

# *Mitshimbilo* (“Wanderlust Disease”): Africa’s Future in Zakes Mda’s *Sculptors of Mapungubwe* and Two of Ben Okri’s Novels

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## **Summary**

This article extends a deliberation on the centrality of the shaman to the spiritual turn in African literatures, where it was argued that Ben Okri and Zakes Mda’s respective models of shamanism in *Sculptors of Mapungubwe* and *Dangerous Love* are bound inward and outward. This argument is rephrased; this time, postulating that, in both authors’ work, shamanism surfaces in heterogeneous and interlocking voices – all keyed into the motif of travel such as is central to the Orphic quest. It continues that what distinguishes Mda is the fact that he captures these perspectives in *mitshimbilo* (“wanderlust disease”) – which is a Tshivenda concept that Mda uses to critique the East African slave trade. By contrast, Okri anchors heteroglossia in a subjectivity which the article associates with Black Atlantic polyglot, underpinning its essence of reclamation with his adaptation of the West African narrative of the Spirit Child, or Abiku. A proposition is also made that these contrasting sets of assorted voices foreground corresponding dispositions of an expanded sense of consciousness. The analysis develops in two phases. First, presenting synopses of the primary texts, the examination draws attention to how, in its allusions to everyday culture, *mitshimbilo* foregrounds shamanism in contrasting postcolonial lenses and non-realisms that have yet to be appreciated. The final section closely reads how the identified insinuations in *Sculptors of Mapungubwe* distinguish its shamanism from Okri’s.

## **Opsomming**

Hierdie artikel bied ’n blik op die sentraliteit van die sjamaan ten opsigte van die spirituele wending in Afrika-literatuur, waar daar aangevoer word dat Ben Okri en Zakes Mda se onderskeie modelle van sjamanisme in *Sculptors of Mapungubwe* en *Dangerous Love* ingaande en uitgaande is. Hierdie argument word herformuleer; dié keer word voorgehou dat sjamanisme in albei outeurs se werk bespeur kan word in heterogene en ineengeskakelde stemme – alles opgesluit in die motief van reis; die kern van die Orfiese soektog. Verder word daar voorgehou dat dit wat Mda onderskei, die feit is dat hy hierdie perspektiewe vaslê in *mitshimbilo* (“wanderlust-siekte”) – ’n Tshivenda-weergawe van Oos-Afrika se slawehandel. In teenstelling daarmee, anker Okri heteroglossie in ’n subjektiwiteit wat in die artikel geassosieer word met swart Atlantiese poliglot; die wese van herwinning word ondersteun met sy aanpassing van die Wes-Afrikaanse verhaal van die Geesteskind, of Abiku. Die stelling word ook gemaak dat hierdie kontrasterende stelle van verskillende stemme, prominensie verleen aan ooreenkomstige stemmings van ’n uitgebreide bewussyn. Die ontleding

ontwikkel in twee fases. Eerstens vestig die ondersoek – deur sinopsisse van die primêre tekste te gee – aandag op hoe *mitshimbilo*, in die sinspelning daarvan op alledaagse kultuur, sjamanisme in die voorgrond plaas met kontrastering van postkoloniale lense en non-realismes wat nog nie ten volle begryp word nie. Die slotgedeelte bestudeer in diepte hoe die geïdentifiseerde insinuasies in *Sculptors of Mapungubwe* die sjamanisme daarin onderskei van dié van Okri.

### ***Mitshimbilo*: Intimations of Everyday Culture**

The milieu of Mda's *Sculptors of Mapungubwe* (2013) is common knowledge;<sup>1</sup> the title freely gives it away. Equally, the text, announcing its experimentation with multi-media in the title, and later on in the storyline through the trope of performance and plastic arts, expands focus beyond the written word. However, what does not seem obvious at first sight is the framework of storytelling that this novel mobilises through its respective representations of setting and of sculpting, with emphasis on how these constructions set the scenes for elaborate imaginings. Interestingly, these portraits hint at a critique of the Middle-Ages construction of Africa known as cartography. In terms of this discourse, Africa is a coastline that stretches from Mogadishu to Sofala (present day Mozambique), peppered with an archipelago that has distinct stone-masonry. The momentum behind cartography is “a desire for the marvelous, speculation about the fantastic and a taste for the improbable” (T Luca de Tena 1966: 515). By contrast, the text's locale and construction of sculpting exceed cartography in significant ways that I hereafter discuss as having to do with storytelling.

