

Promoting the poetic cause in Ben Okri's *stokus* from *Tales of freedom* (2009)

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This article illustrates the theme of the poetic in Ben Okri's *stokus* from his *Tales of freedom*. It does this principally through an exploration of this new literary mode and its use of serendipity. As a sudden insight, serendipity becomes, in this Nigerian writer's hands, a poetic device equivalent to illumination or an epiphanic moment. The introduction is an attempt to show the interrelationship between poetry and thought, on the one hand, and poetic experience, creative consciousness and serendipity, on the other. This is followed by a brief digression to outline the paucity of critical reception of this prose anthology, followed by a focused discussion of the storytelling form, in general, and the *stoku*, in particular. This elliptical form to which Ben Okri gives the name *stoku* is, as he states in *Tales of freedom*, 'an amalgam of short story and *haiku*'. A comparison between the conventions inherent in the ancient Japanese art of *tanka* or *haiku* (short poems), also known as *waku* and displaying the poet's imaginative wit (derived from the Anglo-Saxon *witan* [to know]), and those of Okri's newer art form, the *stoku*, follows. The core of the article focuses on a brief analysis of a select number of Okri's 13 rhapsodies in prose, showing how each *stoku* serves to illustrate a poetically rendered moment of insight, a vision or a paradox. In Okri's *Tales of freedom*, the mythic conjunction between short story and *haiku* reveals hitherto hidden aspects of life. Through this innovative medium, akin to flash fiction, the subconscious can illuminate unknown worlds. This is akin to experiencing serendipity, linked to interiority, to inner vision. The argument concludes by pointing to the serendipities captured obliquely yet poetically in the *stokus* selected for discussion.

Die pleidooi vir die digterlike in Ben Okri se *stokus* uit *Tales of freedom* (2009). Hierdie artikel illustreer die tema van die poëtiese in Ben Okri se *stokus* uit sy *Tales of freedom*. Dit ondersoek hierdie nuwe literêre vorm en die gelukkige (maar onbedoelde) saamval van denke en poësie (serendipiteit) daarin. As 'n skielike insig, word serendipiteit in die Nigeriese skrywer se hande 'n digterlike kunstgreep vergelykbaar met illuminasie of epifanie. Die inleiding is 'n poging om die onderlinge verwantskap aan te dui tussen poësie en denke, eensyds, en digterlike ervaring, kreatiewe bewussyn en serendipiteit, andersyds. Daarna volg 'n kort uitweiding oor die gebrek aan kritiese reaksie op hierdie prosaversameling, gevolg deur 'n gefokusde bespreking van die vertelling in die algemeen, en die *stoku*, in die besonder. Hierdie elliptiese vorm, wat Ben Okri die *stoku* noem, is, soos hy sê in *Tales of freedom* sê, 'n 'amalgam van kortverhaal en haikoe'. Daarop volg 'n vergelyking tussen die konvensies van die antieke Japannese kunstvorm van die *tanka* of *haikoe* (kort gedigte), ook bekend as *waku*, waarin die digter sy kreatiewe geestigheid (Engels *wit*, afgelei van die Angel-Saksiese *witan*, 'weet') ten toon stel, en Okri se nuwer kunstvorm, die *stoku*. Die kern van die artikel is 'n kort analise van 'n aantal van Okri se 13 rapsodieë in prosa, wat aantoon dat elke *stoku* 'n oomblik van insig, visie of 'n paradoks digterlik vasvang. In Okri se *Tales of freedom* onthul die mitiese samevloeiing van kortverhaal en haikoe tot nog toe verborge aspekte van die lewe. Deur hierdie innoverende medium, verwant aan blitsstories, kan die onbewuste onbekende wêreld beïnvloed. Dit is soortgelyk aan die ervaring van serendipiteit, verwant aan innerlikheid en innerlike visie. Ten slotte word die digterlike (maar indirekte) serendipiteit in die gekose *stoku* aangedui.

Introduction

A mere two years after publishing his *Tales of freedom* (2009), arguably his most poetic prose, Ben Okri was to write in *A time for new dreams* (2011:3): 'Heaven knows we need poetry now more than ever. We need the awkward truth of poetry. We need its indirect insistence on the magic of listening.' And so, I invite you to listen imaginatively to poetry's most cryptic mode: a *haiku* entitled 'Freedom' by Marié Heese (1997):

The hawk wheels and glides;
It does not need to stumble
Over the mundane. (p. 11)

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This African *haiku* illustrates the power of poetry to appeal to the sensory ('the magic of listening' encapsulated in the onomatopoeic 'wheels', 'glides' and 'stumbles') and the cerebral ('the awkward truth of poetry' alluded to in the implied contrast between the preoccupations of humans and the freedom of nature). African philosophical traditions accept that the experience of wonder, reflected here, is the originating source of philosophy (cf. Okri 1997:49). For a philosophical poet or poetic writer such as Okri, freedom is embedded in the poetic; it inheres in awakening from 'the sleep of reason' (Okri 2011:70), from the 21st century's 'vile dreams ... goaded awake by guns' (*ibid*) and embracing 'the art of being' (*ibid*:73) reflected in Heese's hawk and encapsulated, for example, in the serendipities evoked in Okri's *stokus*, which will be discussed more fully towards the end of this article. First, however, it is pertinent to articulate the central thesis of the coalescence of poetry and thought and the article's braided subsidiary themes of poetic experience, creative consciousness and serendipity that inform my reading of Ben Okri's *stokus*.

