

Ben Okri's *stoku*, "The Standeruppers" (2017): The Frightening Irony of the Anthropocene

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Summary

This article is predicated on two principal sources: Elizabeth Kolbert's *The Sixth Extinction* (2014) and Ben Okri's unpublished *stoku*, "The Standeruppers" (2017). It invokes Edward O. Wilson's 2002 argument on the inherent dangers of the human trajectory: the irony of the survival of our own species. Kolbert dubs human[un]kind's predatory proclivity that threatens creation, our "unnatural history". Using Okri's Olduvai Gorge inspired rock poems (*Wild* 2012) as allusive side references, the argument draws attention to his understanding of human nature and of humans in Nature. Both Okri's *stoku* and his rock poems reveal the destructive nature of *Homo sapiens*, while subtly inculcating cosmic accord and natural harmony. In the context of the Okri *oeuvre*, my readings posit that the latter humanist strand awakens in the individual sympathies for all fellow creatures on planet earth, nurturing a sense of natural community. This viewpoint tempers the frightening irony of the Anthropocene or Holocene era in Yeats's aphorism that "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold", by pointing to our *animus/anima* urges or the destructive/constructive dichotomy of human nature.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel gaan hoofsaaklik om met twee brontekste: Elizabeth Kolbert (2014) se *The Sixth Extinction* en Ben Okri se ongepubliseerde *stokoe*, "The Standeruppers" (2017). Die artikel steun voorts op Edward O. Wilson (2002) se argument betreffende die inherente gevare verbonde aan die mens se ontwikkelingsbaan: die ironie van die oorlewing van ons eie spesie. Kolbert noem die mensdom se geneigdheid tot plundery of roofsug, wat die skepping in gevaar stel, ons "onnatuurlike geskiedenis" ("*unnatural history*"). Met verwysing na Okri se rotsgedigte wat deur die Olduvai-ravyn geïnspireer is (*Wild* 2012), vestig my argument aandag op sy begrip van die menslike natuur en van mense in die Natuur. Okri se *stokoe* én rotsgedigte lê *Homo sapiens* se vernietigende aard bloot, maar dit wys ook subtiel heen na kosmiese en natuurlike harmonie. Binne die konteks van Okri se *oeuvre*, word aangevoer dat die outeur se latere humanistiese ingesteldheid 'n gevoel van natuurlike gemeenskaplikheid en simpatie vir medeskepsels op aarde kan wek. Deurdat dit ons innerlike *animus/anima*-drange asook die tweeledigheid van die mens se destruktiewe/konstruktiewe aard belig, temper hierdie standpunt die skrikwekkende ironie van die Antroposene- of Holosene-tydperk soos vervat in Yeats se aforisme "*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold*".

Introduction

Palaeontologists John Anderson and Martin de Wit (2016: 5) surmise that the Anthropocene dates from 9,600 BP, whereas environmental writer, Elizabeth Kolbert (2014: 234) reiterates popular misconceptions that “[t]he Anthropocene is usually said to have begun with the industrial revolution, or perhaps even later, with the explosive growth in population that followed World War II”. The much earlier dating accords with Edward Wilson (1992: 211), who notes that “[t]he human race is a newcomer dwelling among the six-legged masses, less than two million years old, with a tenuous grip on the planet”. Although the inception of the sixth extinction appears to be contestable, writers consider that humankind has initiated “an unnatural history” (Kolbert 2014 subtitle).

So, when did humans become “a world-altering force”, ushering in the Anthropocene or Holocene, the catalyst for Ben Okri’s newest *stoku*, “The Standeruppers”, a short fiction set one-hundred-thousand years ago? It may have been the advent of modern machinery and urbanisation, or “the stone makers” of two million years ago. Okri imagines these Stone Age men of two million years ago, who “Upright walk” and “... carve these stones/ With the sharp teeth/ Of our dreams” in his poem “The Crystalline Quartz, Olduvai Gorge” (*Wild* 2012: 61). The date of inception matters less than the fact, as Okri (Renfrew, Boyd & Morley 2016: 436) reminds us in “The Muse of Archaeology”, that “Archaeology is a noble discipline: it deals, whether it likes it or not, with the big questions, the great enigmas”.

