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We Shall not Let Him Die! - A Linguistic Appraisal of Okigbo's 'Heavensgate'

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An Introduction

This paper responds to a call from an anthology of poetic tributes to Okigbo, entitled Don't Let Him Die, edited by Chinua Achebe and Dubem Okafor. Actually, from the data available, not much work has been done in the volume of his poetry especially in his language use.

Okigbo, we know, was one of those few Nigerian powerful poets and a metaphysical one too, who shone like a star briefly and was put off, by his death during the Nigeria – Biafra war. During his short life, he was the pivot of an interplay of activities and experiences of life, which he harnessed to build up a volume of poems namely, 'Heavensgate', 'Limits', 'Distances', 'Paths of Thunder'. Okigbo, like Soyinka, is not an easy poet. This is attested to in A New Readers' Guide to African Literature:

His images are often personal and his symbolism complex, calling forth all the influences that have worked on him p. 448.

These influences make his images eclectic because he does not limit his sources for his choice of images or words, because he believes that poetry has a wider world. His sources, claims Funso Aiyejuna 1997:586, has no limit, time, region or race. Okigbo has this to say:

I think that I've been influenced by various literatures and cultures, right from Classical times to the present day, in English, Latin, Greek and a little French, and a little Spanish ('Death of Christopher Okigbo' in A New Readers' Guide To African Literature, p. 449.

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In addition to what he said, he was influenced by and his work affected by his childhood, in his little town Ojoto, where he interacted fully with his peers, fetched water, bathed, and even swam in the Idoto stream. Furthermore, his Christian upbringing accounts for the images drawn from the Bible. All of these sum up to result in the difficulty of his poems.

Okpewho 1985 shares the same observation with other critics as he asserts.

But what makes Okigbo's poem particularly difficult is that it reflects the complex mixture of cultural influences which the poet has undergone.Okigbo reminds us of the Anglo-American poet T.S. Eliot... Okigbo's poem here, like Eliot's, is composed of multiple symbols which are logically associated with one another.... p. 239

In his quest for self identity, Okigbo sees himself turn around to look at himself from the inside. He speaks in his interview with Marjory:

....And when I talk of looking inward to myself, I mean turning inward to examine myself (underlining mine). This of course takes account of ancestors.... because I do not exist apart from my ancestors.

(Marjory White Law, "Interview with Christopher Okigbo in A New Readers' Guide to African Literature. p.448.)

Poetry has given Okigbo a base for practising his traditional religion which he lamentably abandoned. This time, he becomes an idol worshipper of the river goddess, as his maternal grandfather, who has been the priest of the shrine, and who is reincarnated in Okigbo. This vehement turn-around of Okigbo's, exposes his disgust for the Christian religion, particularly the Catholic Church which had nurtured him. It is no wonder that Romanus Egudu comes up with his extreme view of Okigbo as an anti-ecclesiastical, anti-clerical

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poet. It is a pathetic situation of one trying to serve two masters. The Bible makes it clear that it is not possible. Such a person must hate the one and like the other. To show his new found love in the goddess Idoto, Okigbo had to castigate the Catholic Church in order to project the traditional worship that he had evidently abandoned, hence his being 'a prodigal'.

Heavensgate

"Heavensgate" has five sections, each of which expresses a deeply felt experience by the poet. In the main title of the section "Heavensgate", the poet presents himself at the 'gate' through which he can, if allowed, to enter the place of his desired worship. Entrance through the gate spells out his admission into the arena of actions. For this poet, the first step is "The Passage", which is the first poem in this section, followed by "Initiations", the other poem of this section. The third is "Water maid", followed by the fourth poem "Lustra", and finally the fifth poem, "Newcomer". Although these poems were written at different periods of the same year 1961, there is a flow of thought and organic connection and link binding the five of them, with one flowing into the other.

