

Utopianism and Myth in African and Maori Fiction:
responses to underdevelopment ?

This paper is a study of six works, three African and three Maori, for a literary conference where a subtitle was 'the utopian impulse in African fiction'. In varying ways these works reveal a utopian impulse, which in each work shows the need for an improvement to the status quo that's depicted. Full-scale utopian texts have become rare, whereas anti-utopias have been frequent: Brave New World, 1984. So I have taken the word 'impulse' to let me off discussing full-scale fictional blueprints of an ideal society. I don't in fact know whether any have been written in the Third World.

What I intend showing is that in extended fictions that aim to suggest a better way for the contemporary society shown, realistic narrative proves inadequate. So myth and legend are drawn on by these writers, who with similar inevitability show how hybrid post-colonial fictions are.

It's understandable that utopian writers find myth convenient to draw on.

Myth and utopianism exist in the realm of the imagination: they're the same order of narrative. (Frye, 33-41) As Sidney said, "the poet affirmeth nothing", so the writer of myth and utopias may be free from fact and realism.

I will discuss three works briefly: the Yoruba Fagunwa's tale, translated by Soyinka, of seven great hunters braving the forest of a thousand daemons (the title is The Forest of a Thousand Daemons) to gain a benefit for the community; Patricia Grace's Potiki , where a Maori farming community resists the encroachments of a land developer and is strengthened accordingly; and a short story by another Maori writer, Bruce Stewart, about a confrontation over a public playing area. I shall spend more time on two novels that are responses to the Nigerian Civil War of 1967 to 1970 and so incorporate considerable bleakness, Ali Mazrui's The Trial of Christopher Okigbo and Wole Soyinka's Season of Anomy. Finally comes the smaller-scale optimistic The Whale Rider by Witi Ihimaera. All the works show that for Third World authors purely realistic narrative fictions

lack the rhetoric for social change², and for some the coloniser's language isn't entirely satisfactory.

Fagunwa's The Forest of a Thousand Daemons is the only text that predates both the Biafran War and the Second World War. The three hunters who survive the daemons attain the good town of Mount Langbodo (not Heaven, but close enough to hear the cocks crowing) and return with a message, an explicit moral: "let the people of your land love one another that they may value self-respect". (Fagunwa, 137)

The tale is told by a story-teller (an oral narrator who chats with his audience, both here transferred to the page). He calmly presents the supernatural as normal: and Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress is blended harmoniously with the Yoruba allegory. There's no doubting of the truth of the Yoruba/Christian belief in a life to come.

In Patricia Grace's Potiki a Maori family enlarges a farm on ancestral land which a developer wants to turn into a holiday resort with a marina. The family resists, strengthened by their Maori traditions and religion. The reader gains insights particularly through the eyes of a crippled child born of a simple-minded girl Mary and perhaps a carved male figure come to life

for her. The child, the youngest son of the title, is murdered but the novel ends with his subsequent vision of Maori being ready for a militant reply. The last page is in Maori, with only the context to help readers who don't know the language: which is for them both a reproach and a challenge. So this novel, though predominantly realistic, moves in and out of the mode of legend and fantasy, without fuss as a mother tells the legends or the the child has his visions.

Bruce Stewart provides my example of the attenuation of the utopian mode with the story 'Patu Wairua'. At an open-air confrontation a Maori warrior of the previous century appears. The narrator comments "it was as if someone had come back from the dead". But it's not legend or fantasy: this is a young man who has been studying his people's traditions and now applies them. The 'as if' marks a possible utopianism of today, laying hold on those values that endure and putting them again into practice.

Similarly, Potiki asks readers to³ appreciate there's a saving spirituality in Maori tradition.

The next novel, Mazrui's The Trial of Christopher Okigbo makes an even greater claim on the reader's ability to suspend disbelief. Like Fagunwa's, Mazrui's novel assumes the veracity of a life to come, this time an animist/Muslim one. However, this is for a literary reason, to provide a suitable setting for a judicial inquiry into the rights and wrongs of the famous Nigerian poet Okigbo's having taken up the soldier's sword, instead of his writer's pen, and being killed fighting for Biafra.

