

**MYTHOPOESIS, CHILDHOOD AND HISTORY IN BEN OKRI'S *THE FAMISHED ROAD* AND EMMANUEL DONGALA'S *LES PETITS GARÇONS NAISSENT AUSSI DES ÉTOILES***

**INTRODUCTION**

This article shows how in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and Emmanuel Dongala's *Les petits garçons naissent aussi des étoiles*, mythopoesis, childhood and history interact to engage with politics and society. Ben Okri is a London-based Nigerian writer. Although he wrote several books, *The Famished Road* (1991) is the novel that brought him to the attention of the public. The novel's main character and narrator is Azaro, a boy who observes and comments on the socio-political developments around him. Emmanuel Dongala is from Congo-Brazzaville. He is mostly well-known for *Jazz et vin de palme*, a collection of short-stories. His novel *Les petits garçons naissent aussi des étoiles* (1998) is, like *The Famished Road*, the narrative of a boy's gaze at the social events that take place in his country. Both novels also draw on mythopoesis.

Mythopoesis can be defined as a discourse that draws its substance from myths or ritual paradigms and cultural artifacts (Jeyifo in Soyinka, xxx). Ato Quayson describes it as "an invocation of myths, folklore and other aspects of indigenous beliefs" (Quayson, 121). Ben Okri and Emmanuel Dongala respectively in *The Famished Road*<sup>1</sup> and *Les petits garçons naissent aussi des étoiles* adopt a mythopoetic mode by using African myths to shape the characters of Azaro and Matapari, their protagonists. Azaro is an *Abiku*, a child who in Yoruba mythology is caught up in the cycle of life and death. Matapari is the last born of triplets. In many African cultures, twins or triplets are said to be special children and are attributed special powers. In the novels, these two extraordinary children are the eyes through which the readers see African social reality, here referred to as history, respectively on the eve of political independence in Ben

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<sup>1</sup> I will also be using *Songs of Enchantment* (1993) this novel's sequel.

Okri's text and after independence in Dongala's novel. The theoretical framework in which this discussion will take place is Postcolonial criticism. What is clearly at stake in the above mentioned novels is not only the survival of African cultures in the face of modernity, but also the idea of nation building, two projects alluded to by Fredric Jameson when he characterizes Third-world texts as allegorical, as always including a dimension reflective of "the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society" (60). I will start with a discussion of mythopoesis and childhood, then I will examine Azaro and Matapari's reading of African modern history.

## I. MYTHOPOESIS AND CHILDHOOD

At the beginning of *The Famished Road*, the main character Azaro introduces himself. He is a spirit-child who comes from a mysterious and magic land of which he gives the following description:

In that land of beginnings spirits mingled with the unborn. We could assume numerous forms. Many of us were birds. We knew no boundaries. There was much feasting, playing and sorrowing. We feasted much because of the beautiful terrors of eternity. We played much because we were free. And we sorrowed much because there were always those amongst us who had just returned from the world of the living. They had returned inconsolable for all the love they had left behind, all the suffering they hadn't redeemed, all that they hadn't understood, and for all that they had barely begun to learn before they were drawn back to the land of origins. (3)

This quotation describes a widely held belief in most African cultures according to which unborn children live as spirits in a pre-world (Jones, 1). The quotation also reflects the belief that these children-spirits sometimes have a problematic relationship with our earth, the land of the living. In that regard Azaro adds that

[t]here was not one amongst us who looked forward to being born. We disliked the rigors of existence, the unfulfilled longings, the enshrined injustices of the world, the labyrinths of love...the heartlessness of human beings, all of whom are born blind, few of whom ever learn to see. (3)

As suggested above, Azaro is an Abiku, a child which in Yoruba mythology is incessantly shuttling between life and death, or put in mythological terms, a child who is always traveling between the land of the living and the spirit world. However, in spite of the grudge that he bears against human existence, Azaro decides to break that cycle by not returning to the land of the spirits, which causes his spirit-friends to haunt him continuously. Actually, the world of *The Famished Road* and its sequel *Songs of Enchantment* is in fact a hybrid world, where humans interact with spirits, devils and monsters. Azaro, in his half-spirit and half-human condition notices that “It was not humans who come to the market places of the world. Spirits and other beings come there too” (16).

