

Hybridisation in the poetry of Christopher Okigbo: A study of Labyrinths

Michael Onyeisi Ejiodu^{1*} 

¹Department of Languages (English and Literary Studies), Faculty of Arts, University of Delta, Nigeria,
michael.ejiodu@unidel.edu.ng

*Corresponding author

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Abstract: Christopher Okigbo is a hybrid creature (this claim may sound adventurous and outlandish), but who is not. This applies to both his personality and creative efforts. This phenomenon is not unique to Okigbo but extends to all colonial subjects. The African continent has passed through crucibles of re-orientation geared towards adjusting the mentality and psychology of Africans towards hating everything African and loving and adoring everything Western. This has created in Africans a dual kind of personality, which in the present circumstance has manifested as a hybrid subject. Hybridity in the African manifests in the overall disposition of the African. Hybridisation/Hybridity is carefully and profusely demonstrated by Okigbo in his poetry. This paper examines the origin and nature of the concepts of hybridisation and hybridity. Then, their deployment in Labyrinths was investigated. The paper demonstrates that Christopher Okigbo deployed hybridisation in the crafting of Labyrinths. The paper concludes that Okigbo employed hybridisation as a stylistic device in his poetry for the advancement of the treatment of his themes, especially those of dual personality, culture conflict, disorientation as a result of inability to identify and deal with one's personality, and lack of confidence in the African.

Keywords: African, Christopher Okigbo, Colonialism, Hybrid, Hybridisation, Hybridity, Western

Biographical notes: Dr Michael Onyeisi Ejiodu is a Senior Lecturer with the Department of Languages (English and Literary Studies), Faculty of Arts, University of Delta, Nigeria. His special area of interest is Literary Studies with an emphasis on poetry.

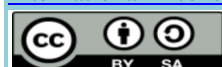
1. Introduction

Poetry derives its material from the collective experiences of a people. In life there are numerous accidents of experience. In fact, life and living are accidents. One such experiences is captured in the concept of hybridisation, which some have viewed pejoratively. This paper takes a look at the concept of hybridisation/hybridity as having to do with the combination of the traits of at least two different sources to create an offspring, which is often beneficiary if properly conducted. Whereas hybridity is the core concept, hybridisation relates to the process. Hybrid is the offspring. The hybrid usually manifests the characteristics of the parent stock, be they dominant or recessive. These concepts apply to the works of Christopher Okigbo. This paper explores the stylistic trajectory in Christopher Okigbo's poetry, specifically in *Labyrinths*. The manifestation of his experimentation of applying hybridisation in his poetry has led to a richer poetic rendition, both in terms of thematic realization as well as aesthetic display. This is a major manifestation of post-colonial African literature, poetry inclusive. Christopher Okigbo is one of the foremost poets that have emerged from the continent of Africa, after its experience with the colonial West. It will be equally important to state that in his writings, especially poetry, he commented greatly and aptly on the socio-political atmosphere of his time, and even projected into the future. He spoke about the Nigerian-Biafran war of the late 1960s to 1970 in which he died. In addition to this, he wrote about the dual nature of the Africans of post-colonial era of which he was one.

2. Review of Related Literature: Concept of Hybridisation

Hybridity as a concept has been widely associated with agriculture, and specifically horticulture. It simply relates to the combination of the traits of at least two different species in a fresh offspring which manifests the inherited characteristics. According to DIA (2014, p. 32), "hybridity has been defined in different ways by various scholars, but to put it in simple words, it is the fact of being cross-bred or living in-between two cultures. The concept of hybridity has been theorized from different viewpoints by many thinkers in the field of literature". According to Bacon and Hill

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(2024: 2), hybrids are offspring of two different species. Another author Houghton (2022: 533) opines that "hybridity is a term that describes the complexity of being multiple things. The word hybrid first recalls animals such as the mythical chimera, or perhaps hybrid vehicles, something that is a combination of multiple things". This justifies the combination of resemblance in characteristics. Also, Bacon and Hill (2024: 1) have stated that, "hybridization is the result of sexual reproduction between species, usually congeneric species or subspecific taxa, but can occur between species from different genera". This is the reality of existence of life and living, be the process through sexual or asexual methods.