Towards an understanding of Okri's poetic aesthetics and the coalescence of poetry and thought

As I noted in an earlier publication that explored ontopeiosis or the self-induced development of consciousness (Tymieniecka 2004:5) in Okri's poetic oeuvre (Gray 2014:50), this Nigerian-born writer and poet avers that poetry is intrinsic to humankind. Okri asserts that '[w]e are, at birth, born into a condition of poetry and breathing' (Okri 2011:3). Furthermore, as he insists, '[b]irth is a poetic condition ... it is spirit becoming flesh' (*ibid*). Then, pointing to the mythic conjunctions inherent in such a non-dualistic cosmogony and to the indissoluble cycle of life and death (Gray 2014:50), he avows: 'Death is also a poetic condition: it is flesh becoming spirit again. It is the miracle of the circle completed, the unheard melody of a life returning to unmeasured silence' (Okri 2011:3). As I also noted in my earlier article in *Analecta Husserliana* 116 (Gray 2014:50), such phenomenological arguments recall the holistic philosophies of ancient times that are still prevalent in African philosophical thought as testified by fellow Nigerian and Nobel laureate, Wole Soyinka ([1976] 1995), who states:

In Asian and European antiquity ... man did, like the African, exist within a cosmic totality, did possess a consciousness in which his own earth being, his gravity-bound apprehension of self, was inseparable from the entire cosmic phenomenon. (p. 3)

Taken together, these quotations by two of Nigeria's philosophical writers serve to underline the symbiosis between poetry and thought. Prefiguring Okri's conception of freedom – embedded in the totality of the poetic experience or serendipity – as embracing 'the art of being' (Okri 2011:73), having awoken from 'the sleep of reason' (*ibid*:70), quoted earlier, Ali Ahmed Said (1992) counters any paradoxical separation of poetry from thought through an etymological argument:

If we go back to the root of the Arabic word for poetry (*shī'r*) that is to the verb *sha'ara*, we see that it means 'to know', 'to understand' and 'to perceive'. (p. 57)

As if foreshadowing my reminder that, when one talks of imaginative wit, one should remember that the word 'wit' is derived from the Anglo-Saxon *witan* (to know), he (Said 1992) adds:

On this basis, all knowledge is poetry. We call the poet *shā'ir* (literally, 'one who knows, understands, perceives') in Arabic because he perceives and understands (*yash'uru*) that which others do not perceive and understand, that is he knows (*ya'lamu*) what others do not know. (p. 57)

So, belying a dualistic epistemological system derived from religion (jurisprudence and theology), on the one hand, and the spoken or written word (language, namely, grammar and rhetoric), on the other hand, Said's holistic epistemology, based as it is on philosophical argumentation, conceives of poetry as 'a continuation of these two systems, adding to their arguments its own particular arguments, drawn from Greek thought' (Said 1992:57). Whether the lineage is Anglo-Saxon, Islamic, Greek, Japanese, African or even peculiarly Okrian, this conception of poetry is succinctly captured in Heese's 'Freedom' *haiku*, quoted at the outset.

This resonates too with Okri's conception of poetry as 'closer to us than politics, ... as intrinsic to us as walking or eating' (Okri 2011:3). Alluding to ontopeiosis or a higher state of consciousness, he asserts the following (*ibid*):

[It is] the voice that speaks to the highest in us, ... to the Gordian knots of our private and natural condition ... to all the unsuspected dimensions that make us both humans and beings touched by the whisperings of the stars. (p. 3)

It can be argued, therefore, that for Okri there is no division between poetic experience (life) and creative consciousness or the self-induced activity of consciousness that Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (2004:5) calls ontopeiosis. He (Okri 2011) elucidates:

All our creativity, our innovations, our discovery come from being able first to see what is there and not there; to hear what is said and not said ... the art of intuition. (p. 27)

Illustrative of intuitive creativity, as this article attempts to show, are Okri's serendipitous *stokus*, stories that incline 'towards a flash or a moment, insight, vision or paradox' (Okri 2009:108), akin to the Japanese *haiku*. The defining characteristic of the *haiku* is the wordless line, the white space Okri alludes to in seeing and hearing beyond the norm, that is, being alert to the invisible and the inaudible. His concept of serendipity is arguably a correlative of the white space of a *sumi-e* or what is unsaid in a *haiku*, yet conveys as much as if not more than what is set down on paper (cf. Lowenstein 2006:134).

Whatever the medium, Okri's writing, in general, and his innovative *stokus*, in particular are, in turn, characterised by fellow Nigerian Wole Soyinka's ([1976] 1995:3) notion of self-apprehension, his 'gravity-bound apprehension of self' as 'inseparable from the entire cosmic phenomenon'. The 'higher state of consciousness or illumination' that is the 'basis of life's transitions' is 'wrought largely through spirit



awakenings via a retrieval of traditional geo-cosmic horizons, that is, via a crucial link between the soul and the cosmos' (Gray 2014:56). 'We ought to conjoin faith in evidence with the need for self-discovery,' says Okri (2011:28) in *A time for new dreams*, highlighting the indivisibility of poetry, thought and intuition in his ontopoietic aesthetics. His is an aesthetic that permeates the various modes of literary creativity, as indicated in his almost Messianic belief, expressed in *Birds of heaven* (Okri 1996:20 n.12), that '[t]he greatest religions convert the world through stories'. Poet and storyteller, Ben Okri uses literature to highlight significant but rare moments of illumination. Put differently and in relation to his *stokus*, his deployment of serendipity as a poetic device and his conception of serendipity are indissolubly linked to interiority, to inner vision.

Why then, one asks rhetorically, is there such a dearth of scholarly criticism on this section of *Tales of freedom*? This publication has two components: a long dramatic short story entitled, 'The comic destiny' and 13 *stokus*. Whereas the former has attracted a great deal of scholarship, possibly because of its overt intertextual allusions to Samuel Beckett, the latter appears to have been somewhat neglected despite their obvious charm.