To rephrase, in Mda's take on cartography, narrative looms large, enunciating an archive which, being multi-medial and multi-accentual, people respectively tap into to conceptualise themselves in relation to the slave trade in East Africa. On the one hand and through the frame narrator, the reader hears the story of the journey of the main character, Chatambudza (Chata, henceforth), from Mapungubwe across the continent to the Far East, and back. On the other hand, it is the sense in which Chata's people variously retell either notable aspects of his chronicle, or re-state them in a range of imagining the life world that is known and unknown to them. Being textured, the tale

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1. South African African History online, [www.sahistory.org.za](http://www.sahistory.org.za), traces Mapungubwe to the “Early Iron Age settlers” 1000 AD to 1300 AD. They were successful crop and livestock farmers. Between “1220 and 1300”, they established “an advanced trading centre”, serving an expansive market across East Africa, through to “Arabia, China and India through the East African harbours”. The city of Mapungubwe “lies near the Shashe river flows into” “the Limpopo River, which connected with the [Indian Ocean] coast”. Mapungubwe has been declared a heritage site, recognising that it is “the first state in Southern Africa, this after” it “had discovered itself as a Kingdom” in 1220.

takes its fictional audiences through a broad panorama of the “Zanj” territory. This is a concept that, in its unwitting prioritising of Africa during the East African slave trade, coincidentally provides a radical reading of the epistemological boundaries of cartography. Accordingly, Chata sank into *mitshimbilo*, the “wanderlust disease” (Mda 2013: 37, 39), particularly when in contact with Abdul wa Salim, a merchant who would come to Mapungubwe, bringing “cloth, beads, ceramics and other foods that the Swahili traded for ivory and gold” (37-38). Chata would relapse upon him hearing of Abdul’s sail northwards “across the Zanj seas” to the city of “Mogadishu, and then across the Arabian seas to Persia and Sidon, and then further east, a voyage of many moons, to India and China” (38).

As if inspired by Abdul’s story, these popular spaces confirm the disposition named *mitshimbilo*, and implicitly identify it as a telling of this territory in reverse of, and in contestation with, East African modernity, particularly its construction of Africa. This is why, intriguingly in these residues, the story of Chata’s journey has the heroic casting of an odyssey. It commences by being north-bound, as opposed to being Southward, revealing his encounter with the Arab enslavement of the Zanj people (Mda 2013: 41-50), the Arabic slave trade’s appellation of people who came to define themselves as “black” during the later 20th Century European domination of the world. In the second part, he returns to Mapungubwe, having survived capture during the mentioned slave trade. In this outline of alterity, Mapungubwe is the heroic embodiment of the subjectivity whose geo-historical identity has come to be known in post-colonial history as Africa.

The novel introduces Africa with a close focus on the kind of art that Chata produces as a pre-adolescent boy. In this opening, he clay-moulds animals in a non-realist mode and is seemingly unable to account for it convincingly to himself (Mda 2013: 31). In contrast to this first part of the novel where Mda appears to be lessening the degree to which the text’s post-colonial vision depends on what the protagonist sees or knows, the second part of the text glitters with the accounts of his dance (108) and of how it accidentally inspired Marubini, whom he later betroths, to render a rain-triggering variation of his performance (111). The storyline also attains a notable signature in the interlocutors whom the frame narrator gives space for comments. This is where, as per these social conversations, Chata’s sculpture of a woman has an entrancing effect (121), but also defamiliarises the certitudes that his people have of themselves, particularly regarding art as well as social and political rectitude. Here, then, in this history in which, through counterpoint, the people perform themselves in contradistinction to the East African slave trade, and where they also encounter themselves in expanded but non-teleological terms, is *mitshimbilo*.

In Okri’s *Dangerous Love* ([1988]1996), *mitshimbilo* has a contrasting turn, in that it is steeped in the West African myth of the spirit child; the subject’s fictive embodiment, Omovo, daringly reflects Africa’s complicity in Trans-

Atlantic slavery, as well as Africa's demise in neo-colonialism (see Gray 2012 and Maithufi 2015). Also, in contradistinction to Mda, the journey motif in Okri is tasked in a reclusive space with a spiritually rich individual, and for whom self-awareness takes place in his consideration of his visual art which he deems inchoate, non-teleological and non-fulfilling. The spirit child is redolent of Wole Soyinka's (1967) Abiku child in his poem, "Abiku". This is how Soyinka describes Abiku: "Wanderer child. It is the same child who dies and returns again and again to plague the mother – Yoruba belief" (28). The Igbo version of Abiku, Ogbanje, can be found, for instance, in Chinua Achebe's (1958) path-breaking novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958). By virtue of being an embodiment of high infant mortality, the diseased corpse is corporally assaulted in ritual therapy in Soyinka and Achebe's respective texts.