Another issue to be taken cognisance of is that there are times when the agencies of the desired or harvested traits are from different super-structures. According to Karjalainen, Heinonen and Taylor (2022: 1), hybridisation is about the mixtures of human and non-human, of nature and culture in quite complex ways. The terms Hybridity, hybridisation, hybridism and hybrid share similar meanings, being of the same root. These terms, according to Karjalainen, Heinonen and Taylor (2022: 2), "designate processes in which discrete social practices and structures, that existed in separate ways, combine to generate new structures, objects, and practices in which such elements mix. The terms embrace name, concept, process and so on. Continuing, Karjalainen, Heinonen and Taylor (2022: 2) opine that, "in biology and chemistry, hybridisation equates to a process of combining different varieties of organisms to create a hybrid". The organism (hybrid) so created in all essence is an offspring. In agriculture, the offspring is seen as an improved version of the parents. However, in literature the blending of the characteristics from the different parents is acknowledged, only that in some situations, especially in the past, the new creation was perceived pejoratively. This is due to the non conformity of the hybrid to full identification with one of the parents or the other. This has led to some level of unpredictability of the nature and behaviour of the hybrid. Perhaps, it is for this reason that Badjak, Majid and Magfirah (2022: 628) have opined about hybridisation thus: "The outcome of that experiences between distinctive societies is hybridity, a mix of different cultures, ... always in the area of contradict (sic) and ambivalence that make claims against a hierarchy of purity culture." Still discussing the ambivalent nature of the hybrid, Ishtiaq, Yasmin and Kamal (2024: 105) say, "the ambivalent hybrid existence of diaspora identity is a central focus, characterized by its negotiation with the dominant culture of the host land while simultaneously harboring a sense of attachment to native roots, often shaped by inherent instabilities". To this one may add the contribution of Faiz and Asghar (2024: 654): "In the contemporary global scenario, the identities of nations and individuals are continuously shaping and reshaping themselves through diaspora and cultural contact". This is the fate of post-colonial Africans. They are ambivalent, and are constantly in negotiations with dominant cultures, only that this time it is the invading culture that is favoured. To this, one may add that the boundary between diaspora and home has been broken down and melted. Geographical location almost does not determine diasporan status today. What matter in this era is the nature and/or attitudes of individuals, irrespective of where they live.

Hybridity by its very nature is ever changing. The fluid nature of hybridity and hybridization has been brought to bear in literature. Sadiq, Tulder and Maas (2022: 2), are of the opinion that, "... hybridization literature does not regard hybridity as a finite set of possibilities but more as a continuum with possible configurations and dimensions". The implication of this is that hybridity in literature is ever evolving. This flux and ever changing nature of the hybrid on its own and in literature may have accounted for why it has been viewed pejoratively. The whole ideas are captured by Houghton (2022: 533) where he states that, "in reference to literature, a hybrid is described as a work built out of multiplicity". Continuing, Houghton (2022: 534) says, "hybrid literature is a genre that takes ' features from multiple parents or genres, mixing them to create a new entity This multiplicity could be multiple stories and forms within the one novel". All these are pointers to the ways the hybrid is generally perceived. However, there is a shift in orientation in recent times, especially in literature.

It is worth noting that the concept of hybridity is now seen in a more positive light than it was previously. According to Al Areqi (2017: 53-54), "The word has its biology and botany origin where it designates a crossing between two species that give birth to a third one called hybrid. In recent times, hybridity and hybridization have been extended to encompass many senses that are tied with postcolonial studies and to exhibit the relationship between the colonizers and the colonized". The usage of the concept in postcolonial study is a major shift from the paradigm of agriculture, and it is in this shift that it has found relevance in literature and literary criticism. In another breath, Al Areqi (2027: 54) has posited that there are positive attributes to be garnered from hybridity. According to him, "the postcolonial theorists and critics differ in their understanding of the term hybridity/hybridization from cultural perspective and its consequences and connotations that could be valued by some theorists as positive alteration while the others look at this sort of modification as negative...".