Emmanuel Dongala’s *Les petits garçons naissent aussi des étoiles* also includes an extraordinary boy. Delivered by his mother two days after a pair of twins, he is actually considered to be the last born of what should have been triplets. Twins and multiple births in Africa have been and continued to be considered extraordinary (Renne, 2001). If they were not outright treated as demonic and disposed of immediately after their birth (Bastian, 2001), they were treated as super-humans beings, sacralized, and associated with special rituals, because they were seen as blessings for their parents and could make them rich. At the beginning of the novel, Matapari describes how his belated birth was interpreted in the small town, namely by Mama Kossa, the midwife who helped his mother deliver him:

Cet enfant n’aurait pas dû être né...en fait, il n’était pas dans le ventre de sa mere quand celle-ci était venue accoucher, il n’y avait que les jumeaux...Ce n’est que quand sa mère était rentrée à la maison que lui, l’esprit d’un ancêtre n’ayant pas réglé tous ses comptes ici-bas et mort de façon brutale, donc flottant sur les bois et sur les eaux, avait saisi l’aubaine de la poche laissée vide par les jumeaux pour s’y glisser et s’y installer. (20)

[This child shouldn’t have been born... as a matter of fact, he wasn’t even in his mother’s belly before. There were only the twins... It was only when his mother went home that he, surely an ancestor who hadn’t had

time enough to settle a score in his lifetime, floated through the woods and over the waters and crept into the sanctuary left empty by the twins and settled there.<sup>2</sup> ] (13)

Matapari's special nature is further emphasized by Mama Kossa when she addresses him directly, enumerating the extraordinary gift he would be endowed with. He has abilities superior to those of a normal person.

'Enfant surprise, tu entendras des sons et des mots que d'autres n'entendront pas.' Elle prit la feuille de manguier transformée en stilligoutes et me déposa une goutte verte de jus de feuilles sur chaque paupière ' enfant esprit des eaux et des forêts, tu verras des choses et des phénomènes que d'autres ne verront pas...tu sentiras des effluves et des fragrances que d'autres ne sentiront pas, tu flaireras des événements que d'autres ne devineront même pas.' (21)

[Child of surprises, you shall hear sounds and words others will not...Spirit-child of the waters and woods, you shall see wonders that others will not...Ancestor-child who has come back among us, you shall smell sighs and fragrances others will not, you shall sense events others won't even guess.] (13-14)

Matapari is thus an exceptional person. Under certain circumstances, he can float in the bush, in forests and mountains like a spirit (42). He once finds himself in a country of dreams ready to be dreamt by the people they are intended for and manipulates some of the dreams to disturb their recipients. He once plays this trick on the local Catholic priest and his twin brothers.

Matapari also has healing powers. This special disposition enables him to cure one of his brothers about whose medical condition even doctors and other spiritual healers were desperate. Later he says:

J'avais sauvé la vie de mon frère par une simple imposition de ma main gauche sur son front alors que que la médecine moderne exercée par le scalpel de notre médecin avait échoué, et j'avais réussi cela contre l'avis

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<sup>2</sup> This translation and subsequent ones are by Joel Réjouis and Val Vinokurov. *Little Boys Come from the Stars*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001.

d'un prêtre catholique qui avait fait un stage dans les écuries du pape.  
(78)

[I had saved my brother's life simply by placing my left hand on his forehead, while the modern medicine practiced by our doctor's scalpels had failed; and I had managed this against the opinion of a Catholic priest who had completed an internship in Rome in the Pope's stable.] (58-59)

Matapari and Azaro are unusual boys, each of them in his own way. Azaro is a spirit-child and Matapari is a triplet, and as such are endowed with occult powers in African mythology. By creating them, both Ben Okri and Emmanuel Dongala have shown what Richard Priebe has called a "mythic consciousness" (14 ). How can we now interpret or justify this choice?