One of the most pressing questions is how to deal with the fact that “our well-being – even our existence – depends on ecological systems and biodiversity” as Barbier, Burgess and Floke (1995 back cover) warn us. Alan Burdick’s view is that *Homo sapiens* is “arguably the most successful **invader** in biological history” (Kolbert 2014: 218). Dubbing the sixth extinction or Anthropocene’s process of annihilation, the New Pangaea Project, Kolbert (2014: 210) aligns the era with “the period when modern humans first migrated out of Africa”. Paleo-biologist, John Alroy (Kolbert 2014: 234), has argued that the sixth extinction and, more specifically, that of the demise of the megafauna, is a “geologically instantaneous ecological catastrophe too gradual to be perceived by the people who unleashed it”; while David Papineau, in his *New York Times Book Review* (1992 front page), asserts that “[t]he central message of Edward O. Wilson’s stirring new book [*The Diversity of Life* (1992: ii)] is that *Homo sapiens* is in imminent danger of precipitating a biological disaster to rival anything in evolutionary history”. Tom Jones and Ellen Stofan (2017: 99) insist that “previous mass extinctions were caused by giant impacts or massive volcanic eruptions; this one is primarily caused by humans”.

When an entomologist (Wilson) joins hands with a planetary scientist (NASA’s veteran astronaut, Jones) and planetary geologist (Stofan), the

BEN OKRI'S *STOKU*, "THE STANDERUPPERS" (2017): ...

agreement between their views is difficult to dispute. "It is clear", says Jones, "that loss of habitat and climate change are the biggest threats" (Jones & Stofan 2017: 99). The actions of humankind have undoubtedly exacerbated the crisis, but an obvious rebuttal to over-pessimism is Earth's interglacial story: the advances and retreats of the Arctic ice sheet across the northern landmasses during the Pleistocene and the climactic birth of civilisation in the Fertile Crescent, as Anderson and De Wit observe (2016: 5).

Poets too have long been concerned with Anthropocene's destructive tendencies. John Milton, for example, cryptically castigates mankind in *Paradise Lost* with:

Into a Limbo large and broad, since called the
Paradise of Fools, to few unknown. (Bk XI :11)

In "Anatomy of the World", the metaphysical poet, John Donne, laments that: "'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone" (ll.9) before presenting his dramatic view of man in:

For had a man at first in forests stray'd,
Or shipwreck'd in the sea, one would have laid
A wager, that an elephant or whale,
That met him, would not hastily assail
A thing so equal to him; now alas,
The faeries, and the pigmies well may pass
As credible; mankind decays so soon,
We are scarce our father's shadows cast at noon,
Only death adds t'our length: nor are we grown
In stature to be men, till we are none.

(ll.137-146)

Both Milton and Donne paint a depressingly negative view of humankind's predatory proclivity, while W.B. Yeats is chillingly prophetic in his evocation by the *Spiritus Mundi* of the death of innocence and the birth of the predatory monster [part lion, part man] with "A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun" ("The Second Coming" Stanza 2, l. 15). Okri is more nuanced, less pessimistic. In his poem, "Basalt Stone, Olduvai Gorge, 1.8 Million Years Ago", this fellow poet-seer points to the destructive/constructive dichotomy in human nature:

... The will is now risen.
We can open the skulls.
We can beat music into bones.
We can **heal** by breaking.

(Wild 2012: 80; Stanza 2, ll.14-17; added emphasis)

These lines draw attention to Okri's understanding of human nature and of humans in Nature. Both his *stoku* and his Olduvai Gorge inspired rock poems

reveal the destructive nature of *Homo sapiens*, while subtly inculcating cosmic accord and natural harmony in the paradox encapsulated in – “We can beat music into bones./ We can heal by breaking”. These lines mitigate the ironic awfulness of the Anthropocene or Holocene era in Yeats’s aphorism that “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.”