Another author who has dwelt on the concept of hybridity is Jan Baetens. He, in his work, points out that the whole idea of hybridity is pervading the atmosphere of the arts. In a most expansive presentation, Baetens (2013: 2) posits:

it is difficult indeed to deny the overpowering presence of hybrid forms and practices in contemporary art and writing as it is difficult to make up our minds on the exact significance of their spread. Combination of sign types within a given work (multimodal "image-texts," comics and photo-novels, sound poetry, etc.), adaptation and remediation of one medium by another (filmic adaptations of novels or, the other way round, novelizations of films, some of which are already adapted from previous books, etc.), and, more generally, the simultaneous elaboration of works in various media (the phenomenon that Henry Jenkins has called "convergence" or trans-media culture) —all these practices are just some examples of the countless hybridizations which have become so mainstream today that they have ceased to be mere hype and have shaped a new hegemony. Hybridity is, in all possible meanings of the word, a must.... A good case in point is the relationship between literature and photography. Nearly two decades ago, the 1995 anthology by Jane Rabb

disclosed the many encounters and mutual influences Rabb used the neutral term "interactions" of writers and photographers.

Continuing, Baetens (2013: 3) adds some of the scopes that hybridity spans: "...covering also intermediary solutions such as 'impure mediality' (oral poetry in print or print poetry read aloud, for instance), on the other". It is in these areas that hybridisation becomes quite obvious in the poetry of Christopher Okigbo, as well as other poets, especially Africans.

Sylvia Sasse aligns with the idea of transfer of the concept and theory from one field to another. This time he ties originality of application to biology instead of agriculture, and from thence to other fields of human endeavours. Citing Kapchan and Strong, Sasse (2022: 907) says,

hybridity is one of those concepts in cultural studies that have undergone transfer, not only between theories but also, strikingly, between disciplines, from biology to the philosophy of language, whence it was then adopted by cultural and post-colonial studies. Hence it is used in the analysis of language, genres and identities as well as plants, animals and cultures.

Going further, Sasse traces the usage of the term in cultural studies to Mikhail M. Bakhtin. According to Sasse (2022: 907),

in cultural studies, hybridity is always discussed with reference to Mikhail M. Bakhtin's use of the term. Homi Bhabha, for instance, points to the work of Bakhtin when he describes hybridity as a characteristic of language and culture. Bhabha describes hybridity as a 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge. Here, he relates the processes of hybridisation not only to language but also to practices of colonisation, which he considers to involve reciprocal processes of appropriation giving rise to a hybrid third quality, the third space, belonging to neither the colonised nor the colonised culture.

It is in its association and application within colonialism that hybridisation has acquired the pejorative attention. Also, the production of inferior species, as perceived, gives it the negative interpretation. The inferiority of species calls to mind the idea of politics of races. For example, the offsprings of "Whites" and "Blacks" are neither whites nor blacks, but perceived as inferior to the whites. This is without recourse to the fact that how it is to the whites is how it is to the blacks: a tempering of the "original", if there is anything "original". The negative interpretation of the hybrid is a racial one.

Another author that has shed more light on the concept and workings of hybridity is Pedro Andrade. The author tries to highlight the intricacies in the whole concepts of hybridity, drawing attention to the fact of the generation of a new product which is a blend of the essence from the *original* species. According to Andrade (n.d: 510),

hybridization refers to a mode of knowledge and action associated with the hybrid. And this last idea denotes the interstices, the network of relationships, the places and instances that, while merging their essences and experiences, generate new productions and reproductions of themselves. Indeed, the hybrid is the essence of almost everything that exists. Nothing is pure, either in nature or in society. Since Antiquity, this term has been associated with the ideas of mixing, heterogeneity, mestizaje, monstrosity, etc. One of its genealogic roots is the Latin word *hybrida*, used to categorize the offspring of the cross breeding of a wild boar and a domestic female pig. The term gradually acquired the meaning of mixing two or more things of a different nature, in various areas of practice and in diverse branches of knowledge.