Thematically, the poet in 'The Passage' presents himself as a prodigal to the water spirit of his roots, his revered muse and goddess, after many years of non-recognition of her. Yet he had been a passive adherent of hers in his early years in the village of Ojoto.

In his quest for knowledge and being, in consonance with the religious path carved for him by his parents, he imbibed Christianity, without anyone seeking his consent, and without any feeling of abandonment of the goddess by him. This Christian religion which had been a gateway to education and subsequent civilization and modernity, nurtured Okigbo, who after many years of acquiring western education, felt a hollowness which could only be filled by his return to the river goddess. He is at the passage stripped of all alien and foreign influences, /naked I stand/, begging to be re-admitted into her fold of worshippers.

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The second poem, "Initiations", discloses how he had been initiated into the foreign religion and he vents his disgust on the 'culprit' whom he believes is the epitome of both the religion and education that result from it. He derides this religion by categorizing its hierarchy using geometric figures.

The third poem, "Watermaid", is couched in the poet's mystical experiences of the appearance of the watermaid. Although her visit is brief and dazzling, it puts him into an ecstasy. This flash point is also an indication that his prayer has been partially accepted by the water spirit.

The fourth poem, "Lustra", brings to limelight the essence of the ceremonial and final purification, which he draws from his solitary visit to the hills. 'Hills' in religious worship connote sources of spiritual strength. Whereas Soyinka climbed the Idanre hills, Jesus, the Judeo-Christian leader, went to the mountain (the Sermon on the Mount), and finally concluded his mission on the Mount Calvary. Although Okigbo tries desperately to sever himself from the Christian religion, in favour of the traditional, it is difficult for him to achieve. That is why he, in the next but last poem, is involuntarily jerked into the time for worship - 'the Angelus', and he makes the sign which reminds him of the death of Jesus on the cross.

In the fifth and last poem "Newcomer", the struggle for his disengagement continues and he sees the whole phenomenon as 'a mask over his face, and believes that using vulgar, rude and offensive words regarding the activities of that 'abhorred' religion would do the magic,/ protect me from them fucking angels/lines 11 - 12! However, the tension is assuaged by the birth of his daughter to whom he dedicates this section - "For Georgette". Her birth at this point in time, is the synthesis of the inner struggle between the foreign and traditional religions. This birth of her daughter is a mark of victory. He now/stands above the noontide/above bridge head /



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(lines 6 and 7).

A close examination of the linguistic arrangement in these poems, namely graphological, the phonological, the grammatical and the semantic, reveals that although no definite structural and stanzaic pattern can be discerned in terms of a uniform line stanza, there are obvious strikers in the use of capital letters for the first one or two words of the lines which begin each of the poems. These are thereafter, followed by normal small letters. Let us examine the following:

From The Passage

- i. BEFORE YOU, mother Idoto p.3
- ii. DARK WATERS of the beginning p.4
- iii. SILENT FACES at crossroad p.5

From "Initiations"

- i. SCAR OF the crucifix p.6
- ii. AND THIS from Jadum p.8
- iii. AND THIS from Upandru p.9

From "Watermaid"

- i. EYE OPEN on the sea p.10
- ii. BRIGHT p.11
- iii. AND I WHO am here abandoned p.12
- iv. THE STARS have departed p. 13

From "Lustra"

- i. SO WOULD I to the hills p.14
- ii. THE FLOWER weeps unbruised p. 15
- iii. THUNDERING drums and cannons p. 16

From "Newcomer"

- i. TIME for worship p. 17
- ii. IN THE CHILL breath of the day's waking p.18
- iii. I AM standing above the noontide p. 19

These undeniable cases of graphological foregrounding are pointers to the reader. The poet is split between two religions, the foreign and the traditional. He prodigally makes a u- turn to embrace the

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traditional worship of his abandoned waterspirit. Thus, the consistent capitalization of words as shown earlier, drops a message of highlighting and projecting the worship of Idoto, in preference to the now jettisoned Christianity which is represented by small letters. There are profuse uses of the ellipsis (...) and dashes at the end of many lines which indicate that information has been hoarded by the poet. By the nature and content of the poem, the poet is flooded with information that he has decided to withhold.

