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The Living River: Ritual and Reconciliation in *The Famished Road*

Marissa Deane Compton

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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ABSTRACT

The Living River: Ritual and Reconciliation in *The Famished Road*

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In Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, rituals such as baptism are easily lost in the dense symbolism. The novel is, in the words of Douglas McCabe, a "ramshackle and untidy affair, a hodge-podge of social ideologies, narrative forms, effusive enthusiasms, and precision-jeweled prose poems" (McCabe 17). This complex untidiness can be discouraging for readers and critics alike, and yet "there is something contagious about the digressive, meandering aesthetic of *The Famished Road*" that makes the novel difficult to consign to confusion (Omhovere 59). Commonly considered post-colonial, post-modern, and magical-realist, *The Famished Road* deals with, among other things, spiritualism, family relations, and political and sociological tensions in Nigeria in the decades before its publication in 1991. These themes are depicted with a rush of symbols, and in such a clamor, baptism and other rituals may have trouble making themselves heard. And yet, paying attention to the repeated performance of baptism transforms this audacious, ramshackle novel into a story of liminality, alienation, and reconciliation, a story which celebrates these things as inevitable and necessary parts of life. As readers, we can use baptism to decode *The Famished Road*. In doing so, the novel develops a cyclical, ongoing narrative focused on the difficulties of and increased agency in liminality and the necessity of ritual, on an individual, familial, and socio-cultural level, in navigating that in-betweenness. I will begin by exploring baptism in *The Famished Road* in order to understand the performance and power of ritual. Here, ritual acts as a doorway, giving characters a chance to navigate liminality without removing themselves from it. This navigation gives them an increased understanding of how the world works and how they may operate in it. After exploring baptism as a ritual, I will examine Okri's "universal abikuism" and its connection to the flexibility of liminality.

Keywords: baptism, Nigeria, *The Famished Road*, Ben Okri, ritual, reconciliation, liminality

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my committee, Peter Leman, Aaron Eastly, and Jason Kerr, who read draft after draft and endured rambling meetings. Additional thanks to my parents, who taught me to pay attention and have opinions.

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The Living River: Ritual and Reconciliation in *The Famished Road*

In Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, rituals such as baptism are easily lost in the dense symbolism. The novel is, in the words of Douglas McCabe, a "ramshackle and untidy affair, a hodge-podge of social ideologies, narrative forms, effusive enthusiasms, and precision-jeweled prose poems" (McCabe 17). This complex untidiness can be discouraging for readers and critics alike, and yet "there is something contagious about the digressive, meandering aesthetic of *The Famished Road*" that makes the novel difficult to consign to confusion (Omhovere 59).

Commonly considered post-colonial, post-modern, and magical-realist, *The Famished Road* deals with, among other things, spiritualism, family relations, and political and sociological tensions in Nigeria in the decades before its publication in 1991. These themes are depicted with a rush of symbols, and in such a clamor, baptism and other rituals may have trouble making themselves heard. And yet, paying attention to the repeated performance of baptism transforms this audacious, ramshackle novel into a story of liminality, alienation, and reconciliation, a story which celebrates these things as inevitable and necessary parts of life.

Azaro, the narrator of *The Famished Road*, is an abiku, a combination of "the supernatural and the natural, . . . a spirit human being born to die again and again" (Ogunsanwo 44). He is a child that repeats a cycle of birth and death, tormenting his parents in order to return as promised to his spirit companions. Azaro explains, "We were the ones who kept coming and going, unwilling to come to terms with life. We had the ability to will our deaths. Our pacts were binding" (4). Azaro chooses to stay with his parents, refusing to will his death and breaking the binding pact with his spirit companions (*Famished* 5). Because of this choice, he lives with an "innate metaphysical or extraordinary consciousness as he 'often finds himself oscillating between two worlds' (Ogunsanwo 8), since 'one world contains glimpses of others.' . . . Azaro

apprehends both worlds simultaneously and finds them both real” (Ogunsanwo 44). He tells us, “We are the strange ones, with half of our beings always in the spirit world” (4). Azaro spends the novel navigating the liminality of being in the world of the living with a constant awareness of the world of spirits, spirits that are trying to return him “to the world of the Unborn, the place of fountains where [they, the loved ones] would be waiting” (*Famished* 4). Such spirits wish to reconcile with him as they only can when he becomes one of them again.

In the novel, attempts at reconciliation and negotiations with the otherworldly are enacted through ritual, which is unsurprising given the book’s cultural background. Wole Soyinka reports that “Each and every one of Africa’s religions is animated through negotiations—including symbolic—by the human entity with the forces that surround it, and the need to invoke, placate, or co-opt the forces of nature for the survival of his species” (Soyinka 130). In *The Famished Road*, the distance between Azaro and his earthly family, and Azaro and his spirit companions, is a force of nature that is invoked, placated, and otherwise negotiated through rituals. One of the most prominent rituals is baptism, which reconciles Azaro to only one of his central communities (his family or the spirits) at a time, making that community whole again, but in doing so distancing him from the other.

As readers, we can use baptism to decode *The Famished Road*. In doing so, the novel develops a cyclical, ongoing narrative focused on the difficulties of and increased agency in liminality and the necessity of ritual, on an individual, familial, and socio-cultural level, in navigating that in-betweenness. I will begin by exploring baptism in *The Famished Road* in order to understand the performance and power of ritual. Here, ritual acts as a doorway, giving characters a chance to navigate liminality without removing themselves from it. This navigation gives them an increased understanding of how the world works and how they may operate in it.

After exploring baptism as a ritual, I will examine Okri's "universal abikuisim" and its connection to the flexibility of liminality.