The use of the word "original" as highlighted above is deliberate. This is due to the fact that in reality there is nothing like "original", all being hybrids of some sorts: Everything is a mixture of two or more other things.

The examination of the concept of hybridity becomes interesting when one considers that hybridity as a concept is not pure either. It involves and is used in a mixture of varied circumstances. According to Guignery (2011: 1), "'Hybridity is ... itself a hybrid concept', according to Robert Young in *Colonial Desire*. Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race (2005), ... has become a buzzword in cultural and literary studies, and is at times used carelessly to describe a disparate body of subjects in widely differing domains". Guignery continues on the same page: "the concept is widespread in the English speaking sphere (Great Britain, North America, and the postcolonial world), but is also relevant in the context of literatures in French, Spanish and Portuguese (from Latin America and the Caribbean in particular), which accounts for its extensive development". And on the next page he adds that, "the word 'hybridity' has its origins in biology and botany where it designates a crossing between two species by cross-pollination that gives birth to a third 'hybrid' species". This later part aligns with the position held by most of the other scholars about the origin of the concepts of hybridity and hybridisation.

The concept of hybridisation is relatively new in literature. At best, it could rightly be described as a post-colonial theory. In relation to the history of written poetry, Okigbo's poetry, which is largely post-colonial, is also relatively new. Nonetheless, Okigbo's poetry has enjoyed quite a lot of attention from critics and readers. This is incontrovertible. He has been studied from numerous thematic and stylistic perspectives. However, not much could be said about the studies from the perspective of hybridisation, hence this study.

3. Hybridisation in Okigbo's *Labyrinths*: A Textual Analysis

One striking feature of Okigbo's poetry is the blend of African and Western ideas and elements (including classical references). This gives birth to hybrids which are neither absolutely African nor Western. However, worthy of note is that the offspring produced from the marriage is not negative, but more positive than could be imagined. This is due to the fact that the best traits from both parents are employed. Some critics have posited that hybrids are negative, while others have said otherwise. In the case of literature, and especially poetry, hybridity has given birth to a richer

production. This accounts for one of the reasons Okigbo has been classified as one of Africa's foremost poets. From the usages of imagery, language or diction, themes and ambience, including the blending of written poetry with elements of orality, Okigbo stands tall, and like a priest, he evokes the spirits of the ancestors and God/gods in his poetry to the enrichment of poetry and the lives of the readers.

One technique employed in the hybridisation process is the involvement of the concept of "Heavensgate" in the world view of African worship. This is encapsulated in cultural practices and beliefs. This is further reinforced by the following lines: "out of the depths my cry: / give ear and hearken ... (p. 1). This is a reverberation of the verses of the *Bible* (Psalm 130:1-2). So, in "Heavensgate" there is a blend of Africa and the West: a blend of African and Christian religious practices: a hybridisation. This blend gives more depth to the poem, especially as it is the opening poem of "The Passage" in "Heavensgate" which is a part of *Labyrinths*. This is introductory for what is to come in the blend of African and Western Cultures. It is in a formulaic of prayer to the Christian God, while the prayer is to Idoto, an African goddess. The full power of the African goddess is brought to the fore in the next few lines:

DARK WATERS of the beginning.

Rays, violet and short, piercing the gloom,
foreshadow the fire that is dreamed of.