Okri and Dongala are here using the resources of African folklore. This could be for cultural purposes. Modernity in Africa has come with tremendous changes. In the space of three generations, African people and cultures have been transformed. Their methods of learning have changed for they now have to go to Western style schools. Many Africans have abandoned their gods and the religious practices of their ancestors. Yet in spite of the violent assault of modernity, part of the soul of the African has often remained loyal to the traditional system of beliefs. This situation has often made Africans syncretic people. Some intellectuals have consciously rejected traditional myths, arguing that they now belong to an "archaic mentality" or to an "old world" (Thomas and Luneau, 298). Others, by cultural nationalism, still cling to whatever remnants of the traditional culture are still available. And as it appears, writers such as Okri and Dongala, by reworking these myths and using them in literature, are among those Africans who have adopted a stance of cultural resistance not only to insure the survival of the traditional myth, but also in order to claim a certain originality for the African person and their

culture, as well as a reaction against a certain cultural alienation and frustration brought about by modernity<sup>3</sup>. In *Songs of Enchantment*, Azaro actually has this vision:

Behind the... procession came the representatives of our spirit world, illustrious ancestors with caravans of wisdom, old souls who had been reborn many times in the magical depths of the continent, and who had lived the undiscovered secrets and mysteries of the African Way- the way of compassion and fire and serenity: the way of freedom and power and imaginative life; the way that keeps the mind open to the existences beyond our earthly spheres, that keeps the spirit pure and primed to see the rich possibilities of living...the way that makes it possible...to understand the language of angels and gods, birds and trees, animals and spirits. (159-160)

This is a vision that in a very idealistic way describes what Ben Okri thinks was the quintessential African philosophy of life, a life mainly characterized by its permanent relationship with the spiritual world. Azaro and Matapari are thus two children of mythology. Entwined with mythopoesis, a poetics of childhood is also at work in *The Famished Road* and *Les petits garçons*.

According to Allison James, the meaning of childhood as a concept varies both cross-culturally and through time. But a working definition would be one describing childhood simply as the early years of human life (28). This stage of life has inspired so many literary texts that one can speak of a poetics of childhood. Roni Natov defines the poetics of childhood as a literary approach that “involves the images that cluster around childhood, the voices and tones, the smells and textures that make up the larger landscape

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<sup>3</sup> Brenda Cooper relates this to the debate on the nature of postcolonial cultural politics in her discussion of myth and magical realism. She says that magical realist writers are oppositional to cultural imperialism. See Brenda Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye*. London & New York: Routledge, 1998, p.29.

The same has been said about Achebe, J.B. Clark and Wole Soyinka by Chidi Maduka with regard to these authors' use of the ogbanje/abiku theme. See Chidi Maduka. “African Religious Beliefs and the Literary Imagination: Ogbanje and Abiku in Chinua Achebe, J.P. Clark and Wole Soyinka. *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 22. (1987):17-30.

that recalls to us our earliest states of mind”(1). The two texts I have studied are in large part informed by their author’s experiences. The images in these texts also at times remind the readers of their own childhood. But the question I would like to answer here has been inspired by Roni Natov and is as follows: “How has the freshness through which a child sees the world been approximated? (1)” In other words, how do the texts reflect the inexperience and the intellectual naiveté with which childhood is often associated?

In *The Famished Road*, Azaro’s experience does not reflect the innocence and the naiveté characteristic of the children of his age. Seen from a normal or ordinary perspective, Azaro is in fact a boy whose vision of reality is stark. In spite of his young age he is able to observe and analyze people’s social conditions:

As I walked down our street, under the persistence of the yellow sun, with every thing naked, the children bare, the old men with exhausted veins pumping on dried-up foreheads, I was frightened by the feeling that there was no escape from the hard things of this world. Everywhere there was the nudity of wounds, the stark huts, the rusted zinc abodes, the rubbish in the streets, children in rags...machine-gun noises, the air vibrating with poisonous heat and evaporating water from the filthy gutters. (161).

Azaro hardly speaks about playing. He often complains about hunger and is conscious of the destitution of his family. He knows that “The world is tougher than fire or steel” (71).