Although I am calling the bathing ritual in *The Famished Road* "baptism" (the connotations of which are usually Christian), I don't mean to imply that this is a primarily Christian tradition; though, of course, Christianity is not absent in the "intractable heterogeneity" of Okri's religiously syncretic novel (McCabe 4). The word "baptism" is of Greek origins and takes in a wide spectrum of rituals that include "immersion of a person in water, or application of water by pouring or sprinkling, as a religious rite" ("baptism" OED). The history of baptism is a long and complex one that spreads the globe. In Mandaism, a religion that recognizes many figures from Judaism and Christianity but rejects others like Abraham and Jesus, "baptism marks neither an initiation nor a passage. . . . Instead, baptism aims at reaffirmation of the cosmos, community consolidation, and a redrawing of boundaries to other religions. It also confers healing and purification, and it produces exorcism and interaction with benevolent spirits" (Buckley 159). In ancient Egypt, the Nile was believed to have "peculiar cleansing powers" and as such, a dead king had to "be purified by waters from Elehantine before he [could] go to the sky and take his place among the gods. . . . This belief in the life-giving power of water continued throughout Egyptian history well into the Christian era" (Barton 157-158). Somewhat similarly, Mayans have used baptism to cure illness (Hocart 41). And, as a final example, Sikhs are baptized into their community, after which they take upon themselves the markers of that community, including the long hair (Chilana 109). Baptism, as we can see, is a culturally diverse tradition.

While all of these baptisms may play in the syncretism of *The Famished Road*, two baptismal practices in particular must be noted. The first, from Catholicism (the most populous

sect of Christianity in Nigeria), is represented throughout the novel. In Catholicism, baptism begins with “the sign of the cross” which “marks with the imprint of Christ the one who is going to belong to him” (“The Sacrament”). This baptism includes water that has been “consecrated by a prayer of epiclesis. . . . The Church asks God that through his Son the power of the Holy Spirit may be sent upon the water, so that those who will be baptized in it may be ‘born of water and the Spirit,’” and ends with the anointing with sacred chrism, a holy oil which “signifies the gift of the Holy Spirit to the newly baptized who has become a Christian.” In this tradition, it is understood that “children also have need of a new birth in Baptism to be freed from the power of darkness,” leading to infant baptism (“The Sacrament”). Many of these elements have counterpoints in Azaro’s baptisms, which frequently include special water, special soaps or oils, and a wish to “free” the child from an opposing power.

In Catholicism, as in most traditions, baptism acts as both initiation and cleansing for those who participate in it, but in *The Famished Road* baptism also functions as reconciliation. In initiation, one who has been outside of the community is brought into it through a ritualistic practice, symbolizing that they will let go of what has come before and commit themselves fully to something new. Baptism is initiation when it is occurring for the first time, but when it occurs repeatedly (as it does in *The Famished Road*), when an individual becomes a member of a community *again*, baptism is more like reconciliation; reconciliation being “the purification or reconsecration of a desecrated . . . holy place”; “Restoration, readmission . . . of a person to a church”; and “the action or an act of bringing a thing or things to agreement, concord, or harmony” (“Reconciliation” OED). All of these definitions are applicable to the case of Azaro, as he is a focal point of spiritual struggle and a highly sought member of various communities. This repetitive reconciliation is central to the second type of central baptism.

The second type of baptism that I believe Okri draws from directly, that of West African maternal bathing, adds the element of reconciliation to baptism. In Nigeria, bathing is a rite meant to tie a child to its new world. According to anthropologist Alma Gottlieb, “protecting against the medical risks engulfing young children requires an elaborate bathing routine that begins right after birth” (107). This bathing is partially to curb the many diseases that infants are exposed to, but is also “meant to address the spiritual status of the child” (Gottlieb 108). Within some of the Nigerian cultures, there is a belief that children still remember the spiritual realm, *wrugbe*, that came before this life and, because “*wrugbe* is envisioned as a space of economic plenty and social harmony . . . babies’ reportedly pleasant memories are said to regularly tempt [them] to return to that remembered world” (Gottlieb 106). The baths, then, function not only to cultivate physical health, but also “to wash off as much of *wrugbe* . . . as possible,” convincing the children to stay with their parents rather than return to the fore-life (Gottlieb 107). These baths are traditionally performed by the mother twice daily for at least the first year of the infant’s life (Gottlieb 108). While there are many interesting aspects of this bathing as a kind of baptism, for the purposes of this paper the vital elements of maternal bathing are the washing off of a previous life, the anointing with special herbs and soaps, and the initiation of the child into a new world and community (family). In this repeated act, the child is continually drawn away from the spirit world which is likewise continually tempting the child toward it.

It may seem greedy (and perhaps untidy) to try and claim all of these types of baptism, and yet Okri’s determinedly syncretic novel nearly demands this type of openness. As Douglas McCabe points out, “one of the great virtues of *The Famished Road* is . . . its intractable heterogeneity” (17). Okri insists on the messiness of liminality even in his central themes and myths. This is hardly uncommon in postcolonial studies. Stuart Hall notes similar messiness in

regards to the Caribbean diaspora, explaining that

the syncretized configurations of Caribbean cultural identity require Derrida's notion of *differance*—differences that do not work through binaries, veiled boundaries that do not finally separate but double up as *places de passage*, and meanings that are positional and relational, always on the slide along a spectrum without end or beginning. (Hall 7)

In postcolonialism, there is often not just a recognition of the messiness of meaning, but an embracing and employment of that messiness. Belief systems and culture (both of which ritual rests on) are never simple, but such things are more than normally complicated in areas of colonialism, where they all meet under imperial power structures. In such an environment, it may be unrealistic to assume that Okri will appeal to only one of the hundreds of kinds of baptism.

Instead, Okri seems intent on creating a new kind of baptism, one that draws strongly from Nigerian and Catholic traditions but nonetheless operates differently than both. This syncretism allows Okri to pull both from the initiation of Catholicism and the continual process of reconciliation in maternal bathing, incorporating elements such as the washing away of a previous spiritual life, the anointing to a new spiritual life, the use of water imagery (both sprinkled and immersive) from both. In doing so, Okri creates a hodgepodge ritual specifically focused on addressing the needs of those stranded between communities. By allowing traditional systems of belief, such as Catholicism and indigenous Nigerian religions, to integrate and influence each other, Okri argues for and models a society and world that are more syncretic in their approach to ideology.