The political debate is central, but there is also a love interest included to provide a plot and make the political talk acceptable. Since both young people are killed, the author has at the end to provide them with heavenly rewards. Here I find a serious weakness in that the text turns sentimental.

The novel opens with a frame-narrator, the real author, declaring he is remembering a friend who died in a car accident near the time the poet Okigbo was killed fighting for Biafra. The novel proper starts with a flashback in the life of the friend, who is given the name Hamisi, recalling an amorous night with a young Nigerian woman in London, and then the fatal road accident occurs. Action shifts to the after-life, in Other-Africa, where male elders dispense justice and in a vast stadium spectators watch men play soccer matches between the centuries. The players are rewarded in their changing rooms with massages by naked young women to whom they then make love. Hamisi, a devout Muslim, is very embarrassed.

The serious business in Other-Africa is the trial of the title: was Okigbo right to take up the sword instead of his poet's pen? An interesting legal case is instituted. Hamisi is made counsel for the defence, a test for him as he has been frail in his earthly life. He calls up as evidence the young woman from London, who has also died. What he doesn't know is how she died, and the opposing counsel destroys Hamisi's case by letting the truth appear. Aisha, in the fiction the first Hausa woman MA, was pregnant as a result of that brief encounter. During the Civil War she was in the south of Nigeria, where she was raped and murdered in retaliation for what had been done in the North. Hamisi meets a rapid death early in the novel, to live again in Other-Africa. But Aisha's excruciating suffering comes for the reader near the end of the novel because Hamisi's ignorance compels her to recall the agony of her death.

This is a novel of ideas, but I am focussing on the human error that the text endeavours to give imaginative life to. The young couple are shocked and humiliated : the elders impose a heavy sentence on Hamisi for his blunder. He is to haunt a lonely baobab tree in Gabon and frighten little children straying near. (Mazrui, 145) Here, it is the novel's last page, the young woman pleads to be allowed to join him and share in his punishment, for it was her miscalculation too. 'And so it is that in a desolate part of Gabon, on a windy evening, children sometimes hear voices reciting poetry to each other. It sounds like a man and a woman.

*...Then we must sing, tongue-tied,
without name or audience,
Making harmony among the branches.*

(ibid.)

Apart from the poetry, that ending is winsome: I find it disconcerting. Legend or fairytale is served up to provide a conventional happy ending, as if the love interest had merely the job of leading the fiction-loving reader into the political discussion. Once that is resolved, such readers can be placated with a sentimental coda. I find the end embarrassing because the woman is made a stereotype of tender forgiving love.

A non-Nigerian reader appreciates the novel's final balanced judgment of the Civil War, for both Biafra and Okigbo 'Not Proven'.
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Wole Soyinka, however, had no reason to be tactful or tolerant about the war which he spent in a Federal Government prison. The next novel we discuss is his Season of Anomy, a realistic satirical novel whose characters embody ideas, if unevenly. (Maduakor, 147-9) This novel contains elements of utopianism and is structured on an ancient Greek myth.

Season of Anomy begins with a description of a utopian socialist society, Aiyero, which the main character is invited to join This is derived from a real, similarly named successful farming community in Nigeria which has been described as Quaker-like (by Molly Mahood). (The fictional Aiyero, though, is animist, not Christian.)

A quaint anomaly, had long governed and policed itself,

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was so singly-knit that it obtained a tax assessment for the whole populace and paid it before the departure of the pith-helmeted assessor, in cash, held all property in common, literally, to the last scrap of thread on the clothing of each citizen - such anachronism gave much patronising amusement to the cosmopolitan sentiment of a profit-hungry society. A definitive guffaw from the radical centres of debate headed by Ilosa, dismissed Aiyero as the prime example of unscientific communalism, primitive and embarrassingly sentimental. To the governments that came and went it posed neither threat nor liability.

(Soyinka, 6)

The narrator appears edgily combative and the novel compels readers to grapple with the unresolved question of whether myths are immature thinking or provide deep insights. (Bidney, in Slochower, 16-17) Here there is clearly some indeterminacy as to whether a utopian community can endure realpolitik. In fact what Soyinka is doing is including negative criticism at the start only to show its inadequacy later, so the novel shows these dismissive terms should be used as praise.