Azaro’s language is well beyond his age and educational status. He is only beginning primary school. So the extraordinary images that he sees and that he comes to terms with are not realities a normal child is familiar with. He says for example:

All around were silent figures in great masks. All around me were ancestral statues. Wherever I rode I saw immemorial monoliths with stolen faces and bearded lapis lazuli eyes. The monoliths were of gold, self-luminated in the darkness. One of the statues moved and turned into Madame Koto. Her golden wrapper fluttering about her, she climbed on to a caparisoned horse of the night and commanded the other statues and monoliths to follow her. *Famished...*(139)

In *Songs of Enchantment*, he has this other vision:

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I beheld the awesome sight of the converging spirits of the continent. I saw them in their transfigured procession. I saw the great spirits of all the ages from all over the world...bringing their spirit-mysteries, their oceanic wisdom, their gnomic lore distilled from countless incarnations, bringing the jeweled terror of their immanent foresight and their understanding of the secret forces and balances in the universe. (*Songs...* 40-41).

The issues evoked here by Azaro as well as the scenes he describes are worthy of some specialist. Moreover, I would agree with Eldred Jones that Azaro's narrative style often makes no concession to the natural expectations from a boy who is hardly out of primary school (2). Actually the above quotations contain vocabulary that a boy Azaro's age would hardly use. The reason is that he is an Abiku and has extraordinary powers that not only enable him to see reality (and non-reality) in a different way, but also enable him to describe it with loftiness. However, there are moments where Azaro remembers that he is a child. But examples similar to those just discussed abound in the text and show that Azaro's gaze at reality does not have the naiveté and the spontaneity characteristic of childhood.

In Dongala's novel, although Matapari's knowledge is remarkable for his age (he is twelve), he often shows the naturalness of an ordinary child. He is proud of his dishonest uncle Boula Boula's propulsion in the highest spheres of the political party. But he at the same time admires his father's critical attitude toward his uncle and the regime. Likewise, as a normal child would do, he is happy to have been part of the general uprising that brought about democracy, even if he does not understand what democracy means. He tries to smoke cigarettes like adults to show to himself and to other people that he is a "tough guy." But one of the passages that best illustrates Matapari's innocence and gullibility is when he witnesses an act of adultery between his uncle and tantine Lolo, the wife of a local shopkeeper. He does not understand and thinks that the two adults are fighting:



Le lit se mit à s'agiter de haut en bas, de droite à gauche, une bourrasque avec des oh à peine soupirés du côté de tonton tandis que du côté de tantine, les non, non s'étaient transformés en oui, oui, avec le i longuement et lentement expiré. J'avais peur, très peur, je ne savais pas ce qui se passait. Se battaient-ils? Se faisaient-ils mal? (66)

[The bed began to bounce up and down, left to right, a flurry of painful oh's and ah's issued from Uncle's side, while Auntie's no, noes, had become yes, yeses, with the s breathed out slowly and at great length. I was scared, very scared. I didn't know what was happening. Were they fighting? Were they hurting each other?] (48)

The poetics of childhood are definitely more pronounced in Emmanuel Dongala's novel than in Ben Okri's. Dongala's *Matapari* in his thoughts and deeds always reminds the reader that he is a child, although an unusual one due to his precociousness. On the other hand, Azaro sounds like an adult in a boy's body.

We have here two different images of African childhood. Azaro is an unhappy child whose life contrasts with that of *Matapari* who seems quite happy. If we leave aside Azaro's mythical condition that makes him a special being, his social and psychological circumstances reflect the condition of many African children. Azaro often goes hungry. He works in Madame Koto's bar for food. He once got lost and walked the streets for a few days, and was taken in by strangers before being returned to his parents. Azaro would have been an ideal prey for all sorts of child exploiters that thrive on the African continent. The child-soldiers, protagonists of Ken Saro Wiwa's *Soza Boy* (1985) and Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah n'est pas obligé* (2000) were drawn into rebel armies in those contexts. *The Famished Road* in fact looks like a plea for endangered childhood in a hostile world. Azaro's spirit-friends relentlessly remind him about that:

Voices of the children singing in an intense blue chorus all around...voices of my spirit-companions, luring me into the world of dreams, away from this world where no one cared about me. (18)

Emmanuel Dongala's *Matapari* is the symbol of another type of African child. This one is better off. His family is not very rich, but they are not as poor as Azaro's.