While some postcolonial writers tend to focus maintaining traditional cosmology, Okri is centered on creating the possibility of a more syncretic worldview. Okri employs much Nigerian symbolism, ritualism, and spirituality, but this does not restrain him from employing the

symbolism, ritualism, and spirituality of other traditions. Even Okri's abiku mythology, a well-used and well-known aspect of African literature, does not "have an analogue or precedent in modern Nigerian literature" (McCabe 4). Esther De Bruijn explains that Okri consciously creates a history in which "traditional animist belief systems mingle together with Christianity, Muslim faith, secularism, and other imported ontological systems" (171). Although Douglas McCabe argues that the prominent belief system and ideology of *The Famished Road* is New Ageism, he nonetheless asserts that its "heterogeneity frustrates any attempt to unify the novel around a single ideological vector" (17). Baptism, then, is one of these intentional overlaps or reconciliations that Okri creates in his model of belief systems as complementary rather than contradictory.

In *The Famished Road*, the communities that Azaro is baptized into are complex and many, but essentially can be divided into the community of spirits and the community of the family. While as readers we have a limited view of why his spirit companions need Azaro, it is suggested that in some way they love him and recognize him as one of their own—in a violent, jealous, abusive way. We can see the spirits' desire for Azaro through their attempts to reconcile with him through kidnapping, killing, and forced baptism. Their motivations for kidnapping and baptizing him are sometimes to gain power, for Azaro is a "child of miracles" (*Famished* 9) and "good luck" (*Famished* 63), but also because they recognize him as one of their own and perhaps fear for him.

Similarly, Azaro's parents need him because they love him and do not want him to leave. Dad tells Azaro: "We have little to give you, but our love. You came out of our deepest joy. We prayed for you. We wanted you. They say you are an abiku child, that you care nothing for your parents. . . . But I do not believe them. You have wept for us and watered the tree of love" (337).

Azaro is the only child of his family, and there is the sense that he is what holds his parents together, that they would be incomplete without him. It is Azaro that makes Mum and Dad a family and gives them identity. In the novel, we never learn their names—they exist merely as Mum and Dad. Without Azaro they could not be who they are. Both communities, then, need Azaro because they love him and because he makes their community whole.

Unfortunately, the two communities are fixed points, distant from each other. As demonstrated at various points during the novel, moving towards one moves him away from the other, both physically and emotionally. Azaro cannot be fully part of his family and maintain his complete connection to his spirit companions, and having a connection with his spirit companions necessarily distances Azaro from his family. And yet, Azaro is “unable to choose between the world of the spirits and that of his human family” (Specht 34). He loves his parents—it is because of them that he broke his binding pact and did not choose death as an infant (*Famished* 5, 340). However, Azaro is defined by his relationship with the spirit world and is “intent on maintaining a connection with the invisible world” (Guignery 1). He cannot let go of who he is, and he is defined by two separate and irreconcilable spheres. Azaro is strung between these two communities and two loves and thus lives his life in a liminal space, a space that, by definition, characterizes the abiku. In the novel, baptism and other rituals are used to address the liminal space.

The liminality that characterizes abiku-ness is generally regarded negatively. In Nigerian culture, abikus are seen in one of two ways. The first hopes the abiku will “break free of his or her ties to the spirit world and stay”; the second suggests that the abiku “mocks as futile any and all human attempts to change his destiny” (Specht 36). In either case, it is expected that the liminality is uncomfortable for everyone involved and cannot exist forever. A choice between the

two, it is implied, is a positive and inevitable development. *The Famished Road* itself leans towards a negative portrayal of abikus at several moments. Dad says that Nigeria itself is “an abiku nation, a spirit-child nation,” and interprets this to mean that it “keeps being reborn and after each birth come blood and betrayals” (494). Here, the refusal to stay is characterized by blood and betrayal; liminality itself is identified as the source of hurt. And yet, while the novel does frequently portray the darker side of liminality, it nonetheless emphasizes through the constant baptism that in-betweenness is inevitable and necessary.

In *The Famished Road*, there are roughly six instances of baptism that are used to tug Azaro away from one community and toward the other. These instances are circular rituals, repeated spiritual conflict between the mortal and spirit communities. These rituals are circular because they occur again and again; not because they failed the first time, but because they require renewal. The circle begins when Azaro chooses to live in mortality and continues through baptism as follows:

1. Azaro is kidnapped by priestesses (bath)
2. Azaro is adopted by the policeman’s wife (baths)
3. Azaro is rescued by Mum (rain and baths)
4. Azaro is kidnapped and nearly drowned by the albinos (drowning)
5. Mum cleans and bathes Azaro upon his return (washing of feet and wounds and bath)
6. Azaro is held against his will by the pregnant goddess (bath and rain)

While none of these points on the circle are exactly the same, each includes a moment of baptism that acts as reconciliation to one community and movement away from the other. This is not a complete list. Its lack of completeness is partially due to the fact that *The Famished Road* is so rife with ritual that complete lists are nearly impossible. It is also incomplete because, as I will

argue, Okri advocates the use of ritual to navigate liminality as a vital and ever ongoing process. We will trace these rituals, then, as part of a continuing story of reconciliation between Azaro and his family and Azaro and the spirit community. I discuss these rituals in the order they appear in the book because I believe that the rituals build on and exist in dialogue with each other, each complicating the next. Further, I believe that when drawn in the circle they are, the baptisms act as a type of decoder for the book. It makes much that seems random appear more purposeful—Azaro’s ever changing relationship with his family and the world of spirits becomes increasingly clear. The rituals allow the book to form a more coherent narrative.

When Azaro is kidnapped and baptized by the pregnant priestess, he is pulled back toward the spirit community for the first time since his birth. He relates, “We arrived . . . and the woman. . . led me to a hut. It was really a bathroom. She made me wash. When she had dried me with a coarse towel, she smeared me all over with oils” (13). The priestess offers the precedence for the bathing ritual (the most common and easily identified form of baptism in the novel) by washing and anointing Azaro with oil. Just as Nigerian mothers use baths to “wash off . . . *wrugbe*” (Gottlieb 107), Azaro’s kidnappers attempt to wash off the remnants of his old life with Mum and Dad. Through the ritual of maternal bathing, captors claim him as a son, simultaneously appealing to rites of baptism; in doing so they attempt to remove him from his previous life symbolically and spiritually as well as physically.