As for the myth element, the main characters are the ancient Greek figures, Orpheus the wonderful musician and his wife Eurydice, both considerably changed as Ofeyi and Iriyise ("dew on the feet", Izevbaye, in Gibbs,). Orpheus won his way down to Hades to persuade the gods there to return him his wife. Complications arise at the ending of Soyinka's novel: is it tragic, like the Greek, where Orpheus fatally looks back and loses his wife for ever, or is it hopeful ?

Ofeyi's profession is writing publicity songs for the big business enterprise the Cartel, which markets cocoa. These songs are sung by his woman friend Iriyise, who captivates audiences. Iriyise is lost to Ofeyi when the Cartel Chairman realises the subversive subtext of Ofeyi's songs: she is kidnapped. The Cartel now moves to halt brutally the missionary endeavours of the men of Aiyero in spreading better labour relationships on job sites throughout the country. Slaughter becomes common and Ofeyi at length accepts the use of weapons and their user, the Dentist. (This may be seen as providing a slanted parallel with The Trial of Christopher Okigbo: an implicit validation of Okigbo's action in real life, and going beyond the canny verdict in Mazrui's novel of "not proven".)

The Nigerian critic Izevbaye discusses how in Soyinka's writing the pen and the sword have often been placed in trembling balance rather than in direct opposition. (Izevbaye, in Gibbs, 249-50.) Iriyise is rescued, and the adventure story concludes. Orpheus lost Eurydice, but the Nigerian text leaves matters less determinate. One critic noted Iriyise as having a role as earth goddess, and recently another critic, Balogun, suggested Ofeyi and the Dentist represent respectively creative and destructive aspects of the powerful Yoruba god Ogun, so their association means well for the narrative if it is read in myth terms. (Black American Literature Forum 1989)

The novel ends with a rescue and the heroes going on to fight another day. Such a romance ending replicates readers' hopes of a brave new world eventually. But even at the level of fictional chronology the endless note of scepticism may be heard. The rescued Iriyise, Ofeyi's mistress, is in a coma and her future health is uncertain and her voice lost, but the next young woman is on hand for Ofeyi. A utopia whose young women's heroism barely raises them above being sexual playmates does not convince. This is reading mimetically: the text also works in a legendary mode when the heroine is presented as goddess-like, a Proserpine figure, which isn't cheering for a feminist reading either.

The novel requires the pondering reader to decide how skewed Ofeyi is from both the mythical Orpheus and Soyinka the living poet and dramatist whose productions have often seemed subversive. The text at times openly suggests self-referentiality, though I haven't time to follow this.

At the level of realistic thriller the novel may be seen as ending without much hope, with an upbeat conclusion that is merely surface. The mythic readings make an extremely precarious balance in their reliance on art inspiring victorious heroic acts, even if by Orpheus transmuted to Ogun. The text produces fissures of scepticism. The choice there sometimes is between right and might, this novel fearfully suggests, may have dissolved into the seemingly irresistible claim that might is right.

But the very unevenness of the text, the possible inability of the components of contemporary thriller, utopian impulse and mythical theme to mesh successfully together, has value. The novel exemplifies the pluralism of modern texts as it examines the workings of a utopian impulse in politically oppressive

circumstances. The difficulties of real life are refracted in the text.

By being a fictional community derived from a real one, Aiyero validates Mannheim's prediction that modern utopias will approximate more closely to the events transpiring in this world: "utopias are often premature truths" (Mannheim, 223-4, and 183) Dystopias, antiutopias, seem likely as well: the novel also conveys a keen sense of the great historical process of disillusionment, in which according to Mannheim every concrete meaning of things as well as myths and beliefs is slowly cast aside. (ibid, 233)

So very likely the great Grecian myth of the wondrous power of music won't work and communities of missionary-minded idealists and altruists can be imagined as sending their enthusiasts only to martyrdom. Women, as Soyinka, and also Mazrui, appear to indicate, fit only a limited number of roles. The logic of the ending is that social justice is to be achieved out of the barrel of a gun, turning the oppressors' own violence back on them. This is the condition of anomie, to suggest desperate remedies.