In addition to featuring the spirit child figure, Okri's memory project reverberates a Black Atlantic polyglot in his later novel, *Astonishing the Gods* ([1995] 2014). In this text, he presents this subjectivity, together with his family, as being "invisible" (3) and as denizens of an unnamed Atlantic Ocean island. As with Omovo, the trauma in *Astonishing the Gods* neither appears to resonate nor to attain added nuances in realist social textures, because, as Okri argues in his Introduction to this novel (vi), "[i]nvisibility [and the unvoiced] as history", collectively, indexes a "paradoxical condition of redemption". He comments that the "conception" of this book is "oblique": "[t]he catalyst for this birth was ... a lingering sadness for the souls of black slaves re-dreaming the world at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean", but particularly for Okri, "[h]ow to redeem that suffering" (ibid.) and, by implication, to make it his reader's ethical imperative. Attributing this success to what he calls the sense of a consummation of "the inner and outer worlds" (ibid.), Okri rhetorically asks whether, "[i]n a world blinded by the visible[,] might not its opposite [and the unexpressed] be fruitful as a contemplation of the human condition", where, for instance, "accidental discoveries constitute the magic heart of creativity" (vii). This is why, as if elaborating on his preoccupation with memory in *Dangerous Love*, Okri has the key character of *Astonishing the Gods* staying in an Atlantic Ocean island (7), and engaged in an intense reflection.

I argue that the expanded motif of contemplation in Okri's novels constitutes a readership, and that, through this pattern, it paradoxically enables the articulation of the unspeakable of slavery. As projects of memory, the texts ratify the Black experience in the sense in which the leitmotif of the odyssey hails the reader to imagine – hear and see – the Black world as it unfolded in history from across the Atlantic Sea. This is why he is the allegorical figure who, upon beholding himself in the "avenue of mirrors [that] seemed to go forever", "he felt himself becoming more insubstantial, less real" (10) and ultimately transmogrifying into "the Great Basilica of Truth" which made visible to him "the forgotten sword of Justice" "point[ing] to the illuminated

heavens, dazzling the eye with its divine purity” (11). Therefore, his return to the Atlantic Ocean, which he recognises as his ancestral gravesite, imposes a poetic-licensed obligation on the reader. This burden pertains to affirming the universal imperative of redress, and to understanding the Black world as essentially cosmopolitan; that is, to imagine its “*métissage*, the mixture of races and cultures that sweeps away notions of racial purity and singular origin and of which [Edouard] Glissant writes that ‘the poetics of *métissage* is the poetics of Relation’” (Celia Britton 1999: 16). “*Antillanité* [Caribbean-ness], which is Edouard Glissant’s phrasing of “*métissage*”, “stands for the solidarity of a multiethnic and multilingual region in which different Creoles coexist with English, French, Dutch, and Spanish” (in Britton 1999: 2). As the allegorical figure, Okri’s main character stands for the “non-reducible difference of the [Black] other” (11), and for “a force field of possible trajectories” (13). Sarah Fulford (2009: 234), who traces his allegory to a “non-colonized cultural space within the spirit of the people”, points a way to the complex evolution and transportation of the Abiku narrative to the postcolonial context of Okri’s fiction. It is also not this article’s intention to venture into this direction.) At the same time, within “Relation”, identity is shrouded in “opacity” (18-19) in the autochthonous or indigenous sense – or in its issuing out of its own system of knowledge in the sense of being “subversive” and of “conceal[ing] meanings, thereby turning the master’s language against him” (25). In the extreme case scenario, “Relation” can take the form of “detour”, which is a tactic that the colonised uses to fake stupidity while, at the same time to fellow oppressed, the stratagem enfolds a sophisticated register of defiance and self-assertion (29). All these key aspects of “Relation”, Glissant argues, are underpinned by being aware of the fact that, being dependent upon the language that the coloniser uses, resistance is “counter-poetic” (3, 11). As I demonstrate in the second part of this article, Okri nuances the Black Atlantic polyglot with his adaptation of the Western African subjectivity of the spirit child, and with how this reworking adds to what can be argued to be a postmodern proliferation of voices – à la *mitshimbilo*.

Neither does the synopsis of *Sculptors of Mapungubwe* that the previous paragraphs present seem to form the basis of any existing scholarly focus on this text (see, for instance, Johan Jacobs 2015). Nor does it seem that a dialogue on the trope of *mitshimbilo* has been done, comparing a text that is a hybrid of Black Atlantic polyglot and West African such as Okri’s, on the one hand, and that is TshiVenda in orientation, on the other hand. What appears to be common is how African cultural models insinuate themselves within the Black Atlantic Internationalism, as opposed to showing how the former, first, span a diversified field as possibly an ancient form of the Internationalism of the South and how, second, they expand on the latter’s possibilities. Without setting up a hierarchy of literary values, I privilege an intimate engagement with *mitshimbilo*. This is by virtue of it signposting a Black intellectual

archive, the collective trauma mediation specifics of which are overt and explicitly affirmative of Africa in a global world informed by unequal North-South relations. Towards the end of this article, I will briefly comment on the distinctions.