Below are some examples:

- "The Passage" - /give ear and hearken ... line 12
 /festivity.... in black/ line 34
 /its loveliest.... fragment/line 44
"Initiations" - /the rhombus – brothers and deacons line 30
 /self seekers – all who are good, line 32

Whereas the dashes are used by the poet to elucidate some thoughts, the markers in print contribute to a better understanding of the poem, and further task the reader's imagination to have a feel of the poet's predicament.

In addition to the **graphological signals**, the poet uses italics for the whole of what could be termed a **quasi stanza** in "Lustra", where he sees himself as a 'Messiah' of the traditional religious worship of Idoto. Because he thinks his **messiahship is the functional type**, different from that of the **Christian religion**, he uses the italics contemptuously to show unfulfilled prophesy:

Messiah will come again
After the argument in heaven
Messiah will come again ... lines 19-21 of Lustra.

Another use of italics is in "Newcomer" where it is meant to denote the non-participant persona whose birth coincides with the crucial moment of his mental squabble that aids him in arriving at a successful spiritual journey. He therefore dedicates that section of his poem to his daughter – *For Georgetown* 18. He imitates the

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At the phonological level, one would not expect any melodic rendition, given the thematic nature of these poems. Nevertheless, to ease the tension in the poet who is in the throes of a spiritual expedition, there appear bits of expressions which may not be intentionally arranged to give melody, but are rather seen as an oasis in a desert area.

Furthermore, he shows his total disgust for the Christian religion by his use of italics – thus

*/Anna of the panel oblongs/
/protect me/
/from them fucking angels: /
/protect me/
/mysand-house and bones /lines 10– 14 of 'Newcomer'*

In "The Passage", where the poet **dramatizes** his penitence by his position, i.e. both his nakedness and **bare foot**, he is / leaning on an oil bean /, /lost in your legend/.

— □ □ □ — —
/Leaning on an oil bean
— □ □ — □
Lost in your legend (lines 5-6)

Not only is there rhythm **here**, **there is also** beauty, harmony and melody. There is the chiming of the lateral sound/l/, in leaning, oil, lost, legend.

At the syntactic level, the **sentence arrangements** distort the usual sentence order of syntax, **which** is S V O C A. Although this thwarting of the syntactic order of sentences is the prerogative of poets, he has lavishly employed this license in protesting against the Christian religion. From "The Passage" through to the last poem "Newcomer" we find:

Adv complement The poet in his eclectic tendency, used to use the complement



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/Before/you, mother Idoto/
/naked I stand/
adj subject verb

Subject

Verb adj adv
Ordinarily the sentence order should be I/ stand/ naked/
before/
complement
you mother Idoto

/Under your power wait I/
/on bare foot/ (The passage line 7-8)
/out of the depths my cry/
/give ear and hearken/ (The passage line 11-12)

In many such lines are thrown up bits of noun and prepositional phrases without verbs to anchor them e.g.

/SILENT FACES at crossroads/
/festivity in black.../
/faces of black like long black/
/behind the bell tower/
/into the hot garden/ the passage lines 29–32

The reader is given the **onerous task** of fixing the poet's communication point because of the telegraphic nature of his syntax. This emphasizes his protest **that he does not see anything worthwhile** in the Christian religion, **even though** he had been 'dragged' into it by his parents, without his consent.

Some statements are paradoxically made e.g.

At confluence of planes, **the angle**;
Man loses man, loses vision; (underlining mine)
... Life without sin, without life (underlining mine) lines 14
and 15 of Initiations.

The poet, in his eclectic tendency, uses the biblical paradox of 'he

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who loses his life (for Jesus) will find it and he who finds his life will lose it'.

