs" and embarrassing negatives of the pre-colonial past) rearing up its ugly head from a anatomically cherished past, in a situational irony reminiscent of Whole Saying's early ritual drama, *Dance of the Forests* (1960): Where are your Gods now Gods of the Back that have brought forth this monster? Throw it away, throw it into the river and let the mermaids carry it on their songs.

Throw it away to the Back and let the Back swallow it in its abyss And let the Gods remember their lives are in my hands In these lines, the " Gods of the Back (past) that have/brought forth this monster" (embarrassing negatives of Africans pre-colonial history) are reminded on he 'Jog custom known as uremia, in which? as traumatized in " The Revolt of the Gods"? the fate of the gods, which are traditional in the hands of their worshippers, must be determined by humans in accordance with their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their providential conduct.

In concluding, in Part IV (Birth Dance of the Child Front), the " songs of mermaids" are 5 given pride of place in finale of " our dance/ of the Front" (of the future), again stressing the primacy of the muse as an agency for shaping the future of a troubled land: Let's leaven our dance of the Front with rhythms of the Back and strengthen he fragile songs of the new with songs of mermaids Much later, in his mature post-war, political poetry set at the heart of the future envisioned in " The Fisherman's Invocation" and collected under the title *The Dreamer, His Vision* (2006), the mermaid reappears in " Mamma Water and Me" as the presiding lady of the poet's anguished cry for succor in the midst of the triumph of disorder (" embers.. Moldering", " in memoriam ashes", " flames I cannot temper", " whirling vortex, helpless") in post-civil war Nigeria: The embers are smoldering? once again? They've refused to die into in memoriam ashes. And have burst into flames I cannot temper. They draw into their whirling vortex, helpless? Mamma-water & me. There we stand, hand in hand, Like Starch and company, the faithful, Calmly waiting for the redeeming flames Then we shall step out with solemn steps To silence offended eyebrows and daggered

tongues and walk on calm waters? still, serene? Free! Clinched by the refrain ("Mamma-water and me"), the poet expresses strong optimism that, by keeping faith (standing "hand in hand") with his muse, "redeeming flames" that would effect "the cleansing" and "free us of earthly dross" would surely come in the end.

By contrast to "Mamma-water" (a supernatural being under whose divine shadow the poet appears helpless to offer anything but total devotion), Diamond and Pave are human objects of love to whom Okra, in his love lyrics, projects the archetype of the muse in an unconscious recognition of their place in his "inside" as his soul mates or psychic alter egos (representing, from the Jungian psychological perspective, his anima). The anima, for Jung, is one of the most powerful archetypes of the collective unconscious that participates in the all-important process of individuation. As noted in my essay on Skibob and Jung (Ozone, 1981: 37), "the anima is the primordial image of woman in a man, a counterpart of the animus, the primordial image of man engraved on the mind of a woman. The anima appears in dreams, visions and fantasies as in literature and myth in the form of a mother, a loved one, a goddess, a siren, a prostitute and an enchantress, or a femme fatale.

The impact of these latent images of woman can be as destructive to the psychic health of the man who projects them as they can be beneficent. They often give rise to an obsessive pursuit of the elusive and the intractable. Because of their appearance in the mind of the poet in forms consistent with the well-established characteristics of the archetype of the anima, Diamond and Pave tend to feature in Okra's lyrics in patterns of relationships

reminiscent of the kinds of poet-muse relationships described by Robert Graves in *The White Goddess* (1959) and exemplified in the life and poetry of Okra's contemporary, Christopher Skibob (1930-1967).

As Skibob learned from his reading of Graves, and as parsed by Among (1972), "one phase in the relationship between the muse-poet and his goddess-woman is that in which the toe becomes more consciously aware of cruelty." This lesson, also learnt by Okra and 6 embodied in the myth's of "The Mystic Drum," "Diamond," and "To Pave," is writ large in the imagery and symbolism of Skibob's second sequence, *Limits*, especially *Limits IV* in which the beloved female figure metamorphoses into a ferocious lioness that gores the over-excited lover to death or, at any rate, tranquilizer him into an unconscious state from which he would awake to complete the writing of the poem at hand with a mature mind truly informed by experience: An image insists From flag pole of the heart;

