

Mysticism in Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone*

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“...the world is not the product of a manifold power, but of one will; of one mind, and that one mind is everywhere active... All things proceed out of the same spirit and all things conspire to it.” --Emerson

ABSTRACT

Tom E. Kakonis, explaining John Steinbeck's idea of the group-man in his *Mysticism in Selected Early Novels of John Steinbeck*, speaks of the essence of a unitive state. For Steinbeck, "species are only commas in sentences," so that "one specie of life merges into another to the point when what we know as life enters what is non-life," thereby animating it in the process (qtd in Tom E. Kakonis, 14) and "the units nestle into the whole and are inseparable from it" (14). Needless to say, Zelig's desire is to restore magic to Orisha as it means a reuniting of her world to the world of the gods, to Sky Mother. Does this ring a bell in the universal literary tradition so as to necessitate an actual critical reading? If anything, Zelig's desire is akin to the literary rhythm that resonates through Amos Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard*, Soyinka's and J. P. Clark's versions of *Abiku*, Ben Okri's *Famished Road*, Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* as well as Emerson's transcendental view; John Steinbeck's writings, *Grapes of Wrath*, for one; and William Blake's poems, to mention just a few familiar ones. In all these, there's the motif of a link to an unseen perfect world, once detached from, and then a desperate need to link up to that world again, oftentimes through series of adventurous moves. This is what this essay seeks to prove in exclusive relation to *Children of Blood and Bone*.

Keywords: *Transcendence, mysticism, wholeness, unity, ultimate life-force, the mystic ideal*

INTRODUCTION

On *Wikipedia*, it is clear how Tomi Adeyemi drew ideas from fantasy and magic-realist novels like *Harry Potter*, *An Ember in the Ashes*, and the Yoruba mythology in the writing of this text.

But, being substantially the product of imagination, with its own self-determining use of language, "an aesthetically liberated life," (qtd in Akwanya, *Verbal Structures*, 130) in the words of Casirrer, *Children of Blood and Bone* transcends the bounds of mere magical realism, not to even mention that magical realism is only a literary style. And as far as this sort of reading is all that has been seen so far, it will not be presumptuous to say that no actual critical writing has emerged on the text; the reviews seen so far all operate at the peripheral level of the text's obvious exploration of the literary style of magic realism and fantasy. Also, to say that the text speaks—on a metaphorical level of analysis—about racial tension, prejudice, genocide and structural inequality would only be redundant, a reduction of the work to the level of realistic expectation, an urgent literary voicing to societal demand. This is certainly not all there is about the work, and it is what Francis Thompson eschews when he writes: "Literature is a category of production and of labour... It is a structured totality which is irreducible to the sentences to which it is composed" (qtd in Akwanya, 312).

In *Children of Blood and Bone*, instances abound of the unity of the human characters to the gods and then to the non-living aspects of its setting, one charging and animating the other into producing physical results in both glorious and damning proportions. Such textual phenomenon, on a more critical level, is Mysticism.

In the simplest sense, it is, according to Oxford Advanced Dictionary, a transcendental union of souls. And it proves itself analytically useful because it bears a profound resemblance with, and is a broader vision of transcendentalism, which has been manifested in different fashions in the works of early transcendentalist and contemporary texts.

In the 19th century, it was confused with emotionalism, suggesting that it is a vague idea that reflected a foggy, misty mind. Hence, in an attempt at delivering the concept from the notion it was associated with in the 19th century, Frederick Carpenter, in his *The philosophical Joals*, attempts to draw parallels between the character, Casey in *Grapes of Wrath* to the ideals of the early transcendentalist. Many scholars in the school of mysticism, Tom E. Kakonis, for one, drew from Carpenter's views to prove that mysticism is the foundational ideal of transcendentalism, pointing to a great array of similarities that mark the Hindu theistic belief and the views of Emerson. Hence, for Kakonis, where Hinduism holds that: "the unity of nature is in variety which meets us everywhere," Emerson states in his "Nature": "Beauty in nature is not ultimate, it is the herald of inward and eternal beauty... it must stand as part and not as... the last or highest expression of the final cause of nature" (qtd in Tom E. Kakonis, 8). However,

this is just one among several other similarities we shall encounter in the course of textual interpretation. Additionally, there are remarkable imprints in Christian mythology that reinstates the mystic ideal of unity to an eternal godhead, giving rise to what has come to be known as Christian Mysticism. In literature, it has also had such remarkable presence, some of which have been mentioned elsewhere, all reiterating the notion of wholeness and connection to an eternal deity through direct, intuitive or spiritual processes.