Azaro is thus already teetering away from his family when he is kidnapped by the policeman’s wife, the one baptism initiator who is not directly connected to the spirit world or Azaro’s family. She instead uses the rite to initiate Azaro into *her* familial community, replacing her dead son. This baptism, then, creates something of a spiritual impasse, where neither of the two communities with a true claim on Azaro are the closest to him. When Azaro runs away from

the priestesses of the pregnant goddess, he is taken to a police station, where a police officer takes temporary custody of Azaro and brings him home. Following the same pattern as the priestesses, the policeman's wife bathes Azaro immediately after gaining custody over him. Azaro narrates, "His wife . . . made me bathe and dressed me in her son's clothes" (19). Unlike the priestesses, the policeman's wife repeatedly affirms her claim over Azaro, as part of their daily routine: "after a bath she would comb my hair and oil my face" (20). In performing this bath, the policeman's wife draws him further from his family, perhaps even more concretely than the spirits could, by claiming him as part of *her* family.

The policeman's wife's use of oil makes evident another element of baptism: that of anointing, represented in the text by the presence of oils, ointments, and herbs that are applied during or after ritualistic baths. This use of special additions to the baths (including oils) is tied back to the ritual of baptism in several ways. Catholic baptism concludes with the use of holy oil which "signifies the gift of the Holy Spirit to the newly baptized who has become a Christian," reminiscent of the oil the police man's wife uses on Azaro's face ("The Sacrament"). Similarly, in Nigerian maternal bathing, mothers use a particular black soap, which is only ever employed to wash children and corpses. This soap symbolizes the exit of an old world and an entrance into a new one, for "despite occupying opposite ends of the life cycle, [infants and corpses] are in fact intimately connected, as they are both seen to be in the midst of making a passage from one life to another" (Gottlieb 107). Because black soap begins with a base oil, like palm oil, it is further tied to traditions of anointing. The priestesses, policeman's wife, and goddess appear to be employing the ritual of baptism doubly, using it to usurp Mum's role in washing Azaro and to force him to go through yet another rebirth, thus reconciling him into their community in order to make it whole. The policeman's wife's use of these soaps in the repeated baths particularly taps

into baptismal tradition, as Nigerian mothers perform the ritual daily. In performing this ritual of motherhood repeatedly, then, the policeman's wife strengthens her claim over Azaro.

This cycle of being distanced from one community and reconciled to another continues when Mum rescues Azaro. By the time Mum comes for him, Azaro has had baptisms performed on him multiple times by two different communities; as a result, he is spiritually very distant from his family. It is the repeated use of baptism that binds the policeman's wife and Azaro to such a degree that Mum must reach out to a spiritual specialist to perform her reconciliation ritual. Desperate to find her son and retrieve him from the policeman's house, Mum goes to a herbalist who tells her that he is "in a house of ghosts" and "surrounded with such powerful spells [and] if Mum didn't act quickly I would be lost to her forever" (30). Although it does not say so explicitly, it seems evident that the baptism the policeman's wife performs is at least one part of this spell, perhaps even the one that is so powerful that the herbalist cannot break it: "That one is too powerful," the herbalist says, "Only lightening can break that spell" (30). Although the woman says that it is lightning that breaks this spell, it is accompanied by rain that came down "steadily . . . driving in water through gaps in the window frame" (*Famished* 26). Rain is frequently associated with baptism, as in the Judeo-Christian tradition, in which typology often aligns the "rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights" and the ensuing flood with baptism (Gen. 6:4, NRSV; Lewis 230, 228). Mum's rescue with rain and fire, then, invokes some of that baptism just as the bathing of the goddess and the priestesses do. Symbolically, Mum's rain washes away the past, allowing Azaro to emerge both unhurt and unclaimed.

While the rain works as a baptism in and of itself, Mum fulfills her side of the circular ritual by mirroring the actions of the kidnappers, further reconciling with Azaro by bathing him multiple times. The first mention of Mum bathing Azaro comes immediately after they return

home from the policeman's wife's house, the immediacy of the act implying that she is attempting to cleanse him from this experience. After they return home, Azaro relates, "Mum stripped the . . . clothes off me and later burned them in kerosene and herbal fluids. . . . On her return she seized my hand, pushed me to the bathroom . . . and made me bathe from a bucket of specially treated water" (29). Like the other mother figures, Mum forcefully bathes Azaro almost as soon as they are home and does so with "specially treated water," which is reminiscent of the oils and ointments the kidnapers used. This baptism and anointing is necessary because of the distance between Azaro and Mum, created by the baptisms performed by the priestesses and policeman's wife. Because Azaro had recently been exposed to two assertions of motherhood and reconciliations/initiations into disparate spiritual and familial communities, it is necessary for Mum to renew and reassert her claim as his mother and baptize him back into the family and the mortal world. Further, in washing away his physical past, Mum is metaphorically preventing his return to the spiritual past, just as other Nigerian mothers attempt to prevent their children from returning to *wrugbe* through washing.

While Mum's double diligence keeps Azaro safe for a long while, the spirits do use baptism to snatch Azaro back from the stability of his family into spiritual liminality. In this instance, Azaro is in Madam Koto's bar when he is kidnapped by inhuman (spirit) albinos who "sprang up and covered me with [a] sack" (*Famished* 111). Azaro understands that his capture and planned demise is the work of his spirit companions and explains that he could hear them "singing in [his] ears, rejoicing in [his] captivity and the fact that [he] would soon be joining them." Eventually, these mocking voices change to "the rushing of waves, the hissing of water," as Azaro and his sack have been thrown into a river (112). Here, the spirits attempt to drown Azaro, making water a direct gateway into the spirit community and his reconciliation with them.

This is especially relevant because baptism “literally [means] to be drowned, or, more freely, to be submitted to the waters of chaos” (Witvliet 159). The spirits very literally attempt to drown Azaro in waters of chaos to return him to the spirit world. Although Azaro manages to escape and the baptismal ritual is not fulfilled as the spirit companions meant it to be, Azaro is nonetheless immersed in the river water and once again baptized in an effort to reconcile him to the spirit community.