The reader wants economic specifics from this novel and is not satisfied. Moreover, the novel mixes optimism with pessimism, rather as late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century European imaginary voyages combined a radical critique of contemporary societies with a conservative sense that utopia can't be found in this world. (McKeon, 249, 418) This applies also to the Mazrui.

Now, finally, as a contrast, let's consider the third Maori novel. In The Whale Rider Witi Ihimaera openly works a myth of origin into a modern story with affection and some humour. He takes his readers into his educated confidence in this post-mythological time: real present time and mythological time are wittily related to one another with some sleight of hand. The legend is of a certain part of the East Coast of the North Island of New Zealand whose tipuna (founding father) came over the sea on the back of a whale. That same bull whale, now aged, reappears in this present time in the everyday world and beaches itself in order to die where it had long ago carried the tipuna Paikea. A young girl revives the whale by telling it she is that ancestor: "Ko Paikea"/I am Paikea. (Ihimaera, 104) She has been named after him by her strongwilled great-grandmother, who is of a different tribe from

her husband the old chief. His tribe⁸ never had women as deserving to be leaders, so he is bitterly disappointed that his grandson's wives bear only girls. Women are to be wives, and that's enough. Now his great grand-daughter struggles out to the huge beached whale in the night storm and clambers on to it. It's epic bravery: the heroic individual is acting for the community, not for herself. The whale revives and swims out to sea again with the girl on his back, and then dives. She is wonderfully found floating alive on the surface three days later. The old chief had seen the whale's death as meaning the tribe's death, and now since both live he accepts that his mana, his power and influence, must pass on to his great-grand-daughter.

The old bull whale was cleverly manipulated by his consorts, who had urged him to the surface and then towards the shore. This touching and humorous sequence parallels the old chief being cajoled by his resourceful wife.

The parallel is readily seen and the deliberate artistry is evident. Then the author like an oral narrator pokes fun at his own storytelling (possibly anticipating criticism from his rambunctious listeners). The whales are anthropomorphised and their underwater passage is presented with selfconsciously comic hyperbole. The whales are beneath the ice of Antarctica:

The light played gently on the frozen ice layer and bathed the undersea kingdom with an unearthly radiance. The giant roots of the ice extending down from the surface sparkled, glowed, twinkled and flashed prisms of light like strobes in a vast subterranean cathedral. The ice cracked, moaned, shivered and susurrated with rippling glissandi, a giant organ playing a titanic symphony.

Within the fluted ice chambers the herd of whales moved with infinite grace in holy procession. As they did so they offered their own choral harmony to the natural orchestration.

(Ihimaera, 81)

This seems a clear instance of intertextuality, with the narrator of the whale's progress signalling kinship with the narrator in Ihimaera's earlier larger novel The Matriarch, of the experiences of very grand Italian opera. The ludicrousness of the quoted passage suggests to me oral narration, with a jocular storyteller

laughing along with his or her responsive audience, who are alert to hear how traditional material will be applied, so I suggest that what a New Zealand critic sees as unconscious self-parody is to be read as conscious good-natured self-mockery. (Williams, 123)

What the critic calls overinflated in the language I would call necessary rhetorical elaboration to unsettle reader's common sense so that they will accept the marvellous. In contemporary terms an aspect of this is the child's heroism: hers isn't a self-centred pursuit of individual greed. That has been seen in men with chain-saws cutting off the lower jaw of a stranded dying whale. But a context of socio-economic crisis may lead to problems in fictions generated by that crisis.

Certainly the text's descriptions of the return of the ancient sacred whale show strain: "crashing through the skin of the sea.... its companions began to breach the surface also, orchestrating the call with unearthly music". (ibid. 93) Then, after a gap in the text, the narrator returns to his low demotic mode: "I zoomed on my bike through the night and the rain, rounding the boys up". (ibid)

The problem is that the text is functioning in a both-and mode when commonsense declares this to be unacceptable. The novel offers myth as observably true at the same time as sense impressions are taken as trustworthy, whereas for modern readers myth is taken as imaginative play or truth of a different order. Which is to take a risk, that some readers accept.

