



Decolonizing the Hero's Journey: Collective Heroism and Afro-Diasporic Resistance in Children of Blood and Bone

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the structure and transformation of the Hero's Journey in Tomi Adeyemi's Children of Blood and Bone, arguing that while Zélie Adebola's quest initially aligns with Joseph Campbell's monomythic framework, the novel reconfigures several of its central stages to articulate a distinctly Afro-fantastic, postcolonial model of heroism. Through a close reading of key narrative moments—including the call to restore magic, the fragmented mentor figure, and the communal stakes of the ordeal and return—the study demonstrates how Adeyemi resists Campbell's emphasis on an isolated, individual protagonist. Instead, Children of Blood and Bone recasts the journey as a collective struggle for cultural memory, political liberation, and spiritual restoration. By situating Zélie's arc within African cosmology and histories of oppression, the article shows that Adeyemi both utilizes and subverts the monomyth to foreground a reparative, community-centered narrative of healing and resistance.

Keywords: Hero Journey, Study, Joseph Campbell

1. INTRODUCTION

Since Joseph Campbell first articulated the Hero's Journey in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Campbell, 1949), the monomyth has dominated discussions of mythic structure in modern fantasy narratives. Its stages—departure, initiation, and return—have been used to interpret countless protagonists who embark on quests of self-discovery and transformation. Yet, despite its influence, Campbell's model has long been critiqued for its universalizing tendencies and its inability to account for narratives shaped by colonial histories, racial trauma, or communal identities (Murdock, 1990; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986; Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2002). Contemporary fantasy, especially works emerging from African and African-diasporic traditions, increasingly challenges the assumption that heroism is fundamentally individual, apolitical, and culturally neutral (Okorafor, 2019).

Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone*, the first novel in the *Legacy of Orisha* series, offers a powerful reimagining of the mythic quest through an explicitly Afro-fantastic lens (Adeyemi, 2018). Set in a world where a brutal monarchy has eradicated the Maji and suppressed cultural memory, the novel follows Zélie Adebola as she attempts to restore magic and reclaim a heritage violently taken from her people. At first glance, Zélie's journey seems to mirror Campbell's monomyth: she receives a call to adventure, crosses thresholds, faces trials, endures an ordeal, and emerges transformed (Campbell, 1949). However, a closer reading reveals that Adeyemi employs the Hero's Journey only as a scaffolding, reshaping its most iconic stages to reflect the complexities of resistance, trauma, and communal survival (Ashcroft et al., 2002; Okorafor, 2019).

This article argues that *Children of Blood and Bone* simultaneously engages with and subverts the Hero's Journey. While Zélie's arc loosely aligns with Campbell's structure (Campbell, 1949), Adeyemi destabilizes the monomyth by dispersing the mentor figure across memory and community, by redefining the ordeal as a



collective confrontation with generational violence, and by framing the “return with the elixir” as an unfinished, politically charged struggle rather than an individual triumph (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, 1986). Through this reconfiguration, the novel constructs a model of heroism rooted not in solitary transcendence but in solidarity, cultural restoration, and the shared pursuit of liberation (Murdock, 1990; Okorafor, 2019).

By examining key stages of the Hero’s Journey alongside critiques from feminist, postcolonial, and African futurist scholarship (Ashcroft et al., 2002; Murdock, 1990; Okorafor, 2019), this study demonstrates how Adeyemi transforms a Eurocentric mythic structure into a narrative of resistance that centers Black identity, community, and historical trauma. In doing so, *Children of Blood and Bone* not only expands the possibilities of the contemporary fantasy genre but also challenges the ideological assumptions embedded in the monomyth itself (Campbell, 1949; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, 1986).

2. Theoretical Framework

Joseph Campbell’s articulation of the Hero’s Journey in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Campbell, 1949) has become one of the most influential models for understanding narrative structure in myth and modern fantasy. Campbell proposes that myths around the world share a common pattern—the monomyth—in which a hero departs from the ordinary world, undergoes trials, receives aid from a mentor, confronts a transformative ordeal, and ultimately returns with a boon that renews the community. This cyclical structure, emphasizing individual transcendence and psychological integration, has shaped not only literary analysis but also contemporary storytelling in film and popular culture. Its enduring appeal lies in its promise of universality: the idea that all heroic narratives can be mapped onto the same sequence of stages (Campbell, 1949).

