Preface

This thesis seeks to examine the peculiar ways in which Ben Okri captures the depth and enormity of the African cultural experience and apprehends the social and political realities of the continent by projecting through his works a life-affirming vision, gathering his materials and techniques from truly African resources. Strongly rooted in the oral traditions and the conventions of storytelling, Okri is essentially an African artist with communitarian concerns and an infinite spring of humanism. He exemplifies the social responsibilities of the traditional artist by making the struggling poverty-stricken multitude of the African ghettos the main focus of his fiction.

Powered by the benevolent principles of the African worldview and refined by the literary conventions imbibed from his reading of the classics, Ben Okri’s fiction is a unique blend of the ancient and the modern, the universal and the local. It provides a composite cultural experience with theme, treatment and tone, specifically African. The main contention of this study is that Ben Okri has carved out a poetics of his own incorporating the conventions of orality and drawing parallels with archetypal figures from the mythological pantheon of Africa.
In the first chapter, the political history of Nigeria is recounted briefly, followed by an account of the major Nigerian novelists who have been instrumental in the development of the genre of novel in Africa. Ben Okri, a writer of international acclaim, has been variously grouped among magical realist and postmodernist writers. The last part of the chapter is devoted to a brief study of the author, his works and his place among the new generation writers of Nigeria.

The second chapter discusses the problem of style in Okri. His technique of writing is radically different from the well-known practitioners of magical realism like Rushdie and Marquez. Quite different from the myth-making and the mimicry of myths practiced by these writers, Okri infuses metaphorical values into certain African myths by making a fresh reading of them. He extends the meaning and metaphorical significance of the myth of the *abiku*—a spirit-child who is entrapped in the cycle of repeated births and deaths—into a political allegory in his celebrated trilogy inaugurated with the Booker Prize-winning *The Famished Road*.

The third chapter examines the principal philosophical propositions of the African religions, the knowledge of which is essential for understanding Okri's fiction and appreciating its strength and beauty. The African religions are invariably founded on
certain common universal ideas namely, the belief in the extension of life after death, the notion of the wholeness of the universe, the power of the past in shaping the future, the life-force which manifests itself in all things in varying degrees, the existence of spirits, ancestral spirits and other super-natural beings, the power of magic etc. Since Okri’s stories are all set in an Africa where these theories hold good, an understanding of them will illuminate the reader and enable him to get in touch with the reality of his fiction. The chapter also examines the place of story-telling in Africa and the functions of myths, riddles and proverbs in literature. The fourth chapter traces Okri’s evolution as a writer and examines his main thematic concerns, the problem of style and characterization.

The final chapter sums up the totality of Okri’s fiction and examines his place among the African writers. Okri draws on the oral traditions of Africa, alive in the works of Fagunwa, Tutuola and Soyinka and creates a novel narrative strategy powerful enough to encompass the African cultural experience and to enable men to survive chaos by celebrating the immense potential of the African world-view.