Reception of Okri's *stokus*

As with so much of Okri's writing, the *stokus* in *Tales of freedom* (Okri 2009) have met with a mixed reception and a paucity of serious scholarly attention. What little there is consists of immediate post-publication, media reviews. An anonymous interviewer for *The Scotsman* (2009), for instance, enshrines the authorial intention by describing Okri's fusion of short story and *haiku* as 'pushing the groundedness of prose closer to the magical shimmer of poetry, just to see if there's another way of touching the mysterious flash of human existence' (The Scotsman 2009). By contrast, Lucy Daniel (2009) writes somewhat condescendingly in *The Telegraph* that, '[a]lthough they have some quirky charm, these prose pieces read more like half-formed stories that are far from transcendent', and reading the *stokus* via a literalist ontology, she adds that '[i]t's also hard to see what relation they bear to the haiku form'. Dismissing Okri's chosen nomenclature and further underlining her tendency to essentialise, Daniel claims that the mode is 'usually called prose-poetry'. I would argue that Okri's *stoku* or short poetic prose modifies and enhances the short-story mode – prose not poetry – through allusive *haiku*-inspired compression rather than manifesting as prosaic free-verse poetry. Likewise committed to praxis, David Astle (2009) retorts reductively: 'I felt happier treating each *stoku* as a mix of story and Soduku, staring at each opaque parable in hope of a solution.' Conscious of Okri's post-structuralist or postmodernist tendency and seemingly more well versed in the Okri oeuvre than Daniel or Astle, Nisha Obano reminds us that '[t]he enigma of arrival is something Okri omits from his creative work' (Obano n.d.). Jay Parini's (2009:1) summation, by contrast, comes closer to a Romantic viewpoint. He claims that '[t]hese are vague sketches – ill-formed, framed in generalised symbolic language, with only occasional moments of genuine poetry and insight'.

However, as already intimated in the discussion of Okri's poetic aesthetics, his writing is fundamentally meditational as is also evidenced, for instance, in his introduction to the new edition of *Astonishing the gods* (Okri [1995] 2014) where, recalling an incident that became the catalytic question for this novel, he states:

The question passed into the inspiration, and a meditation persisted, a meditation on invisibility ... In a world blinded by the visible might not its opposite be fruitful as a contemplation of the human condition? (pp. vii–viii)

Overview of Okri's *stokus*

The thrust of this article is premised on the argument that any appreciation of what Okri calls '*stokus*' should be predicated not only on the wider Okri oeuvre and his poetic aesthetics but also – and more importantly – on an understanding of the basic conventions of both the short story and the *haiku*. For, as he states, this new elliptical form of compressed poetic prose is 'an amalgam of short story and *haiku*' (Okri 2009:108). The brevity and visual beauty of fellow African writer and critic, Marié Heese's traditional *haiku*, quoted at the outset, serves to illustrate the mode. Just as the 17-syllable poetic form expresses delight in nature, coupled with a deeply felt sensibility accruing from contemplation on the nature of being, so too do Okri's *stokus* implicitly pose philosophical conundrums, such as 'What is reality?' and 'What is the meaning of freedom?' The underlying teasing of the intellect serves to highlight the unification of the poetic and thought. His motifs cryptically capture transnational and transcultural ideas, places, customs, festivals and transient pleasures within the *haiku* paradigm whilst, miraculously, adhering to the morphological pillars of the short story: conflict, character, theme and point of view.

Okri captures the drama of nature – whether natural or human – in his description of the mode of the *stoku* where images have an existential impact on perception 'like a figure materialising from a cloud, or a being emerging from a vaporous block of marble' (Okri 2009:108). The structural analogy is pertinent, capturing as it does the mysterious power of the imagination. Creativity does not invent but discovers as Okri implies when saying that '[The *stoku*] is story as it inclines towards a flash of a moment, insight, vision or paradox', which was quoted above, adding that '[i]ts origin is mysterious, its purpose revelation, its form compact' (*ibid*).

Okri's final entry of his 13 *stokus* in *Tales of freedom* offers an example of the refined quality of his *haiku*-inspired sensibility. Reminiscent of *Piers plowman* or *The pilgrim's progress*, 'The message' – a quest myth – can be read as a synoptic allegory for a principled life. Having described a life-long quest, a solitary journey, the purpose of which is to bear 'a message that only you can carry' (Okri 2009:193), the narrator concludes by describing 'the pastel sky ... touched with blue' in the 'dawn sunlight' (*ibid*:197), a poetic allusion to the regeneration, 'the peerless freedom' (*ibid*) that accrues from accepting one's lot in life, from avoiding temptation, from



living one's true purpose in life. Here, the sky and sun are not merely token metaphors for *haiku* idiom and poetics. The evocation of nature or *zōka* is, at once, emblematic of *haiku* aesthetics and of Okri's poetic sensibility.¹ Writing from a third-person omniscient point of view and employing the dis-unifying strategies of ellipsis and ambiguity, the author re-dreams the outcome for his symbolic Everyman (*ibid*):

... the true gift of it was in your spirit, your inner liberation
The sense of being in a new world, a luminous world ... the sense of living an enchanted life in the kingdom. (p. 196)

Lucy Daniel (2009) rightly sees this *stoku* as a 'hopeful parable' but suggests somewhat fancifully that 'the reader is addressed ... as a weary traveller in a mysterious fairy-tale kingdom, whose journey has been the book itself!' In African cosmogony, there is no division between the real world and the chthonic realm as indicated in the Soyinka excerpts quoted earlier. Furthermore, as already argued, for Okri, there can be no division between poetry and thought. So, I would venture to argue that 'the kingdom' is an allusion to the non-dualistic or cosmic realm in which we live, following illumination or 'inner liberation'. In other words, it entails being in this world when the mysterious process of experiencing inner vision (serendipity) has opened for us the kind of freedom that Okri writes about and Heese illustrates in her 'Freedom' *haiku*.

Although the overriding theme of each *stoku* is freedom, they are collectively almost impossible to codify outside of Okrian aesthetics, caught as their serendipities are 'in the air, reverse lightning' (Okri 2009:108). Each 'wheels and glides', like Heese's (1997:11) bird of prey, without 'stumbling on the mundane' ('Freedom'). Okri's poetic-prose *stokus* are ignited by a valorisation of the quotidian and the complexities that characterise the constructions of non-institutionalised and mobile subjectivities, an insight shared with me by Maithufi in personal communication in 2014. To borrow from C.S. Lewis, albeit in a different context ([1961]1995:89), Okri's writings are 'exquisitely detailed compulsions on a mind willing and able to be so compelled'. In his *An experiment in criticism*, Lewis (1995:88) draws a contrast between 'using' a work of art and 'receiving' it. In terms of the preferred, more open reception aesthetic, he goes on to state: 'When we 'receive' it we exert our senses and imagination and various other powers according to a pattern invented by the artist' (*ibid*:88). Underlining such reception aesthetics, Okri (*The Scotsman* 2009) asserts that '[I]terature must persuade first of all through the imagination'. To titillate the imagination, at the heart of the *stokus*, the theme of freedom

1.The Japanese *haiku* poet, Basho, explains: 'In the waka of Saigyō, the renga of Sōgi, the paintings of Sesshū, and the tea ceremony of Rikyū, the fundamental principle is the same. Those who pursue art follow the *zōka* and have the four seasons as their companion. Nothing they see is not a flower and nothing they imagine is not a moon ... follow *zōka* and return to *zōka*' (Ross 2012:Preface).