However, the universalizing claims of the monomyth have been subject to extensive critique. Feminist scholars have argued that Campbell’s model centers masculine forms of heroism and marginalizes or oversimplifies female protagonists. Maureen Murdock (1990), for instance, proposes a distinct “Heroine’s Journey” to address the psychological and cultural experiences of women absent from Campbell’s framework. Postcolonial theorists similarly question the monomyth’s assumption of cultural neutrality, noting that Campbell’s reliance on comparative mythology often erases the specific historical conditions, power dynamics, and cosmologies of non-Western cultures (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2002). As scholars such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986) emphasize, narratives emerging from formerly colonized societies are deeply shaped by collective trauma, cultural loss, and the politics of resistance—elements that an ostensibly universal structure can flatten or distort.

In recent years, African futurism and Afro-fantasy have provided alternative frameworks for understanding mythic narratives. Writers such as Nnedi Okorafor (2019) and Tomi Adeyemi reject the assumption that fantasy must rely on European mythological traditions, instead grounding their narratives in African cosmologies, communal epistemologies, and histories of oppression and resilience. Within these traditions, heroism is often portrayed not as a solitary personal journey but as a collective process tied to cultural survival, restoration of ancestral knowledge, and struggles against systemic violence (Okorafor, 2019). Such perspectives challenge Campbell’s emphasis on individual psychological transformation, proposing instead a relational, community-centered model of myth-making.

This article adopts a hybrid theoretical approach: it uses Campbell’s Hero’s Journey as a structural baseline while drawing on feminist, postcolonial, and African futurist critiques to interrogate its limitations. By placing *Children of Blood and Bone* at the intersection of these discourses, the analysis highlights how Adeyemi (2018) engages with the monomyth’s recognizable stages but reconfigures their meanings through an Afro-diasporic lens. In this framework, the hero’s departure is inseparable from the political realities of racial trauma; the mentor figure becomes diffuse, embedded in ancestral memory rather than embodied in a single guide (Murdock, 1990); and the return is not a triumphant restoration but an ongoing struggle against oppression (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, 1986). The theoretical approach thus foregrounds how Adeyemi both employs and resists Campbell’s model to articulate a vision of heroism rooted in communal healing, cultural reclamation, and political liberation (Ashcroft et al., 2002; Okorafor, 2019).



3. Mapping Zélie's Journey

Although Children of Blood and Bone broadly mirrors Campbell's tripartite structure of departure, initiation, and return, the novel invests each stage with political urgency and cultural specificity that significantly reshape the monomyth. Zélie's development does not unfold as a solitary psychological journey; rather, it emerges from the collective trauma of a community stripped of magic and violently disenfranchised (Adeyemi, 2018). Her progression through the Hero's Journey therefore illustrates both structural resonance with Campbell (1949) and meaningful divergence grounded in Afro-fantastic worldbuilding (Okorafor, 2019).

3.1 Ordinary World: Life Under Oppression

Campbell's "ordinary world" is traditionally a stable, familiar space from which the hero departs (Campbell, 1949). In contrast, Zélie's ordinary world is defined by persecution, cultural rupture, and the memory of her mother's death during the Raid (Adeyemi, 2018). Instead of representing a neutral starting point, it frames the political stakes of the entire narrative, aligning with postcolonial scholars' emphasis on trauma as a foundational condition of marginalized communities (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986). Thus, Zélie begins in a setting shaped not by normalcy but by systemic violence.

3.2 Call to Adventure: A Political Invitation

Amari's arrival with the magical scroll marks Zélie's call to adventure, which in Campbellian terms functions as the inciting disruption. However, the call is deeply political, echoing critiques that marginalized protagonists often embark on journeys tied to cultural recovery rather than personal growth (Ashcroft et al., 2002). Zélie's call is therefore a collective imperative tied to resisting generational injustice (Adeyemi, 2018).

3.3 Refusal of the Call: Fear Shaped by Trauma

While Campbell (1949) frames refusal as internal hesitation, Zélie's refusal stems from fear rooted in the lived reality of oppression and state violence. Her reluctance reflects trauma theory claims that resistance to action can emerge from historical and communal wounds (Caruth, 1996). Instead of signaling immaturity, Zélie's hesitation represents the psychological weight of systemic brutality (Adeyemi, 2018).

3.4 Meeting the Mentor: Distributed Guidance

Campbell's monomyth typically relies on a singular mentor figure. Adeyemi subverts this by dispersing mentorship across communal and ancestral sources—Zélie's mother's teachings, diviner traditions, and spiritual encounters. This aligns with African epistemological frameworks in which ancestors and community function as guiding forces (Mbiti, 1990). The decentralized mentorship also reflects Murdock's (1990) critique of masculine-centered hero models by emphasizing relational knowledge.