I theorise *mitshimbilo* – the respective concerts of multiple voices in *Sculptors of Mapungubwe* and of those at the core of the key subject’s rumination of Africa’s Trans-Atlantic slavery in Okri’s afore-mentioned novels – by invoking a series of models of everyday culture. These templates cast insight into the sense in which, in an oral setting, a people narrate themselves, and the degrees to which their heteroglossia gel into a portrait of bondedness. These paradigms also reveal the craftsmanship that produces such stories, particularly when they cumulatively build on allegory and when they construct alterity such as in Shamanism.

First, I draw on Mieke Bal’s (*On Storytelling: Essays in Narratology* 1991) critique of Gérard Genette’s definitions of focalisation, specifically of his concept of narrative perspective. In this book in which Bal highlights the shortcomings of a structuralist conception of narration, she critiques a “Bakhtinian view” that “narrative” is “an unordered multitude of voices” (1991: 1). Before summarising Bal, it is crucial to note that, in her response to Genette, she redefines and marshals his concept of “focalisation”. Pertinent to this article, I highlight “focalisation” in terms of “perspective and narrating agent” (75). In this framework, Bal constructs narratology according to a “non-coincidence between technical speaker, or voice, and ideological “speaker,” or focaliser.” In the process, she “get[s] away from the conflation between visibility and space” (3). What she establishes through this disruption is “room for ideological subjects intruding into the speaking subject’s discourse while the latter, by virtue of the narrative mode, can continue to perceive and present itself as unified” (1). The interruption foregrounds “heterogeneous subjectivities” (2). Elaborating upon them, Bal distinguishes three types of focalisation. The first, non-focalised narrative, is where “the narrator says more than any of the characters knows”, while the second, “internalised focalisation”, is where the “narrator” says only what a character “knows”. By contrast, the third, which I adapt and expand upon hereafter in a theoretical explication of *mitshimbilo*, is “external focalisation”; it is when the narrator “says less than the character knows, with the latter thus being represented from the outside” (77).

Calling on the theory of narratology, as in the above paragraph, essentially provides details to the reading of Shamanism such as the previous article – which is the primary rationale for this current discussion (Maithufi 2015) – attributes to Dubois (2009). The Shaman, Dubois argues, “undertakes trips” to “spatially differentiated worlds” or “multileveled cosmos” (47), “pursuing, confronting, cajoling, and confounding spirit entities on behalf of his .... community” (3). This reliance on Dubois did not enable a notable attention to the respective narrative styles of *Dangerous Love* and *Sculptors of*

*Mapungubwe*, select primary texts then, particularly in as far as each pertains to the highlights of the people’s bondedness as is supposedly initiated in the Shaman’s journeys to “spatially differentiated worlds” (47). It is on account of this citing of Bal’s theory that I proceed to elaborate on the degree to which orality, as also examined in select scholarship on Mda (see, for instance, Klopper 2011; Maithufi 2016), illuminates how stories “deepen” and “broaden” a people’s identity narrative in the Gramscian sense of organic intellectualism ([1971]1999: 117). In Ruth Finnegan’s ([1982]1987: 11) definition, “primary orality” refers to “the orality of culture totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print”. She continues by arguing that “orality” exists as “residue or deposit” in virtually all modern print cultures, sometimes as a template that “human beings” invoke in order to tell the story (11), itself a tool of lived social cohesion – as captured in the definition I have made above of *mitshimbilo* (“wanderlust disease”). To rephrase by returning to this key concept, this time calling on another theory which is Walter Benjaminian ([1968]1999) in orientation, the storyteller’s purpose is to “bring [experience] out of [the audience] anew” (91). For Benjamin, the storyteller need not have been a traveller, because, to the listeners, s/he has the aura of one “who has come from afar” in as much as from “the man who has stayed at home” (84). Benjamin continues that what is important is to recognise the institution which produces the storyteller:

If peasants and seamen were past masters of storytelling, the artisan class was its university. In it was combined the lore of faraway places, such as a much-travelled man brings home, with the lore of the past, as it best reveals itself to natives of a place. (85)

It is, therefore, also on these grounds that I expand on how the imagined Self informs a cultural outlook – such as the current article identifies in terms of Mda’s reworking of the TshiVenda concept of *mitshimbilo* and Okri’s reimagining of the Black Atlantic polyglot.