It is interesting to note that, serendipitously, the 17th century Japanese *haiku* poet, Basho, who like Okri celebrated 'both the joys and sufferings of life's brief journey' (Lowenstein 2006:58), had devised his own style of poetic prose composition to which he gave the name *haibun*. However, whereas Basho alternated sections of prose and poetry in capturing his many journeys on foot, Okri synthesises the two modes and also places greater emphasis on the brevity of the telling. As with Okri, in his brief poetic prose writings or *stokus*, Basho too considered the nature of his own humanity whilst questioning 'the nature of the 'windswept spirit' that inhabit[ed] his body' (*ibid*), as evoked in the two Basho *haiku* quoted later.

is teased out though such esoteric subthemes as rejuvenation and validation ('The message'), overcoming prejudice and social stratification ('The mysterious anxiety of them and us' and 'The racial colourist'), innocence and poetic justice ('The secret castle'), self-knowledge ('Belonging'), the futility of war and the virtue of selflessness ('The war healer'): the texture, colour, flavour and smell of which are conveyed through a focal incident, experienced by a limited number of characters, variously utilising all three main narrative viewpoints – omniscient, first-person narrating experiencing self and third-person or central intelligence – within an overriding economy of form. However, as Dominic Head (1992) cautions:

... the length question must be secondary to a consideration of technique. It is only when quantity and technique are examined together, as mutually dependent factors, that quantity acquires any significance. (p. 4)

This brings the discussion to narrative strategies or techniques.

Short story techniques, *haiku* and *stokus*

In his text, *Studies in the short story*, David Madden (Madden & Scott 1984:iii) enumerates the basic elements of the short story as 'conflict, character and theme', the effective development of which depends on the writer's point of view. All elements conjoin to determine style. In *Birds of heaven*, Okri (1996:33 n.56) alludes to style, asserting that '[s]tories can be either bacteria or light; they can infect a system, or illuminate a world'. Okri's favouring of enlightenment, as evidenced in 'The message', arguably inspired by *Piers plowman* and *The pilgrim's progress*, as already mentioned implies an interrelationship between fictionality and spirituality, on the one hand, and life's dramatic events and poetry's awkward truth, on the other hand.

Mary Pratt (1981:183) notes that, 'to some extent, the moment of truth stands as a model for the short story the way that life stands as a model for the novel'. She (*ibid*) elaborates:

The lurking associations are these: if the short story is not a 'full-length' narrative it cannot narrate a full-length life: it can narrate a fragment or excerpt of a life. (p. 183)

More importantly in the context of this article, 'if from that fragment one can deduce things about the whole life, then the more novel-like, the more complete, the story is'. Pratt thus foreshadows Anthony Burgess's (1984:38) yardstick for the short story which, he says, accomplishes a 'novelistic job' but does so briefly. Okri experiments further, establishing the interrelationship between short story and poetry's *haiku*, the most compressed mode of literary expression.

More importantly and of necessity, as well as illustrative of the amalgamation of short story and *haiku*, compression or brevity goes hand-in-hand with poetic technique, calling into being the use of such stylistic devices as ellipsis and



implication ('I had gone into the house by accident or maybe not' in 'Belonging' [Okri 2009:111]); ellipsis, ambiguity and symbol ('You have come from beyond the snowline. It has been an epic journey ... You have travelled alone, bearing a message that only you can carry' in 'The message' [*ibid*:193]); allusion and symbol ('it doesn't take much, does it, to unhinge a man. Especially if, in a clearing at night, under a moonlit sky, a mind can't unfix itself from a symbol' in 'The clock' [*ibid*:127]); irony and paradox ('Who on earth are these children? Has grief unhinged them into genius?' in 'Wild bulls' [*ibid*:156]); and pure poetic experience ('In the world of these special books there is no stress, only a kind of peace, and freedom, and a sense of having been redeemed into the weightless condition of pure beauty. The imagination renews the world like dawn does' in 'The unseen kingdom' [*ibid*: 138–139]). Such poetic devices, coupled with serendipitous insights or epiphanic moments, enhance the effects of the narrative strategies of complication, characterisation and theme and the attendant narrative stance or point of view.

The point of view in the Japanese *haiku*, as in the slightly longer *tanka* or *waku*, is that of a poetic central intelligence. Its style and mood are contemplative, inspired, meditative, as can be seen in two of the Zen poet, Matsuo Bashō's (1644–1694), untitled poems that follow:

Priests ... Morning glories show many have died and been reborn
beneath the pine tree? (in Lowenstein p. 101)

And

How I would like
to wash the world's dust
with these dewdrops! (in Lowenstein p. 61)

Both these *haiku* illustrate a compression into a simple pattern of the poet's awareness of the natural world, the *aporia* or white spaces alluding to the mystical nature of life and death. The *haiku* is often a medium for spiritual experience as these two *haiku* as well as in Heese's (1997) 'African miracle' indicate:

Shangaans prescribe pain.
The phoenix will rise again.
Only through fire. (p. 37)

Each *haiku* captures rare moments of inner vision, serendipities or interiority. Each encapsulates the solitary contemplative condition in which poetry and Okri's *stokus*, such as 'The golden inferno', discussed later, are written. Heese's *haiku* alludes to the Shangaans' practice of shamanism, an African trance dance or devotion to attain spiritual power or cosmic oneness. As Alan Northover (2014:116–117) argues, through the trance dance and rock art, shamans 'affirmed rather than renounced the suffering and pain of existence, and through their creativity, tried to control it'. Both their painting and their dances were, he says, 'an attempt to create meaning and bring order to the flux of phenomenal experience and to the pain of existence'. Coincidentally, the dichotomy of suffering as a prerequisite for regeneration in 'African miracle' and shamanic activities resonates not only serendipitously with the fact that the *Independent* (2002) dubs the Nigerian born author, Ben Okri,

'The shaman of modern British fiction' but also with Okri's (Okri 2009:21) summation that '[s]tories are either dangerous or liberating because they are a kind of destiny'.