3.5 Crossing the Threshold: Leaving the Space of Repression

The escape of Zélie, Amari, and Tzain marks the threshold crossing, which Campbell (1949) describes as entry into the unknown. However, in Adeyemi's narrative, the threshold is political terrain marked by ethnic hierarchy and national fragmentation (Adeyemi, 2018). This movement reflects postcolonial interpretations of space as contested and shaped by power (Ashcroft et al., 2002), turning the crossing into an act of resistance.



3.6 Tests, Allies, and Enemies: Building a Collective Hero

Campbellian tests exist to build individual resilience, but Adeyemi reframes them as collective struggles dependent on communal bonds. Zélie's alliances with Amari and Tzain emphasize relational heroism, echoing African futurist arguments that heroism in diasporic narratives is inherently communal (Okorafor, 2019). The antagonists—King Saran and the monarchy—represent institutionalized oppression, aligning with critiques of colonial power structures (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986).

3.7 Approach and Ordeal: Confronting Generational Violence

Campbell's "inmost cave" symbolizes preparation for transformation (Campbell, 1949). Yet Zélie's ordeal is a confrontation with generational trauma and cultural erasure (Adeyemi, 2018). Trauma studies emphasize that such confrontations involve collective historical wounds rather than individual fears (Caruth, 1996). Adeyemi thus politicizes the ordeal by rooting it in cultural memory and inherited suffering.

3.8 Reward and the Road Back: Ambiguous Victory

Zélie's reward—the partial restoration of magic—is ambiguous and incomplete, contrasting Campbell's triumphant acquisition of the boon. Postcolonial scholars argue that liberation in oppressed communities is iterative, complex, and never absolute (Ashcroft et al., 2002). Adeyemi's depiction of the "road back" underscores this ambiguity, revealing that restoring magic does not immediately restore justice.

3.9 Resurrection and Return with the Elixir: A Collective, Unfinished Ending

Campbell's final stages traditionally bring closure and communal renewal (Campbell, 1949). Adeyemi disrupts this by presenting an unresolved ending in which the return is ongoing and politically charged (Adeyemi, 2018). The "elixir" becomes not an individual triumph but a shared opportunity for cultural restoration. This aligns with African futurist claims that heroism is collective, iterative, and future-oriented (Okorafor, 2019).

4. Subversion of the Monomyth

Although Children of Blood and Bone incorporates recognizable elements of the Hero's Journey, Tomi Adeyemi does not simply replicate Campbell's monomythic blueprint (Campbell, 1949). Instead, she actively reconfigures its stages to challenge the individualistic, universalizing assumptions embedded in the classical model. Through her narrative structure, character relationships, and worldbuilding, Adeyemi transforms the monomyth into a vehicle for exploring collective trauma, cultural reclamation, and political resistance (Adeyemi, 2018). Three major subversions emerge: the decentralization of the mentor figure, the collectivization of heroism, and the redefinition of the return.

4.1 Decentralizing the Mentor: From Singular Guide to Ancestral Network

One of Campbell's most stable archetypes is the mentor—a wise elder who prepares the hero for transformation (Campbell, 1949). Adeyemi disrupts this assumption by refusing to offer Zélie a single, authoritative guide (Adeyemi, 2018). The absence of a traditional mentor is not a structural weakness but a meaningful intervention. In Orisha, wisdom is not housed in an individual but dispersed across:

ancestral memory,

collective ritual knowledge,

spiritual encounters with the gods, and



the emotional inheritance from Zélie's mother.

This distributed mentorship reflects African cosmological traditions where guidance is communal, intergenerational, and spiritually mediated rather than hierarchical (Ashcroft et al., 2002). By erasing the monomyth's singular mentor figure, Adeyemi decenters the idea of heroism as an individual's guided ascent and instead emphasizes knowledge as culturally embedded and collectively sustained.

4.2 From Individual to Collective Heroism

Campbell's model centers a lone protagonist whose personal growth enables restoration of balance to the community (Campbell, 1949). Adeyemi disrupts this hierarchy by presenting heroism as a shared, relational process in which no single character holds the exclusive burden of transformation (Adeyemi, 2018). Zélie's growth is inseparable from:

Amari's ethical awakening,

Tzain's unwavering loyalty,

Inan's internal conflict, and

the broader community's suffering and resilience.

This shift toward collectivization dismantles the monomyth's valorization of solitary self-discovery. Adeyemi portrays liberation not as an individual achievement but as a politically and spiritually communal endeavor.