When Azaro returns from the river, Mum recognizes that he has drawn away from her toward his spirit community and employs Christian and Nigerian washings to free Azaro from his recent physical and spiritual past. Azaro records, “She had brought in a basin of warm herbal water. She made me soak my feet. . . . She pressed herbal juices on my welts” (118). In addition to the baptismal implications, Okri integrates further elements of Christianity when Mum washes Azaro’s feet. This ritual is generally read as a sign of “humility and mutual service,” a showing of love (Knox 161). Okri layers ritual upon ritual, playing with water imagery as it has been used across the world, to speak to these moments of reconciliation and cleansing. She expresses her love to Azaro, the love that makes him stay, in the language of multiple religions and rituals.

Mum and Azaro’s relationship is the bend in the circle—it is their love for each other that continues the circular ritual. Many scholars have noted this central relationship as the focal point of the novel. Omhovere writes, “The narrative adopts a serious register whenever it focuses on the figure of the child and his suffering mother” (73), and Okri himself argues, “The mother for me represented a central aspect of the novel. She’s the one who keeps Azaro here, who grounds him. She’s the cause of his being here. She represents for me the bright side of the moon, the side that sheds light on what life means to a child” (“Conversations” 23). The baptisms that Mum administers are one of vital ways that Mum grounds Azaro, keeping him there through her

participation in the ritual.

While Mum's baptism is powerful, Azaro is nonetheless drawn back to the spirit world through a final episode of kidnapping and baptism, in which the Nigerian and Catholic traditions are once again jointly employed to create the most powerful form of baptism. In this baptism a pregnant goddess once again holds Azaro against his will. (Okri never tells us whether or not this is the same pregnant goddess that captured Azaro before, but it seems likely.) During a massive storm, when Azaro is half in and half out of the spirit world, he went "to a half-familiar fairy-land . . . [and] saw an elephantine figure of an ancient mother" (*Famished* 288) who "made [him] bathe" (*Famished* 289). The goddess uses Nigerian maternal bathing to reconcile Azaro to a spiritual community he is no longer fully part of by forcing him into a ritual rebirth in which he symbolically sheds his past and connection to his family, completing their spirit community.

The goddess also seems to be employing Catholic elements of baptism. Azaro observes on her wall "the legend, printed in gothic lettering: GOD'S TIME IS THE BEST" and "the image of a crucified Christ and beneath it another legend: THE EVIL THAT MEN DO" (292). This, in addition to the policeman's wife's painting of Jesus with his large visible heart, arms outstretched" with the legend "CHRIST IS THE UNSEEN GUEST IN EVERY HOME," suggests very purposeful syncretism on Okri's part (19). While it is not shocking to find the legend in the policeman's house, it is rather bewildering to locate it the house of an African goddess, supernaturally massive and pregnant. Okri insists on cognitive dissonance here—he includes Christianity in the novel and acknowledges its power, but he refuses it to stand alone. Christianity, like all other religions in the novel, has authority but is nonetheless required to exist alongside other forms of belief. In their most powerful form, the two ritualistic washings must work together.

The second kidnapping by the pregnant goddess is the one instance that is not followed by Mum re-baptizing and reconciling Azaro back into the family, to dismal effect. Azaro does not go straight home but instead adventures with dad and encounters spirits who threaten to take him with them. When Azaro does go home, Mum does not realize that he has been missing. It is especially significant, then, that Mum and Azaro's next interaction includes him following a spirit she cannot see. Mum says, "Where are you going, Azaro?" and Azaro tells us "It was Mum," as if he had not been aware of her presence before or had not recognized her. "That woman told me to follow her," Azaro says. Mum cannot see the woman, but Azaro insists she is there, and Mum takes Azaro home, slinging him over her shoulder, but does not bathe him (307). Azaro is enough in the spirit world that he is allowing their directions to take him away from Mum. It is only thirteen pages later that Azaro's family encounters the most serious threat of separation and distance: Azaro's decision to leave them for the world of the spirits.

Perhaps the missing piece of this puzzle, that of Azaro's agency, is already evident. For the vast majority of the novel, Azaro's baptisms (even the ones performed by Mum) are forced. The language itself suggests this: Azaro says the priestesses "made me wash" (13) and the policeman's wife "made me bathe" (19). The albino spirits force Azaro into a sack and dump him into a river, and the massive goddess "made [him] bathe" (289). Mum is more forceful still: Azaro cannot fight the rain Mum summons and later, he says, "Mum . . . *seized* my hand, *pushed* me to the bathroom . . . and *made* me bathe from a bucket of specially treated water" (29, my ital.). Later, she instructs "Bathe [of the water] properly,' she said, 'or I will do it for you'" (121). Although it is notable that Mum allows Azaro to bathe himself, granting him some agency, in all of the other instances, Azaro appears to have very little choice. Instead of acting, he is constantly being acted upon.

While it is true that Azaro seems an uninvolved and at times even unwilling participant of baptism, that does not mean he is not actively responding to these rituals. On the contrary, Azaro is constantly negotiating with the ritual of baptism and its practitioners; one of the things that determines the degree to which a baptism will be successful is whether or not Azaro accepts it. When the priestess baptizes Azaro and he realizes what is happening, Azaro says, “They are going to do something to me. . . . My mother will not like it.” With this new understanding he runs away (14). Here, Azaro clearly understands that he is in the process of being claimed by another community. Just as when he was born, however, Azaro chooses to belong more to his mother than to the world’s spiritual elements. Azaro makes this decision repeatedly. When he is in the policeman’s house, the curse seems to stop him from attempted escape, and even, at first, from recognizing his mother. But even before he recognizes her, he “pushed past the officer. . . . Then, with light in [his] head, and hunger in [his] voice, [he] cried: ‘Mother!’” (27). Azaro continues to hunger for his mother, and this hunger stops the baptisms of those who bathe him from being fully binding. This pattern continues throughout Azaro’s abductions: he swims and runs away from the albino spirits (112), and he walks away from the giant goddess’s house (293). Each time Azaro is baptized by someone who is not Mum, he chooses to leave them.

Just as Azaro’s agency is evident in his relationship with his kidnappers, so it is obvious in his relationship with Mum. While Azaro follows the baptisms of his captors by running away, Azaro is continually running towards Mum. He repeatedly refers to her as his reason for leaving the spirit community and though he frequently wanders off and is captured, he most frequently works to stay with her and fulfill his duties as her son. Azaro continually chooses Mum, and thus her baptisms seem to have more power than those of his kidnappers. Mum’s baptism is a mutual commitment, it is the bend in the circle that keeps Azaro returning home.