Alroy (quoted in Kolbert 2014: 234) concurs with the paradox of wilful man (“The will is now risen”) as destroyer **and** healer, when he acknowledges that humans “are capable of driving any large mammal species extinct, even though they **are also** capable of going to great lengths to guarantee that they do not”. The paradox of the animus/anima urges of the Anthropocene era are at the centre of Okri’s unpublished *stoku* “The Standeruppers” (2017), commissioned for inclusion in the Africa Alive project, the epic story of our mother continent. Before exploring this *stoku*, it is necessary to define the genre.

The *stoku*

My recent article entitled, “Promoting the poetic cause in Ben Okri’s *stokus* from his *Tales of Freedom* (2009)”, explores the theme of the poetic in Okri’s thirteen rhapsodies in prose (Gray 2016: 18-27). Integral to this new, cross-generic literary mode – an amalgam of short story and *haiku* – is its use of serendipity. As argued in that article, “as a sudden insight, serendipity becomes, in this Nigerian writer’s hands, a poetic device equivalent to illumination or an epiphanic moment” (2016: 18). The mode of the short story is well known and is articulated in some detail in that earlier publication. Its defining characteristic is economy, while that of the *haiku* is extreme economy, with its wordless line or the white space Okri alludes to when he muses in *A Time for New Dreams*:

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

(2011: 27)

Illustrative of the wordless line or aporia and “art of intuition” is Marié Heese’s *haiku* “Facts of Life”:

After a rainstorm
A whole swarm of ants can fly.
But wings do not last.

(1997: 5)

This African *haiku* encapsulates the power of poetry: its appeal to the visual (seeing what is there and not there – intuiting wingless flying ants). The implied audible/inaudible (the calm following the storm) invokes the wonder of Nature contrasted with an implicit indictment of the preoccupations of contemporary humankind. The operation of intuitive imagination or higher consciousness informs my reading of Okri's "The Standeruppers" (2017).

"The Standeruppers"

"The Standeruppers", imagined as occurring one-hundred-thousand years ago, emulates the aspects/ techniques of both short story and *haiku*, inclining towards a poetically rendered moment of insight, a vision or a paradox (Okri 2009: 108). Akin to the Japanese *haiku* form with its seventeen-syllable intuitive insight into Nature, illustrated by Heese's "Facts of Life", Okri's newest *stoku* invokes a dialogue between past and present as he portrays the complex nature of humankind.

In five short paragraphs, Okri transports third-millennium readers back in time, capturing the process of speciation;¹ from crouching hunter gatherers to the emergence of *Homo erectus*. Around this time, our modern human tree "began branching and diversifying on the African continent" (Anderson & De Wit: 50). The divergence saw the inception of a distinct Khoisan lineage in the south and a Bantu lineage in the north, each with distinct ethnic characteristics. A ten degree Celsius (10°C) warming curve, through ten thousand years (Anderson & De Wit: 50), is on archaeological record. So, global warming is not a recent phenomenon.

My earlier article on the *stoku* form depicted the writer as poet-philosopher: this one focuses on Okri's role as griot. Unique to western Africa, but no less poetically philosophical, griots are primarily historians and storytellers, as Thomas Hale in his *Griots and Griottes: Masters of Words and Music* (1998) explains. As implied in the title to Hale's book, griots fulfil several interrelated functions, some of which are illustrated in "The Standeruppers". Here, for example, as genealogist, Okri recounts an early history in the family of man one-hundred-thousand years ago. As recorder and spokesman for the thoughts and actions of early man, the writer initially adopts a third person omniscient authorial viewpoint, transitioning swiftly to first person, narrating

1. Speciation is the word given to Darwin's concept of natural selection in his much misunderstood and oft misquoted *The Origin of Species*. Wilson ([1992]1993: 405) explains speciation as: "the process of species formation: the full sequence of events leading to the splitting of one population of organisms into two or more populations reproductively isolated from one another". "The origin of species is therefore simply the evolution of some difference – any difference at all – that prevents the production of fertile hybrids between populations under natural condition" (op. cit., 55).