Furthermore, K. Sarayan, in his mysticism research into Okri's works says: "Okri presents a world wavering between order and chaos, an ambiguous and mysterious world of which human beings are but a part and over which they have a little control" (K. Sarayan 10). He espouses what he calls "Okri's conceptualization of Nigerian urban citizen's spiritual alienation from God," thus necessitating the need for a divine spiritual reconnection. For instance, in Okri's *Famished Road*, "Children cry at birth because of the separation from the world of pure dreams." This is Okri's mystical ideal which is obviously in tandem with Emerson's idealistic thought in his 'Oversoul' and 'Nature.'

The same mysterious world of chaos is typical in *Blood and Bone*, revealing special people whose connection to the ethereal world is symbolized by their distinct white hair and gifts of magic. They are seen to be battling with maintaining their inward goodness, at the same time, struggling to escape the vicious witch-hunt staged by the monarchy in order to have their magical powers restored to them and be rekindled to Sky Mother. Sky Mother here plays a similar textual role as God in the Bible, Brahm in the Hindu tradition, and The Oversoul, for the transcendentalists.

What remains pertinent in this essay is the fact that being explained under the lenses of mysticism, Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* is seen to operate within the realm of an innate kind of spirituality that is compatible with several characters in the literary scope of other works of fiction, thus contributing to a canon. We find characters either struggling to attain the mystic ideal or successfully attaining the mystic ideal in the midst of life-threatening circumstances.

TEXTUAL INTERPRETATION

"Sky Mother created humans, her children of blood and bone. In the heavens she gave birth to the gods and goddesses. Each would come to embody a different fragment of her soul" (*Children of Blood and Bone* 276).

The textual world of Orisha is peopled by ordinary humans (kosidans), and very special humans, who wield magical powers of various kinds, known as Magi. This goes to mean that there are a collection of souls united by magic to a bigger soul, the essence of which is to propagate peace. This is mysticism instated. However, there is a rather denting history about a few magi abusing the power gifted them (30-32). For this, there is the Raid ordered by King Saran, such that tears families apart, leaving an indelible sense of loss in so many, one of whom is Zelig, the story's protagonist. It is so difficult for a king like Saran, a kosidan, who has never experienced the sensation of magic, to see its usefulness for his kingdom. He uses the excuse of vengeance at the past actions of a few magi on his lineage to wreck this damage on the many left behind. This foregrounding story alone justifies the enduring presence of mysticism as determining the external conflict and violent tussle that drives the plot. In the words of Coventry Patmore, the mystic ideal “is as incommunicable to those who have not experienced it as the odour of violet to those who have not smelt it” (qtd in A.N. Dhar, *Mysticism Across Cultures* 2). King Saran has no empathy for magic because he lacks magical powers himself and only sees those who do, derisively, as *maggots*. Worse still, he does not believe in the existence of the gods. King Saran's hatred for magic clouds any possible trace of empathy even for his own son. Thus:

Father brings his sword up again, this time for the final blow. There's no love in his eyes. No hint of the pride that flashed just moments ago. The same fear and hatred that burned in Kaea's final gaze stains Father's now. I'm a stranger to him. No. I've given up everything to be his son. (854-855)

In the wake of such injustices as increased taxes, irrational brutality and imprisonment meted to the maji breed, rebellion against King Saran's despotic monarchy follows, so that his own daughter, Amari, especially after witnessing the death of her friend and personal maid, Binta, at the hands of her father (81), joins forces with Zelig in reigniting the reign of magic. For Zelig's father then, “As long as we don't have magic, they will never treat us with respect” (846). Typically, Zelig's voice rings so true of one with the mystical ideal when she says: “After the Raid, I insisted we go to Jimeta. I thought its lawless borders were the only place we could be safe” (771).

This is not just the voice of a girl seeking to escape the danger of attack on her breed, but also the voice of someone with the mystical ideal, which is against organized institutionalism—as opposed to “Jimeta's lawless borders,” for the institution of hatred and senseless massacre

perpetrated by King Saran. For "...no law can be sacred to (the mystic) but that of (his) own nature...Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every of its members...Whose would be a man must be non-conformist ("Self Reliance"³⁻⁴). The true mystic chooses to "be undeterred, free from and insoluble to narrow dogmas." Even the Hinduist doctrine implies the same when it speaks of the self as unattached and unfettered.