Matapari never complains about hunger and he and his brothers often watch movies on video cassettes. He is a good soccer player who once had a platonic love relationship with Alédia, the daughter of a local Lebanese merchant. Matapari is living a comfortable life. Dongala designed such a character probably to show that African children should not always be perceived as a subject of pity and that childhood in Africa is not necessarily a “hell” of a penury from which children should try to escape (Okolie, 30). Dongala’s childhood poetics is similar to the one used in early African novels such as Camara Laye’s *L’enfant noir* (1953) and Bernard Dadié’s *Climbié* (1956) where childhood is evoked and remembered as a time to enjoy. Ben Okri in *The Famished Road* and Emmanuel Dongala in *Les petits garçons* introduce the reader to two boys conceived in mythology but who have different fortunes in life. But although Azaro and Matapari’s childhood experiences are different, they both represent initiation into the reality of existence. In a way, they are given a narrative voice and agency. And in the novels, the boys precisely break out of their mythological condition into existence to look at the history of the societies that they live in, either in a visionary way or as it unfolds around them.

## II. WITNESSING HISTORY

Marcellin Boka sees history as the element that determines the form of the narrative, its internal and thematic data (Boka, 1991, p.125). So, by “history” I not only refer to the time periods in which both *The Famished Road*, and *Les petits garçons*...are set. Okri’s novels are set toward the end of the European rule of Africa, while Dongala’s is set after the independence of African countries, but all three rely on the fictional realities that Azaro and Matapari witness. Those realities show Ben Okri and Emmanuel Dongala’s concerns about African societies that they find deficient in many serious respects.

In *The Famished Road* Azaro notices that the society he decided to live in is prey to corruption and violence, two facts that can seriously hinder people’s aspirations to well

being in a country. One of the characters who symbolizes corruption is without doubt Madame Koto. At the beginning of the novel, she is a roadside bar tender and a friendly and reliable member of her community. But on this eve of independence, she has acquired a new mentality. From a road side bar tender, she has become a capitalist who always wants to make more money. Azaro describes Madame Koto's progress this way:

[She was] growing bigger and vaster than the night. She was bloating, her face was mask-like, and her skin peeling away, revealed a yellowness underneath. As the lights went on and off, she kept summoning me. I noticed the eunuchs around her, washing her skin in the milk of young girls, bathing her swollen body in the oil of alligators, washing her feet with rosewater. (*Songs...*40)

The image that stems from Madame Koto's description is one of a gradual alienation. She is transforming herself into someone else, difficult to recognize, a rapacious person, indulging in practices reminiscent of heartless rulers. It is no wonder Madame Koto joins the party of the rich during the battle for power when the country becomes independent.

Another debilitating deficiency that Azaro notices in society is political violence. On this eve of independence, political parties send terrifying masquerades out in the streets to terrorize people into voting for them.

At night the masquerades...bounded up and down the streets with whips and sticks, pikes and machetes. Terrorizing us, banging on our doors, they shouted our names in guttural voices. They warned that they had people watching us in the polling booths to report on who we had voted for in secret. The political masquerades, the thugs and the supporters invaded our lives and charged the air of the street...People died from inexplicable poisonings. Meetings were held by elders of the street to discuss the new terror, but the political masquerades disrupted one meeting and set the house on fire. We became afraid. Every day we listened to endless rumors to find out which side had become stronger overnight (*Songs*, 71)

Curiously enough, Azaro foresees the future of the black continent through these events:

And while all this happened the future of Africa burst on me and I saw tanks rolling over the wounded roads, I saw armored trucks and jeeps and

great military lorries over the wounded roads, I saw swarms of soldiers in dark places of the country. (*Famished*, 193)