Both danger (that of profligate sexual activity) and the liberation that comes from recognition of this danger are evoked in Okri's 'The golden inferno', which features the house that 'was a country' or 'the country that was a house' (Okri 1996:169), the transferred metaphor signifying the cancerous detritus wrought by sexually transmitted diseases (gonorrhoea, syphilis, HIV and AIDS), which have reached epidemic proportions in the country of Okri's birth, as implied in, 'Sex cannot be the angel of death of a whole people' (*ibid*:172). Inside are 'thousands of tables and pallets' on which lie 'innumerable men and women stricken with a disease for which, as yet, there is no cure ... no awakening except death' (*ibid*.). Outside is a gutter clogged with a dead cow, more sick people on a hospital bed, books and, possibly, human corpses. The turning point in this *stoku* is the action of a single woman who 'borrowed some boots and went into the gutter and began to probe and heave' (*ibid*.). The first person narrator suggests the paradox of horror: 'We watched and did not watch her' until 'gradually, people joined in' (*ibid*). The tension between carnal desire and disease is evoked in the oxymoronic title, 'The golden inferno', the now intrusive authorial voice suggesting that a resolution can be brought about only when 'the long denial was over' (*ibid*:173). In a subtle allusion to William Blake's 'Rose', the famed opening line is reflected, albeit obliquely, in Okri's telling of the archbishop's pronouncement that '[t]his is a husband and wife thing, a thing between husbands and wives' whilst in a dramatic *volt face*, the omniscient narrator reveals the truth of the matter in 'The plague had plunged the world into gloom' (*ibid*:170).

As already intimated, this *stoku* reflects the pathos inherent in an existential 'kind of destiny' that both threatens and frees. 'If we master desire we will be transformed. We will become masters of ourselves, the magnet of a beautiful new future' (Okri 2009:172), declares the voice of the central intelligence, serendipitously, in 'The golden inferno'. Ultimately, the *stoku* invokes a renewed aesthetics of depth such as that which characterised medieval Japan, known as *sabi* and signifying 'a deep connection with nature', as Ross (2012:Preface:s.p.) points out. In this context, nature or *zōka* can also be defined as the process of 'creation'. Ross (*ibid*) elucidates:

In this Taoist metaphysical understanding, all things are in the sway of process, ultimately arising from and connecting to the Tao or the One. The true poet and artist are also in the sway of this process, when they do their poetry or art. (s.p.)

Consider, for example, Okri's *stoku* entitled, 'Music for a ruined city'. Witnessing the devastation of a 'city under occupation' (Okri 2009:132), presumably pre-independent Nigeria, the first-person, black narrator is subjected to an act of racial discrimination. He is singled out for a body search and is forced to relinquish his passport. His response is tellingly revelatory if paradoxical: 'I was annoyed, but my annoyance freed me from illusion' (*ibid*:133). This *stoku* turns



on a double paradox: the first tragic, the second poetically transcendental. The narrating, experiencing self chides the, likewise Black, official for complaining about being under occupation yet 'waiving the rules' (*ibid*:132) for the White occupiers, who were neither searched nor asked to relinquish their passports, yet he treats a fellow African like 'a criminal' (*ibid*). The second paradox is that 'somewhere in this tragic city an orchestra strikes up' (*ibid*:134). Although the music is 'alien to all around it', it casts a spell, transforming the bombed city, promising 'a wiser future rising from the rubble' (*ibid*).

The individual, transformative aspect of the poetic is, likewise, succinctly captured in the *stoku* entitled 'Wild bulls', in which the narrating, experiencing self finds himself in 'a fabulous house' (Okri 2009:155). In a dramatic sleight of hand, we discover that this *stoku* is likewise set in the chaotic aftermath of war,² where the narrator is charged with teaching a houseful of abandoned orphans. Traumatized by loss – a recurrent theme in the Okri oeuvre³ – 'they cannot absorb anything yet' (*ibid*:155). Obligated to teach them something ('I am meant to be their teacher' [*ibid*]), the narrator turns to art. Illustrative of the author's claim that the purpose of his *stokus* is 'revelation', already quoted, that is, serendipitous, the teller points to the situational irony in the redemptive nature of art, its ability (as with music in the previous *stoku*) to transform, to reveal an imaginary that can transcend disaster. These newly orphaned and bewildered children (*ibid*):

... take to it [*art*]. They paint and draw freely, for long hours, absorbed and lost in colour, fleeing from grief into a world of mysterious shapes, of bulls, birds, hybrid creatures, and patterns in which are concealed indeterminate beings. (p. 155)

Pace Daniel's (2009) mimicking of the intrusive authorial voice, 'Who on earth are these children? Has grief unhinged them into genius?', the *stoku* reflects more nearly Heese's 'African miracle' *haiku* in which the Shangaans accept the pain of existence, attempting to master it through their creative routines. The analogy is endorsed by the authorial comment in this tale on the reactions of visiting international scholars, who are both astounded and bemused (Okri 2009:156): 'It is like beholding, on the walls of obscure caves, works of bold mature colourists, of the stature of post-impressionists, or even the masters of expressionism.'