Rainbow on far side, arched like a boa bent to kill,
foreshadows the rain that is dreamed of. (p. 2)

Immediately following these lines, the poet, in the next stanza introduces an Imagery that reeks of Western livelihood. These images are anchored on "orangery" and "wagtail", which although now exist in Africa, but were only introduced by the white at their advent. Whereas orangery relates to "a greenhouse in which orange trees are grown" or "a garden or plantation where orange trees are grown", a wagtail is a "small passerine bird of the English world" (*Wiktionary*). The following are lines from the poem:

Me to the orangery
solitude invites,
a wagtail, to tell
the tangled-wood-tale;
a sunbird, to mourn
a mother on a spray. (p. 2)

In the circumstance, the voice presents self as being in solitude. The stanza is positioned just before another which captures African (Igbo) conjecture about a fierce battle between rain and sun. It is generally believed among the Igbo race that whenever sun is shining while rain drizzles or falls, the gods are said to be in combat. The presence of the rain and sun simultaneously is only a physical manifestation of the spiritual phenomenon, a kind of objective correlative. The referent Igbo belief is captured thus:

Rain and sun in single combat;
on one leg standing,
in silence at the passage,
the young bird at the passage. (p. 2)

And in the next section, the mixture is delineated. This is presented in a very dense and complex range of imagery which is almost palpable, yet difficult to assail. To quote at length:

SILENT FACES at crossroads:
festivity in black...

Faces of black like long black
column of ants,

behind the bell tower,
into the hot garden
where all roads meet:
festivity in black...

O Anna at the knobs of the panel oblong,
hear us at crossroads at the great hinges

where the players of loft pipe organs
rehearse old lovely fragments, alone -

strains of pressed orange leaves on pages,
bleach of the light of years held in leather:

For we are listening in cornfields
among the windplayers,
listening to the wind leaning over
its loveliest fragment.... (p. 3)

Among the numerous expressions to reflect this are such as "behind the bell tower / into the hot garden /... / where the players of loft pipe organs". These reflect Westerners as against "Anna at the knobs of the panel oblong" which reflects Africaness. Also, Africans deal with such objects as "gong" in place of Western "bell", "farm" in place of "garden" and "flute" in place of "pipe". The dense images create complexities, yet they bring about consummate beauty. The mastery exhibited in the poem sets Okigbo apart by himself in the assemblage of poets.

Suffice it to say that Okigbo in *Labyrinths* tries to create a complex personality, a hybrid personage on African soil who has emerged from the colonial canvas. The character so created by the colonial experience is neither African nor European. He/She is a hybrid. This is perhaps the reason Okigbo is noted to have seen himself as just a poet, not an African poet.

In "Initiations" the hybridity of Okigbo is heightened in the effluxion of images of diverse nature from African and Western climates. The symbol of Christian religion, the Crucifix, is immersed in the rituals of initiation of African Traditional Religion (ATR) and practice. The voice says,

SCAR OF the crucifix
over the breast,
by red blade inflicted
by red-hot blade,
on right breast witnesseth

mystery which I, initiate,
received newly naked
upon waters of the genesis
from Kepkanly. (p. 4)

The theme is colonialism and its effects on Africans. It produced hybrids which Okigbo sees as inferior and negative: a fluke of Africans. Here, one observes that a combination of Western and African ways has produced this hybrid of humanity: this new generation of Africans who have lost the fires of Africa. Neither have they shown a true ambience of the West.

In the same way, the mixture of Western and African methods has generated a new breed of poetry. The presence of Christian religion is overtly announced by the images and references such as "Crucifix" and "John the Baptist". And the mingling of these with Africans of the "Anna at the knobs of the panel oblong" has produced hybrids of personality captured in "SILENT FACES at crossroads: / ... Faces of black like long black / column of ants, /... where all roads meet" (p. 3). The hybrids are confused ("crossroads") and blank as bearing long faces ("Faces of black like long black / column of ants") (p. 3) would suggest.

It is worthy of note that the poet does not exonerate himself as he implicates all in the expression, "the quadrangle, the rest, me and you..." (p. 5). This is after reeling out the pseudo officials on the African continent. There is another element which the poet has effectively employed in this poem. It is mathematics. There are such terms and images as orthocenter, square, rhombus and quadrangle. These present a sense of accuracy and specifications, where lines, angles and points are involved. This leaves no rooms for errors and mistakes. Mathematical exactitude is required, and that is what Christopher Okigbo has given here.