We have here a new world characterized by violence and fear and the loss of communal feelings and the respect due to age. That new socio-economic and political context is not conducive to ordinary peoples' well being. Young Azaro and his family are an example of people to whom modernity brings nothing. The mother almost gains nothing from her petty market trade. The father's efforts are also fruitless. As a result the boy often goes hungry. His mother summarizes her condition in these terms: "God smiles at me and my face goes raw. Sometimes I cannot speak. My mouth is full of bad living" (*FR* 443). Azaro's vision of Africa shows a society where independence more than likely is not going to bring economic prosperity and peace for all. The rise of individuals like Madame Koto for whom exploitation and oppression is a way of life is not a good prognosis. Similarly, the violence created by rival factions and the flitting images of war that come to Azaro's mind foreshadow actual gruesome political developments in Africa. Although Azaro decides to stay among humans, the events that he witnesses show African societies as *abiku* societies, plagued with instability. The boy's decision reflects Ben Okri's wish for a stable Africa.

Azaro's visions in *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment* are facts that *mutatis mutandis* are confirmed by Matapari, another gifted boy, witness of the socio-political life in his country, the Congo about two decades after independence. In *Les petits garçons*, Matapari tells the readers stories he was told by adults and also stories he witnessed first-hand. His stories also illustrate the evils that plague the society he lives in. These ills include political instability, dictatorship, militarism, personality cults and tribalism, problems typical of postcolonial Africa. When *Les petits garçons* opens, it is about twenty years after independence was acquired by the Congo. But Matapari has been told the history of his country, from pre-colonial times to the present. He knows that Europeans came to Africa, created a slave trade, then decided to take possession of the

country to have direct access to its resources and to exploit more. He knows that was called colonialism. Then came independence. Since then, many rulers have succeeded one another as the head of the country, via coups d'états. He also knows that the current leader of the country is a soldier who has put in place a "revolutionary system" based on an ideology called "scientific socialism." The regime wants to do away with the mentality of slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism and imperialism. It is a communist regime that prevents people from praying, reading, singing and thinking without the prior consent of the Head of State.

The celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of independence is when Matapari, aged ten gives the reader a first hand account of other aspects of the regime: its dictatorial nature and its observance of the personality cult. For example, people are forced to pay tribute to the leader when their lives are scarred by social difficulties. The young observer remarks:

Le défilé avait commencé par les jeunes chômeurs et oisifs de la ville; ils avaient été saisis dans une rafle une semaine auparavant, habillés en bleu de chauffe, tondus et rasés puis commis à défiler derrière une grande banderole rouge portant en jaune " Malgré l'impérialisme et le néo-colonialisme qui nous a réduits au chômage et à la misère, nous soutenons fermement notre révolution et son guide." Puis suivaient les vendeuses de marché, les gros et les petits commerçants, les élèves et les étudiants; ensuite, il y avait les fonctionnaires et divers corps de métiers comme les pompiers, les infirmiers, les médecins, tous marchant derrière d'énormes portraits du chef suprême de la révolution. 121.

[The parade started off with a procession of the city's young unemployed idlers; they had been picked up in a raid the week before, were dressed up in blue, given crew cuts and clean shaves, and then compelled to march behind a long red banner with yellow letters that read: "Despite the imperialism and neo-colonialism that has confined us to unemployment and misery, we firmly support our Revolution and its Guide." Next came the women from the market, various merchants, high school and university students; then there were the officials and different groups representing the professions, such as firemen, nurses, doctors, all walking behind huge portraits of the Supreme Leader of the Revolution.] (93)

The personality cult reaches its climax when on that occasion, the central committee of the party decides to elevate the Head of State's military rank from captain to marshal for life (meaning president for life), and to impose a mandatory financial subscription on all workers to enable the state to send a giant portrait of the Head of State into space:

Ce buste, jour et nuit, immobile au-dessus de nos têtes, sera notre vigilante sentinelle au zénith du firmament et tout enfant de notre nation, regardant cette nouvelle étoile scintiller parmi les constellations de la voûte céleste, dira en la pointant fièrement du doigt: "Notre guide suprême veille sur nous!" (127)

[Day and night, this bust, fixed above our heads, will be our faithful sentinel at the zenith of the firmament, so that every child of our nation, gazing upon this new star sparkling among the constellations of the celestial canopy, will point to it and say: "Our Supreme Guide watches over us!"] (97-98)

Of course, such a socio-political context is not conducive to the spread of good moral values. That is a context in which only the corrupt can flourish. Matapari's uncle Boula Boula sadly exemplifies this situation. He becomes wealthy by using the funds allocated to the organization of the thirtieth anniversary for his own benefit, but he also works his way up the political ladder to become the deputy chairman of the party. But as often happens in that kind of regime, he is later demoted from his position after a public trial where he and other dignitaries of the regime are made to confess that they had plotted to overthrow the regime.