In a chapter entitled 'The joys of storytelling' in *A way of being free*, Okri (1997) articulates the mysterious process of self-induced consciousness or onto-poiesis and the resultant serendipitous self-awareness and its transformative capabilities:

We all live our lives on this side of the mirror. But when joy touches us, and when the bliss flashes inside us briefly, we have a stronger

2. This is possibly a reflection on the Biafran Civil War in Nigeria to which Okri was not only exposed as a child but in which he also nearly got killed, hiding his Igbo mother in the internecine strife between the Yoruba and Igbo, a conflict in which the Urhobo minority group to which his father belonged became implicated, dwelling as they did in the delta region which lay between the warring factions (Rix 2010). Cf. Okri's 'Laughter beneath the bridge' (1986) and 'In the shadows of war' (1988) in *Stars of the new curfew* (1988) where 'the narrative gaze contemplates the grotesque spectacle of a corpse-littered landscape' (Obano n.d.:23) as well as *The landscapes within* (1981), with their references to the Civil War in Nigeria.

3. Cf. Gray (2013).

intuition. The best life, and the life we would really want to live, is on the other side of the mirror – the side that faces out to the great light and which hints at an unexpected paradise. (p. 45)

The implied injunction, in this extract, is not to live life as if we are a reflection of our true selves because, when we face 'out[wards]', towards 'the great light' of enlightenment, then, and then only, can we experience 'joy'. The excerpt serves as a blueprint for how Okri's rhapsodies each depict a revelation of the art of beingness wrought through serendipity.

The *stoku*, 'The secret castle', itself a metaphor for happiness within a moment of timelessness,⁴ and 'The unseen kingdom' serve as illustration. Set in Italy, the former *stoku* recounts an incident where a bus driver's son, Reggio, engages in small talk with a young lady for whom he has given up his window seat on the journey home from school. The innocent exchange has a dual repercussion. On the one hand, the young lad is transported into 'a magical world' (Okri 1997:180). Highlighting the essential paradox within the title, the omniscient narrator elaborates: 'He was within happiness itself, within its secret castle' (*ibid*). On the other hand, the labourers on the bus misread the naivety, and one of the workers even wrestles Reggio to the ground when all alight from the bus. This is no fairy tale as may have been anticipated although the resolution is arguably a little too neat: The bus driver shepherds all back onto the bus and returns them to their original point of departure where ultimately the docile young lady leads the troupe of workers off the bus but not before pressing a flower into the young lad's hand. This can be read as a symbolic gesture, acknowledging the unspoken 'joy' she had experienced in the innocent yet profound questions posed by the boy. His opening gambit, for example, is 'Do you like those hills?', followed by 'Do you like that cloud?', then 'Do you like that car going past us?' (*ibid*:178). The second set of questions follows a similar pattern: 'Do you like fields?', 'Do you like rivers?' and 'Do you like roads?' (*op. cit.*:179). Seemingly ingenuous, the questions reveal a mature awareness of the opposition between the natural and the manmade world, eliciting positive and negative (yes or no) responses, respectively. They are also indicative of the 'white space' or *semi-e*, already discussed, that characterises the *haiku*, forcing one to read beyond the words or to live 'on the other side of the mirror', to use Okri's metaphor for true beingness. As with 'The unseen kingdom', the *stoku* provides a fleeting insight into social psychology as well as pathology and both *stokus* share an ironic twist.

The second *stoku* is set in the south of France (perhaps the French Riviera adjacent to Italy). It features an international book-lovers' fair where '[t]here is indeed a mysterious mood about the place, a dawn coloured enchantment, on account of the open books' (Okri 2009:117). Whereas the first comments on the social predicament of modes of perception, the generating circumstance of the second foregrounds the whispered scandal of a rigged prize-winning entry at an

4. Cf. Gray (2007).



international book fair. The closing ironic twist here is that '[t] he rigged condition lingered, but it meant nothing. For here, in this fair, the only thing that matters is the charmed condition of books that endure' (*ibid*:140), an allusion to Lewis Carroll's works and original manuscripts on display at the fair. The poetic insight or serendipity here is captured in the truism that '[i]t is impossible, in the long run, to rig a book into a magic condition, or to make it give off a light it does not have' (*ibid*:140), which flows from an abortive attempt to determine who had tried to rig the results in order to win 'the prestigious festival prize' (*ibid*:138). The quoted sentiment reverberates Okri's (1997:60) assertion in *A way of being free*: 'Writers have one great responsibility: to write beautifully ... to write well ...' According to Okri, this means 'being truthful'. The obligation signifies the following: 'To charm, to amuse, to enchant, to take us out of ourselves ...'. A 'parallel responsibility' is 'to bear witness in their unique manner to the beauties, the ordinariness, and the horrors of their times' (*ibid*). The *stokus*, it would seem, are Okri's realisation of this experimental mission.

The consensus of the critics of the *stokus* in *Tales of freedom* cited is that the strongest tale is 'The mysterious anxiety of them and us'. In spite of his somewhat cynical analogy between Okri's *stokus* and Soduku, quoted earlier, Astle (2009:2) is able to recognise literary quality. Adopting a Carrollian neologism, he (*ibid*) concedes:

... a posh banquet is compromised by the presence of hungry eyes watching. As one diner frets, 'To turn around and offer them food would automatically be to see them and treat them as inferior.' Nowhere else has global imbalance been better expressed, and it took a slithy Okrian *stoku* to do it! (p. 2)⁵

Here, the embedded paradox reflecting both the critical concession and the implied social dilemma of seeing and not seeing wrought by the social divide – them and us, self and other, the haves and the have nots – at the banquet recalls that of watching but not watching in 'The golden inferno' discussed earlier. The reader is left with the rhetorical question: 'Did we who were eating feel guilty?' (Okri 2009:120) to which, underlining the paradox, the narrator is given to retort: 'It was a complex feeling' (*ibid*).

A less obvious paradox is seen in 'The legendary sedgewick', a *stoku* recounting the relative expertise of two cricketers. Whereas the acknowledged 'legend of the game' (Okri 2009:163) had mastered the 'classical overarm bowl' (*ibid*), a retired 'once famous cricketer' (*ibid*:162) usurps this legendary stature and status by cracking 'the arcane art of the spin and speed rotation of the casual throw' (*ibid*:164), thus putting himself 'in an unfathomable class, a different space' (*ibid*).