Her image distracts Oblong-headed lioness? No shield is proof against her? Wound me, O sea-weed Face, blinded like a strong-room? Distances of her armpit-fragrance Turn chloroform enough for my patience? When you have finished & done up my stitches, Wake me near the altar, & this poem will be finished... (*Limits V*, lines 71-84) Thus, as stated in *The White Goddess*, "Being in love does not and should not, blind the poet to the cruel side of woman's nature? and many muse-poems are written in helpless attestation of this by men whose love is not longer returned" (Graves, 1959: 91). As stated above, this archetypal pattern is amply reenacted in Okra's "To Pave," "Diamond", and "The Mystic Drum. In "To Pave," the "fire" and "flames" of passion reduce everything between the lover and the beloved into

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"ashes": And as before the fire smolders in water, continually smoldering beneath the ashes with things I dare not tell erupting from the hackneyed lore of the beginning. For they die in the telling. So let them be. Let them smolder. Let them smolder in the living fire beneath the ashes. Through the infusion of the myth's of "the hackneyed lore / of the ginning" (evoking the sexual overtones of the relationship between Adam and Eve in "Den's farm," as subtly recreated by Michael Cherub in his early lyric, "Sophia" (see Ozone, 2011) his personal story, Okra's "To Pave" is transformed into an archetypal tale of poet-muse relationship as predicted in Graves theory of poetry.

Not surprisingly, in "Diamond," the poet-spouse-and-lover presents itself as one in which the artist is possessed by the divine afflatus, theorized in his treatise, *On the Sublime*, as the primary source of inspiration for poets, by the Greek teacher of rhetoric and literary critic, Longinus (ca. 1st or 3rd century AD). Akin to the notion of "spirit arrest," in transatlantic African communities in the Caribbean and the Americas, the idea of the divine afflatus is common among the 'Jog and elsewhere in Africa where artistic and professional creativity is often attributed to possession by a deity of madness and creativity such as Gaga (the patron of medicine-men), among the Gobo (See Mum, 2009).

The speaker in "Diamond" is not only maddened by his love but clearly possessed by the 'Jog congener of the Gobo deity of creative madness, Gaga: eke it's said a madman hears; I hear trees talking like it's said a medicine man hears. Like ABA, the hero of Herman Melville Mobs Dick, he is not just maddened by his monomaniac complex (or neurotic fixation of on a <https://assignbuster.com/the-mystic-drum/>

single passion), he is indeed "madness maddened." But Okra's wifeless is imbued with the kind of tortuous coyness that has provoked, in global amatory poetry, some of the most sublime evocations of the "cruelty of the rose" (in other words, the cruelty of the alluring object of love, as depicted in Skibobs Limits 'V, quoted above). She is singularly unyielding: And I raised my hand? y trembling hand, gripping my heart as handkerchief and waved and waved-and waved but she turned her eyes away.

The reader who turns to "The Mystic Drum" from "Diamond" and "To Pave" will immediately recognize the reification of the tension between the lover and the beloved as an extended metaphor for the exploration of something that lies in the pits of epistemology, already defined above as the branch of philosophy that studies the nature of knowledge, in particular its foundations, scope, and validity. Far beyond the realms of the tremulous stirrings of the love-struck heart, the lyric takes us into the highest cerebral realms of abstruse philosophy. As the poet's muse, the beloved is not only the presiding lady of the poet's art but his link to the ultimate source of all knowledge of reality? his link to the world beyond the quotidian, the wellspring of true knowledge of the essence of reality.

From a deep structure analysis of the meaning of the poem, it seems evident that the epistemological underpinnings of "The Mystic Drum" go well beyond the culture wars of African postcolonial nationalist search for identity through such ideologies as Negritude, Pan Africans, the search for the African Personality, the African Renaissance Movement, and the like. The deft modernist deployment of tropes in the poem is one that cuts across cultural and national boundaries, inviting comparison with systems of thought which <https://assignbuster.com/the-mystic-drum/>

Okra himself may not have ever even contemplated, including the statement from the Zen philosopher Aching Yen, with which the present commentary begins. There is, of course, no intention here to suggest that Okra was directly influenced by the oriental philosophy of Zen or that he was schooled under any Zen master.

Although I have enjoyed close personal friendship with Okra since 1967 and have elsewhere remarked on the Zen mode of apperception in his poetry (Ozone, 1991), it never occurred to me to ask him about any contact he may have had with Zen philosophy as I did not think that it was necessarily of any value to establish any such a contact, until my most recent interview with him at the University of Massachusetts, Boston (August, 2011). After listening attentively to my reading of Zen master. Aching Yuan's statement with which the present article begins, Okra readily agreed that it applies very well to his intention and the structure of the experience of the