It is unsurprising, then, that the only time Mum fails to bathe Azaro after his kidnapping is also when their relationship frays to the degree that Azaro is prepared to leave her for *wrugbe*. The family has been having a hard time, individually and as a unit. Mum is suffering at work and threatened to kill herself (228), dad's life has been threatened (284), and the family is in severe financial trouble (321). In these difficult circumstances, both Mum and Dad fail to consistently act with love toward Azaro, the love that made him stay. In fact, Dad beats Azaro severely (324). In response, Azaro "withdrew from the world of feelings, sentiments, sympathies," or, in other words, those things that encouraged Azaro to be part of their familial community. Over the next few days, Azaro tells us, he "refused to eat. I lost energy and felt myself becoming light. . . . I smelt the world of holiday, the world of spirits" (325). He agrees to follow a spirit guide and walks with this guide steadily on a road that has no end. Curiously, there is no immediate attempt to baptize Azaro on this road. This is later explained when the spirit guide says, "Soon we will get to a great river. . . . When we cross the river there is no turning back" (335). We may assume, then, that this river is the baptism that will guide Azaro to the spirit world. Interestingly, it seems requisite that Azaro walk to it himself this time, perhaps because the spirits acknowledge that the only way for the baptism to be truly binding is if it is enacted as a mutual commitment—in other words, Azaro must choose it. Azaro does not, of course, choose to cross the river from which there is no return. He is, for the first time, wooed back to his family by Dad, who whispers loving words and sings old songs and performs ancient rituals (339). It is significant that Azaro chooses to come back for dad this time, because every other instance he has returned for his mother. Dad's involvement in the rituals makes the family more unified, even more whole and complete than they were before. Dad's rituals allow Azaro to choose Dad specifically.

Azaro's hyper-agency makes sense within the novel's mythology, as he is uniquely able

to navigate this world of ritual and spirituality, knowing how to negotiate it in ways that the other mortals and even other spirits do not. This is represented metaphorically when he swims away from the albinos “very gently,” he says “serene in my element” (113). Azaro feels at home in the water, the tools that others use to baptize him. He knows how to work with it, how to maneuver in it. We see this ease of navigation more literally just a page before when, caught in the sack and unable to move, Azaro calls out to the “great king” (deity figure of the novel) “I do not want to die.” Immediately the great king appears before him and offers him a series of images and sounds (including “the rushing of waves and hissing of water”) that remind Azaro of the pocketknife he can use to free himself (112). Azaro understands the rules of the worlds in which he lives and knows how to call upon their powers. Because of this, Azaro can be active in the process of claiming and reconciling. He has the power to choose to stay or go, and while the baptisms do affect him and especially affect his relationships, they do not make choices for him.

It seems evident that Azaro’s hyper-agency comes from his abikuness. As previously mentioned, to be an abiku in this novel is to be “part in this world and part in the other world, part in the world of the real, and part in the world of dream. . . . What appears not to be real to us is real to him, and what appears to be real to us is not real to him” (“Conversations” 19). This is vital to our understanding of Azaro, ritual and agency, and the novel itself, for according to Okri, this part-in-part-out, part-real-part-dream is “what Africa is like to anybody who is halfway sensitive. It is full of presences” (“Ben Okri” 22). Azaro’s liminality makes him uniquely capable of perceiving the complex reality in the overlap of physical and spiritual worlds. In *The Famished Road*, to be an abiku is to choose where you stand. Azaro tells us this in the beginning, when he says, “We had the ability to will our deaths” (4), a comment which is especially significant in light of the traditional connection between baptism and symbolic death. Azaro is in

control of what world he is in and to what degree, and while the baptisms offer him gateways, he chooses whether or not to walk through them.

We can further associate this abiku liminality with power through the only other abiku in the novel: Ade. While Ade made the same choice to stay with his family that Azaro did, soon after we meet him he tells Azaro, “I am going to die soon. . . . My friends are calling me. . . . In the other world” (477). Ade is sick and stays with Azaro’s family, rather than returning to his own as Azaro always does when he is under threat from the spirit world, indicating that Ade is choosing to leave his family. Such a suspicion is almost immediately validated: Ade tells Azaro, “I want to go to my other home. . . . There’s too much unnecessary suffering on this earth” (477). Ade, like Azaro, can choose to die when he likes, and he chooses to despite the pleas and rituals of his father (an interesting contrast to Azaro being drawn back by Dad’s pleading). Ade uses his power in liminality to let it go, refusing the rituals that might have him stay.

While both Azaro and Ade seem to draw a unique power of choosing and navigating through their liminality, they choose profoundly different things, once again emphasizing the connection between in-betweenness and agency. Azaro himself directly compares his abiku-ness with Ade’s, noting, “I was a spirit-child rebelling against the spirits, wanting to live the earth’s life and contradictions. Ade wanted to leave, to become a spirit, free in the captivity of freedom. I wanted the liberty of limitations, to have to find or create new roads” (487). This passage suggests that Ade found the continual tug between communities too trying. Ade needs the “captivity of freedom” from these communities and their rituals. He does not want the continual burden of choosing or not choosing, walking the lines between. In the freedom Ade craves, no choices are necessary, and thus he is captive. In contrast, Azaro wants “the liberty of limitations”; the liberty of forever choosing the between, working in the liminality created by his

communities and their limitations. In becoming an abiku, both Azaro and Ade chose circular liminality, but both chose it without knowing what that would entail. While Ade can no longer endure the constant pressure of choice and change, Azaro claims that this is the reason he “wanted to be born . . . these paradoxes of things, the eternal changes, the riddle of living while one is alive, the mystery of being” (488). It is, importantly, riddles and mysteries and *changes* that keep Azaro connected to the world of the living, not the stability of it.