The last of the *stokus* to be briefly dealt with, 'The black Russian', implies a correlative paradoxical 'different space'. This *stoku* recounts the highly successful filming of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, with a splendidly attired black Russian, who

5. Lewis Carroll's conflation of 'lithe' and 'slimy'. Cf. Lewis's neologism, 'jabberwocky'.

happened to be aboard the train, slipping seamlessly into the script, resulting in the virtual relocation of Pushkin's work to Africa. The serendipity in this *stoku* is somewhat more introspective: '... we knew in our hearts that we had brought home a great Russian classic' (Okri 2009:151), an implicitly serendipitous happenstance.

This brings the argument to a more focused discussion of Okri's use of serendipities in these rhapsodies in prose: Serendipity highlighted

The *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2010) defines 'serendipity' as 'the lucky tendency to find interesting or valuable things by chance'. *Stokus*, asserts Okri, foregrounding their metaphoric mode, are 'serendipities, caught in the air, reverse lightning' (Okri 2009:108). They are thus akin to fellow African-born writer JRR Tolkien's notion of eucatastrophe. Not unlike Tolkien's eucatastrophic tales, Okri's *stokus* correspond to the primordial desire – in a world of poverty, injustice and corruption – for the consolation of 'a catch of breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, a piercing glimpse of joy and heart's desire' (*Time* 1973:22).

The touchstone in *Tales of freedom* is, not surprisingly and as already stated, freedom, but a freedom that accrues from serendipitous self-discovery, from knowledge of self, mirroring the inner state, the state within. In 'Belonging', the first of the 13 *stokus*, for example, mistaken identity leads first to 'the thrill of belonging' (Okri 2009:112) and then to wilful self-delusive pretence, the enjoyment of role play. Ultimately and in 'a flash', the shock of a younger, fresh-faced narrator (*ibid*:113) being mistaken for 'a black, Arabic, pock-marked elderly in-law', trapped in a fixed role generates the freedom of a serendipitous realisation by the ultimately unmasked narrating, experiencing self that 'I wasn't trapped by tradition. I was lithe. I could go any which way. I had many futures open to me' (*ibid*). Here, the situational irony of being assumed to belong, wanting to belong, then not belonging, of being uncovered or discovered facilitates dialectic thinking, engendering self-validation in the joy of the knowledge of freedom of self.

A further example of situational irony coupled with dialectic thinking can be seen in 'The clock', a symbol for the consciousness of the inexorable passing of time but also for 'the abomination' (Okri 2009: 126) of becoming fixated with the mechanical artefact, itself arguably a metonym for the ambiguities of the physical time of the cosmos, historical time with its emphasis on economic and cultural processes, psychological time and even of the Doomsday Clock⁶ or the end of life as we know it. Ironically, the narrator finds himself

6. Imraam Coovadia (2012:74) explains this: 'In 1947, ... the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, a public-interest magazine founded by veterans of the Manhattan Project who built the atomic weapons for the United States, created the Doomsday Clock and set it at seven minutes to midnight. It was an ingenious attempt to raise public understanding of the possibility of the world ending in an exchange of atomic bombs. The clock still exists, going backwards and forwards depending on the Bulletin editors' assessment of global threats from nuclear warfare to pandemic disease and global warming.'



inadvertently drawn into a support role for a man he only 'partly knew' (*ibid*:125) in a night-time enactment of a courtly duel. All four actors are dressed 'in eighteenth century costume', the enemy sporting 'a large, round, shining clock' (*ibid*:125) around his waist. Seemingly drawing on diverse fields of knowledge to outwit the prevailing discourse and dilemmas of time and space, the opponent is perceived as the embodiment of the complexities of time, entirely unhinging the other duellist's mind. The narrator, at first solicitous and caring, finally curtails his visits to the asylum, abandons his now insane acquaintance who is obsessed with and possessed by 'the clock' and arrives at 'a sort of freedom' in 'not fixing [his] mind on anything, or anyone' (*ibid*:127). Whereas Jay Parini (2009:2) reads this negatively as 'a refusal to engage', the speaker overtly cautions against obsession or OCD: 'It doesn't take much, does it,' he asks rhetorically, after witnessing his acquaintance's demise into madness, 'to unhinge a man. Especially if, in a clearing, at night, under a moonlit sky, a mind can't unfix itself from a symbol' (Okri 2009:127).

A comparable serendipity occurs in 'The racial colourist'. Here, the serendipity is more recognisably a eureka moment. Fleeing from the pursuit by a bespectacled White youth at night during wartime surveillance and realising that there is no escape – 'Where was I running to, where could I run to, where was safe for me?' (Okri 2009:144) – the first-person Black narrator stops short to listen – 'in a blue flash of lightning' (*ibid*) – to his inner voice, which urges: 'Go towards him. Don't run away. Go menacingly, purposely' (*ibid*). The epiphanic moment inheres in an insight into stereotypical racial interaction: 'He's more scared of you than you are of him' (*ibid*). Up close, the erstwhile pursued realises: 'Behind his glasses he had scared, timid eyes and an ordinary harmless face ...' (*ibid*:145). It can be argued, therefore, that this *stoku* is a parable about the necessity of confronting one's (irrational) fears.

In 'The secret castle' and 'The unseen kingdom', already discussed, the serendipities appear to lie, respectively, in the happiness born of innocent pleasure and an unexpected gift (of a flower) leading to a sense of self-worth and (in the second *stoku*) in the knowledge that 'It is impossible ... to rig a book into a magic condition, or to make it give off a light it does not have' (Okri 2009:140), quoted earlier. In 'Music for a ruined city', another *stoku* set in a war-torn city (possibly an allusion to Lagos during the Biafran Civil war), life is sustained by the Mozart effect. Although '[t]his is a music alien to all around it, to the bombed out city,' it casts 'a spell, changing what it touches' (*ibid*:134). Amongst the ruins, the conquered 'listen to music that enchants and cleanses the spaces of suffering. There time stands suspended, and a pure joy percolates out from the orchestra, out and up, in a spiral, to the sky and the stars' (*ibid*). The transcendent resolution personalises the synesthetic affect: 'I go on wandering among the broken columns, witnessing the faces of mute grief, with Mozart in my heart, like ice over a wound' (*ibid*). Here, the simile of an icy remedy to sooth the disaster of internecine strife effectively captures the post-serendipitous state.