### ***Mitshimbilo*: Shamanism to Boot**

Three key passages in *Sculptors of Mapungubwe* stand out, illustrating the broad scope within which this novel phrases *mitshimbilo* in the narrative that the preceding section of the article theorizes in terms of everyday culture – Bal’s narratology, Finnegan’s primary orality, Gramsci’s organic intellectualism and Benjamin’s storyteller being key. The first, relying on Chata as the primary informant and source of his biography, or what Bal (1991: 77) would refer to as “internalised focalisation”, is evident in “Chata regaled” his audiences “with stories of how he and his Azande companions traversed the land of the Barbaroi ... to the land of Azande” (Mda 2013: 51). The second, highlighting the frame narrator as the focaliser who “says more

than any of the characters knows, with the latter thus being represented from the outside.” (Bal 1991: 77), is evident in the narrator’s “[Chata’s] travels were amazing, but the worlds he portrayed were so strange that the Mapungubweans failed to recreate them in their imaginations” (Mda 2013: 50). Indeed, the novel presents him as “A STORYTELLER” – one whose “stories professed to be true accounts of his travels in foreign lands” (50). The difference between the first two perspectives is that, while the first merely presents information of Chata’s interaction with his people, the second goes a step further; it presents an analysis of the contrasting imaginative spaces that he and his audiences occupy. The third, citing communal lore and common knowledge, is apparent, notably, at the end of the novel. This is when the omniscient storyteller says that, as Chata and his wife and son leave Mapungubwe for abroad, they “were all seized by *mitshimbilo*, the disease of the wanderers .... One never knew with *mitshimbilo*” (227).

Particularly in the last quotation, the novel presents a sense of people’s consensus on the disposition termed *mitshimbilo*. However, it is the kind of unanimity which is open-ended. In other words, Mda seems to argue, it is immaterial to query the veracity of this story by, for instance, probing whether the audiences hear this story through Chata’s first person narrative perspective, or through the frame narrator’s view. The point is that the common understanding in the existence of *mitshimbilo* implies a communality of alternatives or, to be precise, to new-found and evolving intellectualising. In an oral storytelling environment, these alterities are heard through external focalisation, as introduced earlier in the synopsis of the primary text and later – in the same section – theorised in the previous section through Finnegan’s ([1982]1987) concept of “primary orality”, Gramsci’s framework of “organic intellectualism” ([1971]1991) and Benjamin’s model of “the storyteller” ([1968]1999).

The limitlessness that the above paragraph portrays of the novel’s outline of *mitshimbilo* makes visible possibilities beyond those that institutional frameworks and that a single genre delimit. This is a subject that the text conveys with intricate details, the kind of which prioritises an expanded sense of awareness. It is introduced through the frame narrator’s character sketch of Chata’s boyhood and seeming maturation within the trade of sculpting. The story is that of Chata – reminiscent of Omovo – being an artist; from his boyhood, he “created animals that never existed anywhere except in his imagination. Some of these were three-legged, had horns growing all around their necks, beaks like vultures and wings on their tails” (Mda 2013: 28). The departure from teleology and from realism in the previous quotation is strange to his stepfather, Zwanga (31), and prejudicially looked down upon, initially, by the laity or laypeople at large. However, as the plot unfolds, presenting *mitshimbilo* as the people’s expanded sense of self-performance, the same storyline depicts them being enraptured in “the stories” that he tells them, “profess[ing] to be true accounts of his travels in foreign lands” (37).



Ironically, through its seeming magical quality, a sense of bondedness spontaneously happens between the storyteller, Chata and his audiences. In the novel’s scheme of things, these listeners appear to be embodied, at first and temporarily, in the figure of Chata’s father, Zwanga (31), who, initially, is nonplussed by his son’s experimentation with non-realism. As the story develops, it is Zwanga who says that “Mitshimbilo does not last forever. Wanderings come to an end” (39). This is indicative of ontological consummation, to put it metaphorically, between the fictional audiences and the character focaliser, and of fiction and reality. In other words, the protagonist and his listeners mature simultaneously in the craft or imagination, which is essentially the story in all its privileging of fantasy. However, this growth would not happen without there being a particular archive that the people reference in order to imagine of themselves and of the wider unknown world. And this is why, when the novel concludes, the frame narrator comments that “the disease of the wanderers” does not end; “One never knew with mitshimbilo” (227).