It is my assertion that the circularity of mystery and change continues all the way to the end of the novel. Mary Helen Specht claims that, while Azaro is originally “unable to choose between the world of the spirits and that of his human family” (34), he ultimately decides against “continuing his cyclical obsession with the crossroads that define his kind, [and] makes a choice.” Specht argues that Azaro ultimately chooses to stay with his family when he says, “It is terrible to remain forever in between” (Specht 37). It is true that Azaro says that remaining in between is “terrible”—but this is not the conclusion Specht seems to suggest it is. Rather, this assertion happens at the beginning of the novel as part of Azaro’s justification for staying with his mother: “It may simply have been that I had grown tired of coming and going. It is terrible to remain forever in-between” (5). Azaro does not use “terribleness” as a reason to commit to one community at the end of the novel; instead, it is the reason for his choice to begin the cycle of reconciliation between communities. Azaro is not choosing stability or certainty; he is trading one round of circularity and liminality for another.

Similarly, at the end of the novel, Azaro is willing to continue living through “unnecessary suffering” on earth in order to continue exploring its mysteries. Azaro is not settled at the end of the novel by any means. Although Azaro is with his family, while Ade is dying, Azaro nonetheless feels the tug of his spirit companions again and tells us, “Deep in me old

songs began to stir. Old voices from the world of spirits. Songs of seductive purity” (477). Azaro has not cut himself off from his spirit companions and is still unable choose in any final way between his two worlds. Further, Ade prophesies to Azaro: “A man with seven heads will take you away. You will come back. You will stay” (478). While this prophecy may testify to an eventual end of Azaro’s cyclical journey (and perhaps the beginning of another), it nonetheless promises that that time is not now. Azaro is as spiritually up for grabs at the end of the novel as he is at the beginning.

While Specht and I are at odds in interpreting Azaro’s state at the end of *Famished Road*, we share an interest in Okri’s choice to “universalize . . . the concept of abiku, exploring it as a global rather than purely African phenomenon” (Specht 37). Near the end of the novel, Azaro explains, “There are many who are of this condition and do not know it. There are many nations, civilizations, ideas, half-discoveries, revolutions, loves, art forms, experiments, and historical events that are of this condition and do not know it” (487). The abiku status that makes Azaro desirable, that initiates his cycle of rebirth and reconciliation and rituals, and, perhaps most markedly, that gives Azaro his power to traverse and transform liminal spaces and walk through the doorways of ritual, is not specific to him, but instead afflicts many in the world. And “affliction” is what many would call it, in the novel and in scholarship.

Okri’s affliction of universal abikuisms applies most famously to Nigeria. Ade tells Azaro: “Our country is an abiku country. Like the spirit-child, it keeps coming and going. One day it will decide to remain. It will become strong” (478). Dad has a similar vision in which he realizes “ours . . . was an abiku nation, a spirit-child nation, one that keeps being reborn and after each birth come blood and betrayals” (494). Two separate sources in the novel declare Nigeria’s abiku-ness, a move that Omhovere claims “gives the novel an original purchase on the telling of

the history of the nation” (68). Okri gets to recast Nigeria’s history through Nigeria’s abiku-ness, and both times the argument is made in the novel being an abiku sounds like a terrible thing. Ade says that Nigeria will be strong only once it stays, and Dad says that each rebirth is accompanied by violence. Here, then, the abiku’s liminality is cast in a strongly negative light.

It should be apparent from Specht’s assessment that some scholars also view this in-between state as short-lived and unproductive. Mounira Soliman and قرينم ناميلسد associate Nigeria’s abikuness in their article “From Past to Present to Future” with the urbanity and colonialism that challenges traditional Nigerian culture and unity. They claim:

Nigeria today continues to live through this conflict: with a population divided into two hundred and fifty ethnic groups, each speaking its own ethnic language . . . half the population Muslims and about forty percent Christians, while the remainder practice indigenous religions. . . . The abiku phenomenon and its translation into literature is a stark example of this conflict. (Soliman and قرينم ناميلسد 154)

Here, again, abikuness represents a lack of unity (or reconciliation) between groups, something that creates conflict and should be a matter for concern. In this reading, to be one of the “many who are of this condition” is to be one of the cursed (*Famished* 487). This is an easy reading to make, given Nigeria’s post-independence political history.

Recent Nigerian history is a battleground in which various groups have struggled for control over the country. Between 1960 and 1990, the country has seen three successful military coups in 1966, 1975, and 1985 respectively (Ifidon 2). Political scientist Ehimika Ifidon suggests that in order to understand this consistent upheaval we must understand that “the most visible feature of politics [in Nigeria] is cultural pluralism” (4). While there are certainly many factors that contributed to Nigeria’s political instability at the time *The Famished Road* was published in

1991, certainly one of the main ones was the multiplicity of the groups involved in and attempting to control Nigeria. That is, there were always multiple forces working to claim the country and force it into a political rebirth. Ifidon explains that the state “reflects the tensions and conflicts among social groups. . . . hence it is importantly an object of appropriation by competing groups” (3). With this in mind, the kidnapping, bathing, and anointing of Azaro in the novel is easy to read as a commentary on the political state of Nigeria.

And yet, if we understand Azaro’s position as an abiku to be one of power and agency, this dismal reading of Nigerian politics and society seems at the very least overly simplistic. While being an abiku causes pain and discomfort, it is also what allows Azaro to see the world clearly, to navigate liminality, and to choose whether or not to accept ritual such as baptism—surely to be an abiku is at least partially a good thing. I agree with McCabe, who suggests that being an abiku means that “we are all . . . subjects alienated, like abiku, from their true home, possessing rich spiritual depths that can be more or less realized in the terrestrial plane of existence to which they have been exiled.” He continues, “For Okri, to be an abiku—to apprehend the paradox, mystery, and fleeting beauty that glimpses of the spirit-world bring—is to put oneself and the society one inhabits on the road to heaven” (McCabe 16). To be an abiku is neither inherently good nor bad, but it has the potential for tremendous good, in allowing us to see and shape the world differently.

To call Nigeria an abiku, then, is not necessarily an indictment of Nigeria’s politics, culture, or society. Rather, it is an argument that Nigeria has the ability to see and act in ways that other beings and countries do not. To truly “be on the road to heaven,” however, Nigeria must come to an understanding and acceptance of its “strange gifts of the soul” (*Famished* 5). This is not to suggest, of course, that the political coups and the pain they cause are good. In this

reading, the coups are not the source of Nigeria's abikuness, but rather a symptom of uncontrolled and misunderstood liminality. *The Famished Road* is not condemning this liminality, but instead suggests that as a political and social entity, Nigeria must learn the processes of reconciliation and ritual.