In 'The war healer', the scene shifts from the ruined city onto the battlefield itself, and the serendipity lies in the paradox of the compulsive selfless service of an erstwhile photographer in the face of futility: 'While they murdered one another, he restored, buried, healed' (Okri 2009:190). Ultimately, the intrusive authorial voice intones (*ibid*):

In a world where no one listens, where no one seems to care, where hatred is greater than love, where hearts are hardened by vengeance and pride, where violence is preferable to peace, what else is there for him to do but heal the wounded, and bury the dead, in a war that could go on forever? (p. 190)

This excerpt recalls the selfless action of the woman in 'The golden inferno'. In both *stokus*, the cause and remedy lie respectively in lack of knowledge and in thinking and 'doing' proactively. Deeply philosophical, Okri expatiates upon the paradoxes of human behaviour by, for instance, drawing an analogy as to how human beings confront death. They either react with paralytic fear and despair or – and this applies to 'a fortunate few' – with total acceptance, embracing life anew with a knowledge of living what Heidegger terms *dasein*/ 'being-towards-death'.⁷

Conclusion

This article has attempted to illustrate the way in which Okri's rhapsodies brilliantly fuse content and style. Emphasis also falls on the capacity of the *stoku* to capture fleeting moments of life, the seemingly infectious that nevertheless remains unknowable and sublime and illuminates that which exceeds conscious awareness. As Okri (1997:2) avers in *A way of being free*, '[p]oets seem to be set against the world because we need them to show us the falseness of our limitations, the true extent of our kingdom'.

This innovative art form, the *stoku*, with its stress on literary artifice and more specifically on serendipity, highlights different sources of wonder, 'the true extent of our kingdom' (Okri 1997:2, in line with African philosophical traditions).⁸ It has an enduring ability to capture the episodic nature of lived life. It bristles with incandescent hope, transporting the reader from the oppressions of daily life to a glimpse of the way to self-mastery akin to the effects of a Shamanic trance dance, discussed earlier. These ontopoietic, or phenomenology of life, snapshots erase the gap between despair and hope, at the same time showing us, as implicit in the *haiku* form, that the transcendental is unknowable, yet sublime. What remains is a longing for and a meditation on the transcendental, the paradox that 'the truth only exists in all its clarity, that is in all its obscurity, in an experience such as this existential union where thought is poetry and poetry thought' to quote Ali Ahmed Said (1992:64). Said thus synthesises, in a *haiku*-style synopsis, Okri's earlier quoted statement about our current need for 'the awkward truth of poetry' (Okri 2011:3),

7. Okri urges us to live in the moment, which he expresses succinctly and with urgency in his Blakean *Mental fight* as an injunction to live with 'A quality of enlightenment/A sense of the limited time we have/Here on earth to live magnificently/To explore our potential to the fullest/And to lose our fear of death/Having gained a greater love/And reverence for life/And its incommensurable golden brevity'.

8. Nisha Obano (n.d.:2) likens Okri's mode to that of Christopher Okigbo, who 'rejected reductive models of African cultural nationalism in favour of a complex transformation of Modernist poetry that could explore indigenous poetic and rhetorical conventions'.



with which this article began. This reflects back to the original Arabic meaning of the word poetry as knowing or knowledge, unifying poetry and thought (Said 1992:57). Like poetry, Okri's *stokus* are not content with merely feeling things and expressing them poetically but thinking about them also. The creative texts of poets and mystics, such as Ben Okri, transcend epistemological dualisms. Okri's *stokus* illustrate an organic relationship between poetry and thought. Through their insights or epiphanies, moments of illumination or serendipities, these rhapsodies in prose illustrate the way in which serendipity is linked to interiority, to inner vision, a common theme in the Okri oeuvre, thus opening up a new aesthetic horizon and also a new horizon of thought (cf. Said 1992:59).

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Appendices starts on the next page →



Appendix:

Tales of freedom

By Ben Okri

Wild bulls

It is the aftermath of war, and there is chaos everywhere. I am in a fabulous house where they have gathered the children of war. They are all orphans and all lost. I am meant to be their teacher.

They can't absorb anything just yet, so I try to get them interested in art. To my surprise, they take to it. They paint and draw freely, for long hours, absorbed and lost in colour, fleeing from grief into a world of mysterious shapes, of bulls, birds, hybrid creatures, and patterns in which are concealed indeterminate beings.

I also try to get them to do other subjects, like maths, history, geography, but about these they are desultory. For them art is the thing.

After some time folks come visiting, acquaintances from various universities. They take an interest in what the children of war had been doing. They find little to remark upon in general subjects. Then I show their art. The visitors are bowled over, thunderstruck. They are astounded at the paintings, in rich ochre, in reds and yellows, of enormous wild bulls. The canvases are large, and the paintings bristle with unaccountable energy and wildness.

There isn't one painting that isn't extraordinary, or terrifying, in some way. It is like beholding, on the walls of obscure caves, works of bold mature colourists, or even the masters of expressionism. It is awesome, and spooky. Who on earth are these children? Has grief unhinged them into genius?

Later on we are at a large round table. It is the end of dinner. Most of us are writers. One of the writers, a woman, and celebrated, proposes that we each sing 'thank you' in as many different languages as possible. I begin by doing so in the language of a favourite aria, with all the elaborated modulations required. The others sing in German, Japanese, Russian, Swahili...

There is good cheer among us. But it is a moment in an oasis, a brief respite from all the suffering around, in the aftermath of war.

Outside, children search for their mothers in bombed houses and cratered tower blocks.

At night, in the darkened city, children sleep on the rubble of their bombed-out homes, waiting for their parents to return from the dead.

Source: Okri, B., 2009, *Tales of freedom*, pp. 155–157, Rider, London.