A previous discussion (Maithufi 2016) of this plot detail does not concern itself with *mitshimbilo*, let alone identify it as being embraced in the trance experience. This is despite this article’s argument that germane to the trance is what Winkelman (2000: 88) calls an “out-of-body experience” and “astral projection” towards the plights of marginalized peoples. The trance experience was presented as a cultural and spiritual artefact of the people whom Mda’s respective oeuvre cites and affirms as the original people of Southern Africa. Building on this anthropological bent of scholarship, the article posited that the distinct focalisations embedded, unwittingly, resonances in the fact of belonging to the !Kung (Mda 2013: 32), the people’s stereotype of the hunter-gatherers of Southern Africa. By virtue of resonating in the shamanic rituals of the dominant amaXhosa and Basotho, the trance experience chiefly testifies to the dissolution of the Bantu dominant order in Southern Africa while, at the same time, granting it a semblance of a coherent alternative to the Islamic South-destined East African slave trade. In other words, the alleged itinerant lifestyle of the !Kung is indexed in the organic intellectualism that, as noted earlier, broadens and deepens *mitshimbilo*. Effectively, this non-realism, paradoxically, sketches an adapted trans-nationalism of the South. In Hofmeyr’s (2007) argument, trans-nationalism of the South contrasts with the Black Atlantic which, as Paul Gilroy (1993) submits, is steeped in the North/South binary opposition and in creolisation. In its privileging of the kind of art the mobilisation of the animal subject of which undoes the human logos (cf. Sewlall’s concept of “post-humanism” 2020), this form of identity has yet to be fully appreciated.

Arguing for the narrative framework of *Sculptors of Mapungubwe* in terms of the post-humanism that *mitshimbilo* enunciates raises the need to respond to the charge of plagiarism which Andrew Offenburger (2008) levelled at Mda’s *The Heart of Redness* (2013). It is not this article’s intention to venture

into this contestation, even though these texts – both written by Mda – draw on live popular cultures that have survived the violence of colonial modernities. (I am convinced that the rejoinder to Offenburger’s article penned by, for instance, Mda (2008) himself, and Kate Highman (2011), correspondingly, suffice for now.) However, I deem it fitting to isolate one key germ from this controversy, so as to consider the key theme of shamanism, and this jewel pertains to how to account for the origin of *mitshimbilo*. According to Offenburger, Mda liberally borrows from Jeff Pieres’s *The Dead Will Arise* (1989); so freely that he, Mda, ostensibly commits plagiarism (Offenburger 2008: 165). Needless to note that, in his response, Mda (2008), ironically repeating his allegiance to Pieres (1989: 200), questions Offenburger’s attribution of the originality of the Cattle-Killing discourse in *The Heart of Redness* to Pieres. Without undermining the wealth of scholarship that Pieres invests in his *The Dead Will Arise*, Mda (2008: 200), again in his retort to Offenburger, recalls that, through his mother’s people whom he tracks back to the Khoikhoi (ibid.), he often heard the phrases that Pieres uses in his history of this tragedy (obviously long before his own encounter with Pieres’s book).

Returning to what might be the founding archive of *mitshimbilo*, core to which is shamanic practice, it is timely that its discursive purchase – indeed, its articulation in external focalisations – and sense of expanded consciousness is reemphasised; it is neither copyrightable nor allegorical in the way in which allegory affirms the human subject as logos. From the very beginning of the plot, the narrator attributes alterity to storytelling, depicting it as, cognitively, a superior preoccupation. In this venture, irony is the narrator’s tour de force: the “year [is] of the mirror” (Mda 2013: 3), on account of the apparent trivial preoccupation with the mirror brought to them during the Middle Ages by the slave “traders from Arabia” who had come “to Sofala” (3). Later, on the same opening page of the novel, the narrator states that there were “only two known mirrors in Mapungubwe”; one owned by “the Royal Sculptor, Rendani, son of Zwanga” (4) and another by Chata (ibid.). But this disclosure of ownership raises the curtain for the dramatisation of the framework that Mda juxtaposes against the violence and positivism such as they underpin the ideological construction of Africa. For the purpose of this discussion, this main subject concerns the potential of the story to break free from the semblances of ownership or patent and, still, anchor cohesion within a people. Hence, even though, to the people of Mapungubwe, the current period is “1223 CE”, they do not intellectualise their time in terms of the Gregorian calendar. This is possibly because this is an institutionalised way of thinking or experience. Instead, and consistent with the concept of dance which features in this novel as a metonym of coherence at social and cosmic levels, individuals counterpoise this calendar to “carnivals of harvests and cycles of drought” (3). Thus, the story of the person whose dance triggers the

upending of the calamity such as drought is crucial to this novel’s intellectualising of time, and of its insurgent mode.