SELF-SACRIFICE AT THE CORE OF THE MYSTIC IDEAL

We also find that this non-conformist inkling of the mystics also endangers a self-sacrificing will. This is first hinted at by Zelig's mother's action of using her healing powers to restore Tzain and some others to life, leading to her own near-death experience (49). It is in Zulaika's death in an attempt to broker peace with the royal soldiers (669-670). It is in Zelig's action of denying her bodily weakness and loss of her powers towards the end just to give herself the slimmest chance of performing the final ritual, to restore magic for the greater benefit of her breed (769-770). It is in Olamilekan's death in his attempt to lead Zelig and others to safety (318). Most poignant, it is in Kwame's sacrifice, when he transforms into fire, tearing through the senseless attack of the army, and consuming himself in the process; "with one final cry, Kwame erupt like a dying star. Fire explodes in all directions, leaving the world with the last remnants of himself" (675). There is a sense in which these resemble the sacrificial crucifixion story of Jesus, the purpose of which is to bring believers to the ultimate gain of a union to God. This has often been described by Christian mystics as Jesus' transcendent significance.

AVENUES OF RECONNECTION TO THE ULTIMATE LIFE-SOURCE

Mysticism also presupposes that human connection to eternal forces is often manifested through means like prayers and meditations, paranormal visions, rituals, and séances. For the Hinduist, especially those in the line of Bhagavad Gita, it is through yoga. For Christianity, it is prayerful meditations and purification. For the transcendentalist, it is through individual intuition obtained in an environment that is far removed from the hassles of modern civilization, a natural landscape where the "mind of the divine can enter their own minds (*Oversoul* 2). And it is echoed in Azaro's and Onye's otherworldly travels in *Famished Road* and *Who Fears Death* respectively. These instances all add up to justify Emerson's point that "we are wiser than we know if we do not interfere with our thoughts" (*Oversoul* 3).

Accordingly, the overall importance of the sacred ritual, which occurs at the end of the text, is emphasized from the very beginning. Because it is at its very consummation that the needed link of the magi to the gods is established (722). This will be addressed later. And there are numerous sites of paranormal visions in this text called “dreamscapes.” These dreamscapes are enabled by passionate meditations that transport members of the magi breed into scenes of undisturbed beauty and peace and pure grace with the eternal forces and with one another. Significantly, Inan, at the sight of the cliff spectacle Zelig creates, says: “when your thoughts and emotions are intense I feel them too...there's a beauty to this new world I cannot deny...” (603). Inan is also stopped short from killing Zelig after a dreamscape vision of her life during the raid, when her mother had been dragged away and killed. Thus the magic inside him connects to hers and holds him down from killing her :

Her sorrow drags me down like a vengeful current...when all I see is the sacred and broken girl. It's like seeing her for the first time: the human behind the magi. Fear embedded in the pain. Tragedy caused in father's name...Zelig's memories don't hold the villains Father always warned of. Only families he tore apart. (481-483)

To transcend has now become to see the past and the present in one glance. It is also to connect to an other-worldly existence, as it is during such a moment as this that Zelig communes with Minoli's spirit and reenergizes her “Ashe” (magical powers) in the process. She is able to “... imagine the face of the girl in a sudden breeze, in reeds apart she materializes like a condescending cloud her body forming as blue smoke travels” (379). In a very similar sense, the function of the Reaper Zelig exercises towards the end is that of an ultimate mystic. Not only is she given a glimpse into the world of the divinities where she can communicate with them as much, but she also calls dead souls back, and thus infuses magic into those who have lost it: “I close my eyes and feel the electric energy of the dead into my bones... the incantation pushes my spiritual pathways open, allowing Ashe to flow through... spirits of the dead answered my call, they bent to my will” (419).

Being a Reaper, therefore, she is acclaimed as “...true (spiritual) sister of Oya” (873). It should be remembered that Oya is the ninth goddess who has power over death and who is directly connected to Sky Mother herself. And the point when Zelig says, “I don't know whether to search for Oya in the sky or within my hands...(419),” another indication of her closeness to the divine is also made. This connects to the transcendentalist view about the possible

physical closeness to the divine; feeling and seeing their presence as nothing else can, to paraphrase Emerson's words on page 3 of his "Oversoul".