He employs parallel structures, which are meant for emphasis e.g.:

Count the sand by waveland abandoned
Count her blessing, my white queen
"Watermaid" (lines 34 and 35)

Both NPs "sand and blessing" are syntactically related to the verb – "count" and are also paradigmatically related. Both NPs are semantically related under the general feature /+ free gift/, unquantifiable bestowed.

All of these go to reinforce the view that the worship of Idoto is supreme. Apart from parallel structures, the poet uses repetition of sentences, emphasis, as well as endows it with musical artistry e.g.:

The STARS have departed,
The stars have departed
("Watermaid" lines 42 and 45)

Here, the poet emphasises the unexpected and flash departure of his idol – the watermaid, such that he is left mesmerized, as he asks/and I – where am I? (Line. 46). He yearns to catch her as he pleads with an unseen tracker:

Stretch, stretch, O antennae
to clutch at this hour
("Watermaid", lines 47 and 48)

To establish his new mission as a poet as well as a prophet, he resorts to dialogue in a linguistic combat between him and 'a village explainer', Upandru, whose name, perhaps, is a corruption of the Christian name Andrew. Upandru's admonition states:

AND THIS from Upandru
Screen your bedchamber thoughts
with sun-glasses,
who could jump your eye
your mind window,



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And I said,
The prophet, only the poet.
And he said: Logistics.
(Which is what poetry is)...
And he said to the ram: Disarm.
And I said
Except by rooting,
who could pluck yam tubers from their base?
(‘Initiations’, lines 65 – 77)

This is a warning from the adherents of the Catholic religion that people should be careful and beware of people that could sway their thoughts from the truth. But the poet retorts: “The Prophet, only the poet.” He counteracts the command given to the ram, to disarm, and he asks a rhetorical question – ‘who could pluck yam tubers from their base?’ With this, he makes a claim that any religion which is not entrenched in the base of its worshippers cannot be effective. In this, we find a comparison between the Christian religious worship and that of Idoto, the water spirit.

In ‘Watermaid’, the poet is so taken in by the exquisiteness of the water spirit, which makes him qualify her as
salt-white surf on the stones and me
maid of the salt – emptiness
sophisticreamy.

The word ‘sophisticreamy’ is a coined word, used to describe the beauty of the watermaid. Her beauty is further described as
with the armpit-dazzle of lioness,
wearing white light about her;
and waves escort her,

He addresses her as ‘my lioness’
crowned with moonlight,
so brief with mirror and me.



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(watermaid lines 17-26)

At the lexico-semantic level, words are astoundingly used to convey some strange phenomena. Some words originate from Christian religion against which he protests, while others originate from his nostalgia for the traditional worship of Mother Idoto.

In the passage, the poet stands before the “watery presence” of Idoto. This expression bastardises the use of statues before which the Catholics pray. This is in order, as a way of projecting a village stream which for him is a more potent image of worship. The expressions 'hearken', 'heavensgate', 'dark waters of the beginning', are all from the biblical myth of creation. His assessment of the Christian religion is that it is only glamorous with 'rays', and 'violet', which 'foreshadow the fire that is dreamed of land/rainbow on far side, arched like a boa bent to kill/foreshadows the rain that is dreamed of/ (lines 13 – 17). The relationship of the statements could be put thus:

{Rays ... }	foreshadow	the fire	that is dreamed of
{rainbow .}	foreshadow	the rain	that is dreamed of
			(Lines 14 -17)

The NPs, 'rays and rainbow' are syntactically related to the VP “foreshadow”, and also are related structurally to the 2nd NPs, the fire and the rain. All of them share the general semantic feature /+ natural/, +atmospheric / and by extension, /+ destruction /, as accounted for in the creation myth when the world would be destroyed by fire and flood. The poet thinks that Christianity is like a rainbow with beautiful colours but beyond it, it is / arched like a boa bent to kill/.