In thus looking back, but also excavating the present for ingenuities apposite to a re-theorising and re-positioning of the African past for the present, this article proceeds to examine how, in contrast to Mda, the select texts of Okri craft shamanism in interwoven threads of everyday and local culture(s) and how they, in turn, visualise the African “FutureS”. According to Susan Arndt & and Nadja Ofuatey-Alazard (2017: 1),

The future is on. Always arriving and yet to arrive at the same time – in temporalities that are causally entangled. What is, is because of what has been, and what will be is shaped by what has been happening ever since. But just as in the case of the past, the future neither will nor has ever simply happen/ed. Futures have been made and unmade, remembered and forgotten in the multiversity of competing agencies, interests, and accesses to power and privileges.

Applying the above-quoted definition of the “future” to the analysis given in the first section and the discussion given above of *mitshimbilo*, what we have is a shading of Afro-futurism. Writing about Afro-futurism, Kodwo Eshun tracks it to its contestation of “imperial racism”. Eshun notes that, having “denied blacks the right to belong to the enlightenment project”, racism “thus creat[ed] an urgent need to demonstrate a substantive [Black African] historical presence” (2003: 287). Eshun argues that Afro-futurism is a response to “futurism”, an early twentieth century Italian art philosophy which glorified speed, internet and mobility above history. Through its key invention of Sci-Fi, Futurism depicts Africa in dystopian terms. As an approach that celebrates Africa or African identities, Afro-futurism focused on digging up African utopian futures so as “to hide the [neo-colonial] present in all its unhappiness”. Here, the “intercultural vectors of Black Atlantic temporality [are positioned] towards the proleptic as much as the retrospective” (290), and towards refuting Sci-Fi’s “power of falsification”, “its drive to rewrite history and the will to deny plausibility” (292). Afro-futurism is thus a mono-chronological venture, because it creates “temporal complications and anachronistic episodes that disturb the [modernist] linear time of progress ... that condemned black subjects to history [and to being objects]” (298). These “dislocations”, Eshun (299), tweaking W.B. DuBois’s “double consciousness”, says make multiple consciousness possible.

In being generically Sci-Fi, Afro-futurism is unable to tap into the African archives such as they are organic and defiant of commodification and copyright. In contrast to Afro-futurism, told through the respective character and spirit child narrator focaliser, Okri’s *Dangerous Love* and *Astonishing the Gods* detail a wide language canvas. In what follows, I discuss the Black Atlantic polyglot in these novels as being indicative of this backdrop, showing how it resonates with *mitshimbilo* and in line with the theories of everyday

culture through which I have read this template towards the conclusion of the first part of this article. This, basically, entails demonstrating what Okri brings into and shapes Black Atlantic into a paradigm of Shamanism.

As already noted earlier in this article, in casting the respective frame and first-person narratives of *Dangerous Love* and *Astonishing the Gods* within the contemplation of Africans who perished during the Trans-Atlantic Ocean (see Okri [1995]2014: 27, for instance), these texts affirm the Black African experience. The extensive evocation of the destination of the sea as a grave site suggests a syncretic deployment of postmodernism, but also of the African ritual of the turning of the bones.<sup>2</sup> While, in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*, (2010) the sea washes away all attempts to solidify narrative, in *Astonishing the Gods*, oceanic water constitutes an important medium that allows the ritual performer to travel to the physical site of perish in order to offer supplications. In turning to allegory in *Astonishing the Gods*, Okri establishes the proximity and rhetoric required to hail, into subjects, the readers who articulate a distinct spiritual orientation, such as those who turn the bones, as already noted. The understanding here is that, being the invisible of modern history, to rephrase Okri ([1995]2014: vi), the dead clamour to be ratified. Answering this call means being adept at hearing it, and this is possible in a capacity that exceeds the mere five senses of perception and of experiencing things only in their tangible nature, or as being comprehensible through one-dimensional logos. The setting, resplendent in mirrors, marble and glitter, "bliss", music and "celestial glow" (10), is understandable through the Black Atlantic theory of Glissant. As already discussed, Glissant's "Poetics of Relation" is counter-poetic in various tactics, simply because the colonised, knowing their entanglement in the hegemonic order's vast discourse, can only undermine it from within in strategies that are grotesque in mode, for instance. It is this collective that this article attempts to draw into a locution with *mitshimbilo*.

What *Astonishing the Gods* ([1995]2014) also asks for is the poetic mode, articulated from an ethereal space such as that of the reader who ratifies the African experience without elevating it to an essentialist status. The protagonist's companion guide in the first two books of this novel puts it well when he says that

Our sages learnt that we tend to repeat our suffering if we have not learnt fully all that can be learnt from it. And so we had to experience our suffering completely while it happened so it would be so deeply lodged in our memory and in our desire for a higher life that we would never want to experience the suffering again, in form (47).