Moreover, the evidence of spirits pervading the world of this text is another strong mystic ideal. So that there are, among the magi community, the Reapers, the Tamers, the Welders, the Healers, the Tiders, the Grounders, the Burners, the Winders all wielding unique strengths (276-277). In the line of Christian Mysticism, this resounds the voice of Paul in Corinthians, speaking of spiritual gifts serving the purpose of unity. Hence: "There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit gives them" (*The Good News Bible*, Cor. 12:4). And the following in *Blood and Bone* reads as a sort of re-echoing:

Sky Mother loved all her children, each created in her image. To connect us all, she shared her gifts with the gods, and the first maji were born. Each deity took a part of her soul, a magic they were meant to gift to the humans below (276).

The distribution of spiritual gifts resonates through every mystic text, as long as there is an attendant injunction—often explicit—to use the same for the purpose of connection to otherworldly entities. Although King Saran only perceives these as destructive, his son, Inan, is able to envision in them a new world of peace for Orisha, where the spiritual resources of all magi could be explored for a greater good, and for unity. As he tells Zelig:

... just imagine what Orisha could become. Healers like Zu would eradicate sickness. A team of Grounders and Welders could eliminate the need for the stocks. Skies, think of what the army would fight like with your animations leading the charge...It'll be a new Orisha. Our Orisha. No battles. No wars. Just peace (653).

Mysticism is further highlighted when the sacred ritual, which facilitates the much-needed connection of the magi to their gods, is seen to take a different twist than earlier stated by Olamilekan. The scroll's incantation that was supposed to tether them to Sky Mother is burnt by an unfortunate twist of incidents, propelling Zelig to use a different approach: "My mind spins, trying to calculate the possibilities. Could I draw on the connection with my ancestors through our blood? Could we reach back, forging a new connection to Sky Mother and her gifts through our spirits" (866)?

This is a signification of the ultimate mystic gain; a reconnection to the overall life-spirit. One spirit merging into another and forming a whole, thus, no longer existing in units. The fact that the scroll's incantation fails, thereby giving way to calling back magic and

rekindling of spirits through blood, is further proof of the ideal of mysticism in which this text is ensconced.

Like an erupting volcano, the power of my ancestors flows through me, maji and kosidán alike. Each grips onto our connection, onto the very heart of our blood. Their spirits twirl with mine, with Mama's, with Baba's. We pour ourselves forward, our souls fighting into the stone (866-867).

The idea of spirits running through the blood into one stone bespeaks the idea of wholeness, the sort that is at the core of the mystic ideal, calling to mind Emerson's notion of "one blood roll(ing) uninterruptedly in an endless circulation (*Oversoul* 6). In the end, what we see is that "Magic shatters through every heart, every soul, every being. It connects (them) all, threading through the shell of humanity" (879).

JUSTICE, BENEFICENCE AND LIGHTS AS ATTRIBUTES OF THE MYSTIC IDEAL

At the introductory part of this essay, we saw that the most enduring internal conflict that runs through this text is that of characters battling with inherent goodness. For Emerson, ethics and morality are only steps to union with the Oversoul. The soul for him requires purity and justice and a better version of beneficence, of which it establishes a connection to the greater soul (A. N. Dhar). It is on this basis that the likes of Jesus, Einstein, Darwin have been termed some of the greatest mystics of all time. At the end of the text, when magic has been completely restored, we find that Amari immediately identifies with it (878). And Inan her brother rescinds from the *Duty before self* mantra that has kept him tied to his despotic father when he finally allows his magic surge through him, and grants him, at the same time, a revelation into Zelig's past. Both come to that point when they realize, as opposed to what they have been trained to believe, that their father's reign of terror and injustice should be expunged.

On another angle, we find characters of the magi breed being restrained from engaging in deadly combats as the reign of Sky Mother, to which they are obliged, is averse to killing and deaths. Even "revenge is meaningless" (845) for them. And Mama Agba tells the diviners:

I teach you to be warriors in the garden so you will never be gardeners in the war. I give you the strength to fight, but you all must learn the strength of restraint. You must protect those who can't defend themselves (34).