The critic Belsey makes a pertinent remark here: 'myth offers a unified vision that shows readers the limitations of modern perception, leaving common sense not behind but aside'. (Critical Practice) When the sacred whale beaches itself, the chief bluntly gives the men a cultural lesson:

Once, our world was one where the Gods talked to our ancestors and man talked with the Gods our ancestor Paikea ... was given power to talk to whales and to command them ... But then man assumed a cloak of arrogance and set himself up above the Gods he started to drive a wedge through the original oneness of the world. In the passing of Time he divided the world into that half he could believe in and that half he could not believe in. The real and the unreal. The natural and the supernatural. The present and the past. The scientific and the fantastic. He put a barrier between both worlds and everything on

his side was called rational and¹⁰ everything on the other side was called irrational:--[So the stranded whale is both natural and supernatural]--a reminder of the oneness which the world once had ... joining past and present, reality and fantasy ... It is both, he thundered, and if we have forgotten the communion then we have ceased to be Maori.

(Ihimaera, 95-6)

This sermon makes a sweeping claim, and I will not presume to say whether this passage in Mannheim invalidates it: "[they] take refuge in the past and attempt to find there an epoch or society in which an extinct form of reality-transcendence dominated the world, and through this romantic reconstruction it seeks to spiritualize the present. The same function, from this point of view, is fulfilled by attempts to revive religious feeling, idealism, symbols, and myths: (Mannheim, 233)

On the whole The Whale Rider is persuasive in conveying an earnest search for new truth: the obvious fictionalness, the chapter divisions, the illustrations, the straightforwardness of the first person narrator Rawiri (David) make the novel acceptable in its modern transforming of an old myth of a male ancestor. Mythical and quasi-historical time, and readers' time are blended with the bull whale of legendary history (twelve hundred years ago) surfacing and diving in the nuclear-bomb-tested Pacific ocean of today, and being rejuvenated by a modern child's telling him she is the ancestor. In the reader's imagination they exist in the mythopoeic present as in the mythological past.

In conclusion, these six texts show the vigorous hybridity of post-colonial writing. There is no apology, and no need for one, for appropriating either the colonisers' narratives, The Pilgrim's Progress or the Islamic after-life, or for using the language of the colonised without explaining what it means. Except for the early Fagunwa novel, which is an allegorical romance and so never realistic, the texts all veer away from their basic realistic mode. Mazrui's apart, they don't offer confident closures but instead an open-endedness: debate continues, the issues are unresolved.

I suggested the end of The Trial¹ of Christopher Okigbo doesn't fully satisfy: indeed with that and Season of Anomy, both works responding to a national disaster, formal imperfections convey a sense of the inadequacy of fiction to provide answers in the confused real world. I think Soyinka's text shows an awareness of this, but Mazrui's doesn't.

I won't presume to evaluate the conclusion of his debate about the Civil War, but just refer you to an essay by Achebe in Morning Yet On Creation Day. (1975) Achebe finds it 'a curious novel...there is no condemnation of war as such, only of poets getting involved "some lives are more sacred than others"'. (Achebe, 53) Achebe implies Mazrui has imposed his theories on the historical reality, which was simpler.

In Grace's Potiki the rural setting hardly allows the tensions of city life to be seen: only in the rapacious developer Mr Dollarman and the eldest daughter of the farm who is a law student at university and so is militant for Maori rights. The fragments of Maori legend and the visionary child provide an imaginative resource to oppose socially disruptive energies.

The Whale Rider quietly indicates the changing society of Maori on the North Island East Coast, with population outstripping land and the young heading for Bondi and King's Cross. Traditional lore is being lost: the text recalls some, riskily and whimsically, because it's no longer as natural as air. But the magic realism works, and a tribe learns to accept a woman as rangatira, chief.

The short story by Stewart may seem the most accessible to us because it does not leave the realistic mode. 'It was as if someone had come back from the dead'. They hadn't: instead there came a diligent student of tradition. But it's only a short story: if its writer had wished to write an extended fiction with a utopian note about Maori today he might find he had to summon myth or legend.

So I've argued that Third World writers of novels that include a glimpse of society improving need at times to move out of realism and into myth, romance or legend.

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