An element of hybridity is also present in "Lustra". Here, there is the juxtaposition of Western and African religious practices. There is the idea of "Messiah" and "heaven" and the return of the Messiah after the deliberation and argument in heaven; the baptismal cleansing and the consummation of the sacrifice for redemption on the "hilltop" (Calvary). Also, there is the anticipated return. This relates to the Second Coming of the Christian Messiah, Jesus the Christ.

*Messiah will come again
After the argument in heaven
Messiah will come again....* (p. 13)

And the very next stanza involves the African ritual of offerings of repentance in the "palm grove" with sacrificial items such as food items:

Fingers of penitence bring
to a palm grove
vegetable offering with five
fingers of chalk.... (p. 13)

These sacrifices are acceptable as indicated in the next section: the last four stanzas of the poem:

THUNDERING drums and cannons
in palm grove:
the spirit is in ascent.

I have visited;
on palm beam imprinted
my pentagon-

I have visited, the prodigal.

In palm grove,
long-drums and cannons:

the spirit in the ascent. (p. 14)

As a prodigal, he has been accepted: his repentance, sacrifices and all. This is akin to the prodigal son of the bible. This is the blend of the two cultures to arrive at a new being. Okigbo was a hybrid personality through and through: African and Western, human and spirit, lay faithful and Chief (High) Priest, a man and a poet. He was a consummate being.

The final clash in his personality is brought to the fore in "Newcomer". Okigbo, being a personage of two worlds (West and Africa), manifests the contradiction that of a necessity must exist in such a situation. Although he tries to identify more with African, which is natural, he did not quite succeed as is seen in the closing lines of the poem:

TIME for worship -

softly sing the bells of exile,
the angelus,
softly sings my guardian angel.

Mask over my face-

My own mask, not ancestral - I sign:
remembrance of calvary,
and of age of innocence, which is of...

Time for worship:

*Anna of the panel oblongs,
protect me
from them fucking angels;
protect me
my sandhouse and bones.* (p. 15)

The hybrid nature has created in the voice a complex personality which to a large extent is a bat of some sort. In this, a hybrid could be said to be a negative being. But looking at the quality of the poetry produced from this whole effort at hybridisation, one observes a richer product replete with beauty, meaning and great depth.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, efforts have been made to look at the concepts of hybridisation/hybridity and how they have been applied by Christopher Okigbo in his *Labyrinths*. Hybridisation/Hybridity has been seen as relating to the fusion of two or more varieties to generate a third or another which is termed the hybrid. Although some have seen the hybrid pejoratively, it is actually a necessity to bring about a better breed. The scornful attitude displayed towards the hybrid in this instance borders on racism. This is because people are tempted to see or perceive others as inferior. This attitude runs through races and tribes. This is the reason for condemning hybrid as inferior and pejorative. This situation contrasts with the findings in literary studies in general, and with those in Christopher Okigbo's *Labyrinths* in particular. This is the situation that this paper presents a blend of African and Western concepts, and images as employed by Okigbo in *Labyrinths* to bring about profundity and beauty. One conclusion that could be drawn in this effort is that the hybrids so produced, both as a human (Christopher Okigbo) and poetry (*Labyrinths*) are a complex reality. This is also the fate of Africans of the post-colonial history of Africa and Africans. This is the hallmark of post-colonial productions, which manifest richer hybrids. Consequently, Okigbo's poetry has been greatly enriched.

It must be mentioned that other African writers have not missed out on this whole idea of hybridization. Writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, J. P. Clerk, Kofi Awoonor, and Even Ngugi Wa'Thiongo share in this. They are all hybrids and produced hybrid pieces of literature. They wrote out of their experiences: experiences of suckling in African creeds and later mutating under the colonial influence and experiences. A fuller discussion on this is a subject for another exercise.

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ORCID

Michael Onyeisi Ejiodu  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8019-2502>

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