4.3 Redefining the Ordeal: Trauma as Collective History

Campbell's "ordeal" typically represents a symbolic death and rebirth rooted in psychological transformation (Campbell, 1949). Adeyemi retains the broad structure but alters its core meaning. Zélie's ordeal is not merely a personal confrontation—it is a confrontation with a history of state-sponsored violence against her people (Adeyemi, 2018). Her suffering is tied directly to:

the legacy of the Raid,

the erasure of magical culture,

the brutality of the monarchy,

the generational trauma inflicted on diviners.

By foregrounding trauma as a collective historical reality, Adeyemi reframes the ordeal as a point of communal reckoning rather than individual enlightenment. This aligns with postcolonial arguments about collective memory and inherited trauma (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986).

4.4 Resisting Closure: A Non-Final "Return with the Elixir"

Campbell's final stage assumes that the hero returns with a boon that restores harmony and concludes the narrative arc (Campbell, 1949). Adeyemi rejects this tidy resolution. Zélie's return does not reestablish equilibrium; instead, it exposes new complexities and unresolved tensions (Adeyemi, 2018):

The restoration of magic produces uncertainty rather than stability.



The political landscape remains volatile.

Zélie herself does not understand the full consequences of her actions.

By refusing closure, Adeyemi challenges the monomyth's assumption that heroic action leads to definitive healing. This refusal mirrors postcolonial narratives where liberation is ongoing and non-linear (Ashcroft et al., 2002).

4.5 Myth-Making as Cultural Reclamation

Underlying these subversions is a broader revision of what myth can accomplish. Campbell treats myth as a universal psychological blueprint (Campbell, 1949); Adeyemi treats myth as culturally grounded and politically situated (Adeyemi, 2018). By embedding Yoruba cosmology, ancestral memory, and African spiritual traditions within her adaptation of the monomyth, she challenges its Eurocentric foundations.

This act of myth-making becomes a form of cultural reclamation and Black identity formation, aligning with the work of Black speculative authors who reimagine myth through decolonial frameworks (Okorafor, 2019; Gates, 1988).

5. Comparative Character Journeys: Multiplicity Beyond the Singular Hero

*While Zélie functions as the central figure of transformation in *Children of Blood and Bone*, Tomi Adeyemi deliberately constructs multiple intersecting heroic arcs that challenge the monomyth's reliance on a singular protagonist (Adeyemi, 2018). Campbell's model assumes one hero whose psychological development structures the narrative (Campbell, 1949), but in Adeyemi's story, character arcs are distributed among several figures, each embodying a different response to oppression, power, and identity. These parallel journeys create a polyphonic narrative in which heroism is negotiated, contested, and co-performed. The journeys of Inan, Amari, and Tzain reveal alternative and sometimes subversive rewritings of the monomythic path.*

5.1 Inan: The Anti-Hero's Reversed Monomyth

Prince Inan's arc resembles an inverse of the Hero's Journey—one that increasingly distances him from transformation rather than guiding him toward redemption. Although he experiences a "Call to Adventure" through the awakening of his own magic, this call becomes a source of internal division rather than empowerment (Adeyemi, 2018). Instead of crossing the threshold willingly, Inan oscillates between allegiance to his father and sympathy for Zélie and the diviners.

Several reversed or subverted monomyth elements define his arc:

The Refusal of Transformation: Unlike the monomythic hero who embraces the unknown, Inan repeatedly rejects the implications of his magical awakening (Campbell, 1949).

Corrupted Trials: Campbell's trials forge virtue; Inan's cultivate deception, surveillance, and moral compromise.

The Failed Atonement: His attempt to reconcile with King Saran results in deeper entrapment within oppressive ideology (Ashcroft et al., 2002).

No Return, No Elixir: Inan brings no boon to his people; instead, he becomes a warning about the psychological cost of clinging to authoritarian power (Adeyemi, 2018).



Inan's journey serves as a critique of the monomyth's assumption that transformation is inevitable or universally attainable.

5.2 Amari: The Ethical Awakening as a Heroic Path

Amari's arc embodies a quieter but equally significant rewriting of the monomyth: the hero's journey as moral awakening rather than external conquest. Her call to adventure begins with Binta's death—an intimate trauma that forces her to confront the violence underpinning her privilege (Adeyemi, 2018).

Key aspects of her alternative heroism include:

Internal Threshold Crossing: Amari's first threshold is ideological rather than physical, as she rejects the monarchy's anti-diviner doctrine (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986).

Moral Trials: Her tests involve confronting complicity, developing empathy, and cultivating responsibility.

Mentorship Through Friendship: Her growth emerges from horizontal relationships, especially with Zélie and Tzain.