The regime Matapari lives in is also of a repressive nature. The boy's father is arrested for daring to write a political tract demanding democracy and the end of the single party's monopoly and an inviolable constitution. To the riots that ensue due to the boy's father's popularity and the fact that people had been waiting for such an opportunity, the government responds with utmost brutality. Matapari reminisces:

Aujourd'hui au moment où je vous raconte cette histoire, je ne me souviens plus que des cris, des larmes et du sang de ceux qui, piégés sur le pont de la Madukubékélé, finissaient noyés dans la petite rivière où ils se jetaient pour échapper à la mitraille. Je me souviens des gens écrasés, du

bruit sec des os qui se rompaient, des thorax broyés dans le piétinement sauvage d'une foule en panique. Je me souviens du sifflement des balles, des odeurs, de la fumée lacrymogène, des cris, des cris, des cris... On n'a jamais su combien de morts il y eut ce jour-là. On n'a jamais su combien de morts la petite rivière avait charriés vers le grand fleuve. La rumeur disait que la soldatesque présidentielle n'avait cessé de tirer que parce qu'ils avaient vidé toutes les munitions de la poudrière de la ville (227-228)

[Today, as I am telling you this story, I can only remember the screams, the tears and the blood of those who, trapped on the Madukutsele Bridge, drowned in the stream trying to escape the machine guns. I remember the faces of the people being trampled, the dry sound of bones breaking, the crushed rib cages in the savage stampede of a panicked crowd: Those who fell didn't have a chance. I remember the whistling bullets, the smells, the tear gas, the screams, the screams, the screams... We never found out how many people died that day. We never found out how many bodies this stream had carried off to the river. Rumor had it that the presidential guard had ceased firing only because they had used up all the ammunitions in the city arsenal... ](178-179)

These events make the regime give in and accept pluralist democracy. But in the elections that are subsequently organized, voters cast their votes along tribal lines. This is a behavior that Boula Boula, the narrator's uncle condones as he asks his brother-in-law to vote for him although they do not have the same political ideas. So this new democracy is threatened by a new evil: tribalism. African societies are not eager to understand the challenges of nationhood. Matapari was late in being born, but was ahead of his brothers in terms of understanding and apprehending reality. But Africa does not do the same in its relationship with other societies. A late comer to modernity, the black continent could have strived to catch up with other nations and even try to beat them. But Africa rather reproduces the abiku myth of endless return to the beginning through acts and events such as the ones that Matapari has described.

The facts that Azaro experiences in a premonitory mode and those described by Matapari have actually been the lot of Africa's recent history. Coups, fake revolutions, personality cults, artificial capitalism and tribalism have been the humus on which social

strife and civil wars have thrived. These ills have been the concern of most African fiction writers. But Okri and Dongala have addressed these issues within a poetics of childhood.

## CONCLUSION

Mythopoesis and childhood poetics have surely been for authors like Ben Okri and Emmanuel Dongala a means of finding their cultural, individual and personal roots. According to Maxwell Okolie, this strategy can have a therapeutic effect: “Recalling childhood experience amounts to revisiting and reconstructing the self, a remaking of a world with its sensations and events” (31). But *The Famished Road* and *Les petits garçons* are not “stories of private individual destinies” (Jameson 60), they are mostly concerned with postcolonial cultural politics and nation building. Both Azaro and Matapari, like other characters in other works of African literature, are witnesses to African history and through them the authors are perhaps trying to find a meaning to the African postcolonial experience. Using child protagonists can actually be another way of finding a meaning to that experience.

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