We then see how this instruction regulates Zelig's thoughts and actions throughout the text, even at moments of intense provocation when her magical powers could come in handy. On one of such rare moments of the inevitable use of her magical powers, she is racked with guilt. Thus:

That's how many times my body was ripped apart. How many spirits perished for sport. How many innocent souls shriek in my ears, how many times my body was ripped apart...Corpses float among the wood in the never-ending sea of blood. Their presence stains the air, invading my lungs with every breath...we're still covered in the blood of those who have fallen. We may have triumphed, but this is no victory (434-435).

Apparently, the magi—who we can conveniently call mystics at this time—have been illuminated by the light of the divine life-force in their beings to know that they are not meant to glory in injustice and bloodbaths; but empathy and deserved punishments of wrongs. “A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within” (Self Reliance 1). It is no wonder that the most significant and glorious indications of magic are manifested through glowing lights emanating from the hands of magi. Hence the motif of light appears severally in the text: (80, 81, 250, 275,276, 281, 871, 878)

The sense of commitment to the land of Orisha nursed by Amari, Inan, Zelig, Olamilekan, Baba, Mama Agba, and some others of the magi community all have similar undertones of beneficence and fairness. This sort of relationship with the land is not only philanthropic or borne from a sense of duty. It is also mystical.

DESIRE AND ECSTASY AS ELEMENTS OF ILLUMINATION

Reynor C. In his *Watcher on the Hills*, notes that almost every mystic account comes with a supreme emotional tone. For the mystics, the world of reality is tainted by all sorts of inanities and distress that they seek to be removed from it. It is not uncommon for mystic stories to have high sexual tones, as sex for the mystics could be an avenue for transcendence into a world of pure dreams. Dieke Ikenna makes tacit reference to this in his Chthonic archetypal exploration of Baraka's encounter with Eros in Baraka's *The System of Dante's Hell*, and Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is also replete with ecstatic undertones. Expectedly, *Children of Blood and Bone* reads thus:

I kiss him with so much force it breaks through his hesitation, his contempt, his shame. Tears fall from my eyes as I press into his touch, desperate to feel the way we felt before. He pulls me close, fighting to be tender, yet holding me tight. It's like he knows that if he lets go, it's over. There's no denying what awaits us on the other side...A gasp catches in my throat as his hands clutch my back, grip the slope of my thighs. Each kiss takes me to a new place, each stroke pulls me from the pain...Everything fades; every scar, every ache. In this instant, I only exist in his arms. I live in the peace of his embrace(757-758)

The strong language of passion in the above should not ordinarily be confused with such that is common with adolescent sexuality. Above all, there is the statement of desire by Zelig to be taken to "a new place," a place where the "aches" and "scars" that come from King Saran's torment wouldn't meet them, an embrace of peace. The world of divinities where Sky Mother reigns have been noted severally elsewhere to be doused in peace. Worthy of mention also is the fact that this uninterrupted moment of ecstasy takes place in their (Zelig's and Inan's) dreamscape, which has come to be understood as the widest otherworldly existence and site for connection to spiritual relations in the text. Hence what greater indication of the mystic ideal than the language of passion and ecstasy captured in a moment of serious distress.

CONCLUSION

In her essay on E.M. Forster's novels, Virginia Woolf writes: "Our business...(as writers) is to draw together the seen and the unseen" (qtd in Sarayan 9). And, in respects to his *Birds of Heaven*, Okri is quoted as saying, "maybe there are only three kinds of stories; the stories we live; the stories we tell; and the higher stories that help our souls fly up towards the greater light" (42 and 126). But Tomi Adeyemi, in her author's note in this book, may not have implied that she writes with the same literary motivation as Virginia Woolf or Ben Okri, because she claims that the pain and loss in this book are real as this book is her endeavour to call for empathy at the police brutality on "unarmed black women and children" etched in black lives history in America (879), which makes the book indeed timely. Nonetheless, it is unsurprising that in her efforts to lend her own voice to this societal dent, via the unfiltered language of literature, she also unconsciously contributes to a canon that existed long before her and her societal worries. This essay has been able to trace *Children of Blood and Bone* as belonging to the canon of literature ensconced in mysticism, showing that what is sought, in this text as in

so many others with similar mystic imprints, is unity, an ethereal unity that stands against the unprecedented losses and pain that rocks its textual world. However, the position buttressed here does not signify a dead-end for further literary exploration on the text as it is only a product of a single critical mind.

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