Transformation Into the Leader: Amari's arc gestures toward political transformation rather than a supernatural restoration (Adeyemi, 2018).

Her journey demonstrates that heroism can emerge through solidarity, accountability, and resistance to inherited systems of power.

5.3 Tzain: The Caregiver-Hero and the Ethics of Support

Tzain occupies a unique narrative position: he is not the primary wielder of magic, yet his presence sustains the quest. His role challenges Campbell's hero-centric structure by reframing care as a form of heroism (Gates, 1988).

Tzain's journey subverts the monomyth in several ways:

No Traditional Call: He does not seek adventure; he enters the journey out of familial devotion (Adeyemi, 2018).

Support as Strength: His contributions—logistical, emotional, protective—shape the quest as much as the magical acts.

The Protector's Path: Tzain's ordeals emphasize endurance, loyalty, and vulnerability.

Return Without Recognition: His lack of ceremonial acknowledgment critiques the monomyth's glorification of singular heroes.

Tzain complicates masculine heroism by embodying emotional responsibility rather than dominance.



5.4 Polyphonic Heroism: A Decentered Narrative Structure

Taken together, the arcs of Inan, Amari, and Tzain reveal that Children of Blood and Bone operates through multiple hero journeys rather than a singular monomythic path. Adeyemi uses these intersecting trajectories to:

redistribute narrative power,

foreground diverse responses to oppression,

challenge the universality of Campbell's model, and

portray liberation as a collective, multi-voiced process.

This polyphonic structure aligns with African futurist approaches to narrative, which emphasize community-centered heroism and culturally specific cosmologies (Okorafor, 2019). It positions heroism not as a universal psychological pattern but as a historically situated negotiation of identity and resistance (Ashcroft et al., 2002).

6. Conclusion

Tomi Adeyemi's Children of Blood and Bone offer a profound reimagining of the Hero's Journey, demonstrating the ways contemporary Afro-diasporic fantasy can both engage with and critically transform Campbell's monomyth (Adeyemi, 2018; Campbell, 1949). While the narrative structure initially appears to follow the familiar trajectory of departure, initiation, and return, a deeper examination reveals that Adeyemi systematically reworks each stage in order to center Black identity, cultural memory, and resistance to structural violence (Ashcroft et al., 2002; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986). Zélie's arc illustrates how the monomyth can be reshaped into a communal and politically charged journey, in which the ultimate "elixir" is not individual triumph but cultural restoration and collective liberation (Adeyemi, 2018).

The analysis of patterns such as the fragmented mentor figure, the collective rather than solitary ordeal, and the incomplete or contested return demonstrates that the monomyth, when applied to Afrocentric narratives, requires significant adaptation (Campbell, 1949; Okorafor, 2019). Adeyemi's world is one in which trauma, oppression, and historical erasure make straightforward heroic transcendence neither possible nor honest. Heroism is instead marked by improvisation, loss, resilience, and shared struggle. These modifications expose the cultural limitations of Campbell's model and highlight the necessity of expanding mythic analysis to include non-Western cosmologies, communal worldviews, and histories shaped by colonial violence (Ashcroft et al., 2002; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986).

Furthermore, the comparative examination of Inan, Amari, and Tzain reveals a polyphonic network of hero journeys that decentralize the singular heroic figure (Adeyemi, 2018). Amari's moral awakening, Tzain's caregiver heroism, and Inan's failed transformation collectively underscore that heroism in Adeyemi's narrative is multifaceted and contingent. Each arc functions as a critique of the monomyth's universalism, illustrating how identity, privilege, and power shape the possibility—or impossibility—of transformation (Campbell, 1949; Gates, 1988). Rather than presenting one definitive heroic path, Adeyemi constructs a mosaic of intersecting journeys that reflect the complexity of resistance movements and the necessity of shared responsibility (Okorafor, 2019).

Ultimately, Children of Blood and Bone challenges the assumption that the Hero's Journey is a timeless, culture-neutral structure. Instead, it demonstrates that mythic patterns are always shaped by the social, political, and cultural contexts in which they are retold (Ashcroft et al., 2002). By infusing the monomyth with African cosmology, Black historical trauma, and contemporary struggles for justice, Adeyemi not only revitalizes the fantasy genre but also invites scholars to reconsider the frameworks through which heroism is defined (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986; Okorafor, 2019). Her work reminds us that stories of liberation—whether



personal, communal, or ancestral—cannot be fully captured within universalizing models, and that expanding our interpretive paradigms is essential for understanding the evolving landscape of global fantasy literature.

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