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2. Memorialising, as a multifaceted subject, receives extensive analysis in, for instance, such volumes as that edited by Richard Werbner 1998. It is not this article's intention to discuss the nuances of the gravesite visiting ritual in *Astonishing the Gods*, safe to argue that it is a typical/classic African ritual.

In a later scene as he and the main character wonder in the unnamed island, the former expands upon the significance of modesty by reading it into the confluence between scholarship and the politics of identity. In this elaboration, the uplifting frustrations that Omovo has with his artistic creation in *Dangerous Love* can be heard. It is because, as this companion argues, the artist, at that point, is tapping into a reserve that s/he did not know existed and, hence, the resulting product never receives public recognition and scholarly acclaim (51). All this is heard externally from this constituted reader through, paradoxically, silence, and contributing to the race’s identity. In contrast, the praise for humble artistic ingenuity is audible through different focalisers such as Zwanga – in his intrigued fascination with Chata’s non-realist clay figurines in *Sculptors of Mapungubwe*, as already discussed. I therefore deem the reader to be an embodiment of one melody within the concert that this text conducts.

*Astonishing the Gods* ([1995] 2014) articulates and sustains its syncretic mode through its life-affirming and Marxist twist on the spirit child. His melody, no longer the dirge of the first generation of African writers, as already stated above, is a curious play on ideology and discourse. While noting the death of the African slaves in the Judeo-Christian sense of matter having returned to matter – being water, air, fire and dust (27, cf.38, 64), he, at the same and in the praise-singer trope, extols them as part of the collective whose blood and sweat lighten the institutions of learning in the First-World (17).

He chimes an interesting counterpoint to, say, Teju Cole’s wanderer key character in *Open City* (2011), the novel that tracks the African man’s stumbling upon the dilapidated and accidentally opened graves of African slaves in his wandering through New York City. In substance, the homecoming story is the stuff of memory, in the sense in which, in *Astonishing the Gods*, it entails beholding the white bones of the Atlantic Ocean-perished slaves (Okri 2014: 27). But, in contradistinction to Cole and in a seeming expansion of the postmodernist vein, Okri (2014: 44) saturates his epic in the theory of evolution in so far as he tracks it back to the basic elements – being water, air, fire and dust (27, cf.38, 64). Under this weight, blackness takes a transcendental hue, easily resonating with human plight and of its articulations across worldly political, literary and cultural periods. This is why, as if working from an infinite canvas, the aesthete is continually in the process of trying to comprehend his practice (Fulford 2009: 242) – sometimes failing as if redolent of the postmodern dissolution of the subject. In *Astonishing the Gods* (Okri [1995]2014: 14), for instance, the image of the protagonist invokes a Greek mythological seer and prophet, Tiresias; he stands on a productive and illuminating cusp; “an understanding of things before his time, beyond his life and quest, an understanding that flowed through from all the past and the future ages.”

In conclusion, centring on a select fiction of Mda and Okri, this article has attempted to discuss Shamanism as a site of spirituality in African literatures, noting that it is about the orphic quest. It has done so through Mda's rephrasing of the TshiVenda trope of *mitshimbilo* in as far as it surfaces in interlocking narratives – all collectively portraying an orphic quest. These voices were, in turn, closely examined for expanding consciousness and for generating knowledge through handpicked models of everyday culture. It acknowledges that the premise of *mitshimbilo* bends towards Mda's novel, by virtue of stretching farther back to the Middle Ages along the Eastern African coastline and foregrounding Mapungubwe as cultural heritage. However, the intention was meant to be an appreciation of the contrasts in literary and cultural outlooks between Mda and Okri, as opposed to a value-judging exercise. (The analysis was wary of the need to depart from and, paradoxically, to coalesce within a particular point – even as this commencement proved to be a point of significant divergence.) This is why the discussion has been alert to the fact that the search for reclamation in Okri's novels, embodied in the West African figure of the spirit child, is saturated in Black Atlantic polyglot. The examination endeavoured to be a critical excursion – à la *mitshimbilo* – of the degree to which the figure of the Abiku transforms into an embodiment of Tiresias. This is also the extent to which Abiku tames the wild seas of postmodernism in order to stake a claim on Africa's behalf, and to which it rephrases external focalisation by constituting a postcolonial readership. The product, as with the multi-accented key narrative in *Sculptors of Mapungubwe*, is an index of people's bondedness and of its authority outside of copyright.

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