He goes on to describe himself as 'a wagtail to tell the tangled-wood-tale and a sunbird to mourn a mother on a spray' (lines 20 – 23). He mourns his departure from the mother Idoto while the “tangled-wood-tale” is the totality of his experiences in the jettisoned tian

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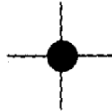
Christian religion.

In "Initiations", he makes use of the symbol, the crucifix, which was used in initiating him into the foreign religion and he describes it as a 'scar over the breast', 'by red-hot blade'. This is because the crucifix represents the cross, with the red-hot blade showing its spiritual implication.

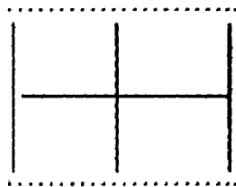
He uses geometric figures to describe the effect of the sign of the cross:

At confluence of planes, the angle:
man loses man, loses vision
(lines 14 and 15)

Diagrammatically, the confluence of planes is where the angles meet



The confluence of planes and the angles of the straight lines are at the position of the heart, which produces faith; and faith itself controls man's reasoning which results in 'man loses man, loses vision'. He closes up the outer parts of the straight lines, which give a square thus:



The square encloses such categories of people in Christian religion which the poet tags 'morons, fanatics

and priests and popes, organizing secretaries and party managers'. The poet further creates another geometric figure – the rhombus, in which he groups the brothers and the deacons, the liberal politicians and the self-seekers about whom he says, 'all who are good doing nothing'.

The last of the geometric figures is the one he terms the quadrangle, which houses 'the rest – me and you'. Okigbo has disgustingly shown his distaste for this foreign religion by classifying the hierarchy of the Catholic Church into geometric figures, thereby showing his

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preference for his traditional worship of Idoto.

In "Lustra", the poet longs for purification, by visiting the hills. This is necessitated by the brevity of the watermaid's appearance, which signals a non-acceptance of his repentance, leading to his seeking to purify himself further. Going to the hills or mountains is synonymous with a solitary and spiritual encounter with one's creator.

The poem "Newcomer" introduces the time for worship. Through a reflex, the poet recognizes and obeys the call for the "Angelus" and makes a sign which reminds him of 'calvary and of age of innocence'. Here the poet replaces a woman of unparalleled holiness and dignity, the Blessed Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus Christ, with his own mother Anna, and asks the latter to protect him, in place of 'pray for us:

Anna of the panel oblongs,
Protect me
From them fucking angels;
Protect me
my sandhouse and bones
(*'Newcomer'*, lines 10 – 14)

The phrase 'fucking angels', is a horrible collocation of words, and it is an unprecedented high level of vulgarity and ribaldry to refer to pure spirits with such an expression. His juxtaposition of the worship of the water spirit Idoto (signified by the thundering drums) and the Angelus produces a synthesis which for him is "Georgette" (a synthetic fine silk material). This spiritual and mystical operation of his, coincides with the news of the birth of his only daughter, in the cold weather of May's morning. He dedicates this section of his poems to the baby – For Georgette. This fusion of the physical and the spiritual brings success to the poet and he expresses it thus:

I am standing above noontide
Above the bridgehead
Listening to the laughter of waters
that do not know why...



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....Listening to incense –

Lines 23 – 26 of 'Newcomer'

The lexical items 'noontide' and 'bridgehead' above which he stands signify success. There is also a collocational disorder in 'standing above noontide' and 'listening to the laughter of waters'. The VP 'standing', ought to take an object with the feature/+ solid/whereas it takes the object 'noontide' with a feature/+liquid/. Moreover, the NP laughter equally ought to take a complement word with the feature/+ human/, whereas it takes 'water', a word with the feature /- animate/; All these aberrations underscore the poet's theme of dilemma.

In summary, Okigbo's poems pose a linguistic challenge to readers, but only the dogged will eventually untie the knot and enjoy fully the beautiful linguistic arrangements displayed therein. This paper will produce a multiplier reader effect, because many more people will now shake off the phobia associated with the esoteric and eclectic nature of Okigbo's poems.

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