Okri gives us a glimpse of what this process might look like several times and at several levels in the novel, in baptism but also notably with Dad's kinsfolk. Kinship, it should be noted, is different from the nuclear family unit that it often denotes in Western contexts. In Africa, kinship is a web of relationships which includes the extended family and, often, other members of the villages. Anthropologist Joseph O. Charles notes while the nuclear family (or *idip ete*) is important among the Ibo, the more removed kinship ties have elements of the sacred and divine in their culture. Although Charles asserts that these kinship ties have remained "relatively stable" (337), others report that "kinship in contemporary Nigeria is a peculiarly ambiguous medium; one that must encompass localized lineage structures adjusting to the pressures of mobile, urban life" (Bastian 117-118). The distance created by these increasingly loose lineage structures are part of what some critics have narrowed in on as Nigerian abiku-ness (Soliman and قرينم ناميلسد 154). When a family is removed from village support, extended family, the ties between them become strained and tenuous. For Mum, Dad, and Azaro, their separation from the village is a banishment, a punishment for Dad's pride and because he was unable to beat "a small man" in boxing (69). When they tell Azaro why they came to the city "they both fell silent. It seemed, almost, as if they had come to hell." Dad continues, "I haven't seen my father in five years" (70). Both Mum and Dad feel the loss of their kinship ties—the thing that gave them belonging, meaning, and identity.

When Mum and Dad *do* interact with their extended family, these kinship ties prove to be

fractured by more than just removal. When Dad's relations come to visit,

They also came to criticise. They attacked Dad for not visiting them, for not attending the meetings of our townspeople, for not contributing to wedding presents, funeral arrangements, and endless financial engagements. Dad responded badly to their criticisms. He blamed them for not helping him, for not being visible during his times of crisis; and their recriminations flew back and forth, developed into terrible arguments, with everyone shouting at the top of their voices, till they all seemed more like implacable enemies than members of an extended family. (128)

Though Mum and Dad may long for the continued belonging and safety that comes from kinship, the mere presence of their kin is not enough to reinvigorate those bonds. Rather, it requires reconciling ritual. When the argument over blame quieted down, "Mum came in with a tray of food and drinks. Dad sent for some ogororo and kola-nuts and made a libation, praying for harmony in the extend family" (129). Although the hostilities do not completely cool, these rituals seem to help, and afterward, "the wives of our relations went out into the passage with Mum and I heard them laughing while the men sat in the room, embarrassed by their differences" (129). Just as with Azaro, the rituals do not entirely control the situation (the men struggle to know how to walk through the ritualistic door), but they offer a gateway to reconciliation and the reclamation of kinship ties. They remind those who participate how to belong to each other.

To be divided, in the world of *Famished Road*, is inevitable and not necessarily negative. In an interview, Okri says "The world is not made by knitting things. A world is made in the spaces between things" ("Interview"). In *Famished Road*, the space between is just as important as the fixed points, more important, perhaps, because it allows for movement and flexibility, the

creation of one's own road. To be an abiku is not to confine yourself to isolation or separation; rather, it is an invitation to actively use and respond to ritual, to walk between communities, and practice seeing and experiencing the world in different ways.

To be an abiku is not an easy thing, and perhaps is not the final goal. Ade says that both Nigeria and Azaro will come to rest one day, finishing their cyclical cycle of rebirth and ritual (478). We may view this end of the process as a "homecoming," which Okri says is "the central theme of all literature. All the stories we tell are about human beings in exile, in one form or another. Being alive is, in itself, a state of exile" ("Interview" 1054). If being alive is exile (or distance) from a home and dying is a homecoming (or ultimate reconciliation), then it makes sense that the in-between process (living) is something complex, uncomfortable, and worth preserving. The cyclical nature of that in-betweenness, then, is something to embrace as the fabric of life, to learn to work with it and maneuver in it well.

This embracing of liminality is also found in the central image in the novel, that of the river and road. This image appears in *The Famished Road's* very first line: "In the beginning there as a river. The river became a road. . . . And because that road was once a river it was always hungry" (3). This road appears throughout the novel, over and over again, often connected to enchantment and spirituality, hunger and hurt. In one such instance, Azaro is traveling with his spirit guide toward the river that cannot be returned from and encounters a road that each generation destroys and starts over. The spirit guide explains:

Each new generation begins with nothing and with everything. They know all the earlier mistakes. . . . Each generation has to reconnect the origins for themselves. . . . It is possible that they now travel slower, and will make bigger, better mistakes. That is how they are as a people. . . . They will never finish the road that is their soul and they do not

know it. (330)

The people of the road never can fully cross to where they are going, just as Azaro is always partially reconciled but never completely connected with the worlds he lived in. This is what it is to be an abiku, to always be in between. And yet, this is not a bad thing, so long as they continue to make “bigger, better mistakes.” It is not, however, entirely clear from parable how one effectively makes mistakes and builds a road. To be liminal and in the process of building may not be comfortable, but it is the only way to become instead of merely being. For the potential of becoming and of itself, such liminality is worth preserving.

Attention to baptism makes it evident that the way we build our road is through ritual. Such an interpretation is appropriate to the novel’s cultural context, since Wole Soyinka says that “Unlike in other parts of the globe, religion [in Africa] has always been a process of relating to phenomena that surround man—including the unseen forces—primarily in a personal way, but collectively also in rites” (Soyinka 130). In *The Famished Road*, Okri appeals to a more enchanted way of viewing the world in order to access those things that have been lost in a move toward modernity, urbanity, and enlightenment and away from myths. For, Okri says, “Myth is not something in the past. It is a living river. A living under-river that touches every single person’s life” (“Interview”1056). Something has been lost, Okri argues, when we stepped away from a spiritual understanding of the world that allowed for myth and ritual. We lose our ability to see the world as Azaro does and as West Africans did in the past, with “otherworldliness as a palpable, vital reality that is interwoven with the present. . . . The ancestors are integrated into the present. . . through rituals, incantations, or through a symbolic transference” (Soyinka 157). Okri seems to fear that we are forgetting to build our roads with an understanding of myth, and that in doing so, we fail to call on ritual to navigate the liminality that this life must always be.

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