experiencing communal selves. The description in "... he had seen them crouching and struggling with crouching ... he had seen them trying to reach for something in the air that was not there", is quickly transposed into "we were dancing in the water of the gods". The past is integral to the initial actions – "for some time" [past], both the crouching and the attempts to stand erect had been observed; the ritual of dancing in "the piss of the gods" brings us into the immediate present. The effect is to draw the reader into the communal ritual as participant; the griot turns praise singer and conveyer of an animistic culture that could **hear** the gods speaking and witness/**see** the earth's response. "We need ritual, initiation, transcendence of consciousness", Okri (1994 interview) insists. As millennial spiritualist and custodian of his culture, the persona shares with us the pleasure of the chase: by day, our early crouching carnivores chanted and shouted as they "followed the wild beast across the grass" and, in an echo of Okri's poem, "The Crystalline Quartz, Olduvai Gorge 2 million years ago" (2012: 61), which reads: "We carve these stones/ With the sharp teeth/ Of our dreams. Upright walk/ The stone makers", early hominids "had sharp stones to stab them with". The fastest ran "on four legs"; and "one who not crouching rose and found a way to hold [the beast's] neck" is suggestive of the inception of blood lust. These troglodytes "dreamed of [the beasts] all night". They had the power of transcendence; they could conjure the image of the beast with their chants and could **see** them "in [their] minds". They had the ability "to see what is there and not there", quoted earlier, suggestive of the art of intuition. By sleight of hand, shifting the era closer to third millennium, the narrator informs us that the standeruppers, crouching in the "blackness" brought upon them by "the god of night", "went to the place where [they] could do anything and where many other beings live that [they] did not know". This dream-time consciousness follows the seeing of "many things" in the moonlight, "in the other side of the dark where the shadow people live". The moon, here poetically rendered as "the round white in the sky", has long been an object of mystery and worship, a symbol of cultural mythology.

In "Amongst the Silent Stones", an essay in *A Way of Being Free* (1997: 99), Okri explains the myth of "the shadow people", alerting us to the belief in "the interpenetration of the worlds of the living and the dead" in West Africa, "drawing death over the living spaces". "This also includes a belief in the world of spirits as being conterminous with that of human beings", as Vanessa Guignery (2015: 1000) notes. Okri's writing, she argues:

... therefore aims to reflect several gradations of reality in which the marvellous and the magical, the esoteric and the invisible are other dimensions of quotidian reality, thus running counter to the faith in rationality of Western philosophy. (Guignery 2015: 1000)

Several gradations of reality are encapsulated in the *double entendre* in the proto-rationalist neologism or creolisation for *Homo erectus* as "stander-

uppers". The implication of standing up for one's beliefs is evocative of *Homo sapiens sapiens*; their rock paintings record the role of the newly upright cave dwellers as the earliest artists – a subtle slippage between now and then. This points to the mediating role of sculpting in the poem, quoted earlier, and of stone art in "The Standeruppers". Creative discernment is implicit in the term, "standeruppers", and is endorsed in the narrative voice's assertions that "it was a **good**" day's hunt and "the **best** among us were the crouchers". The white space, characteristic of the *haiku*, prefigures the central serendipity with which the *stoku* closes: "I liked it **best** when we watched the light-god coming over the grass". Okri is specific: it is **better**, when one lives in harmony with Nature.

As griot, Okri thus serves as interpreter, as evident in:

They were the first standeruppers and we did not know what to do with them but because of them it was easier to have meat between our teeth and grass under our heads.

(2017: 1)

The "standeruppers" are feared; they laugh at the majority, the "crouchers" [another creolisation], who have difficulty in comprehending changes among themselves and beat the rock paintings with sticks, because they cannot distinguish between the real and the represented. This confusion alludes to both superstition and social stratification in primitive cultures. Fearing what they do not understand, the crouchers contemplate murder: "Maybe we thought of killing him [the standerupper]", even though, paradoxically, the artistic images meant that the crouchers "knew how to fight [the beasts] now that they were made of stone". An important consideration here is the conflict between ignorance/superstition and moments of human enlightenment and how we react to that dichotomy. Okri describes one of those epochal moments of intelligence which catapults mankind forward, capturing the agitation and opposition that such a light or insight causes. In "Changing too fast. With the beasts on the cave walls and the not crouching anymore, changing too fast", the reactive reiteration serves to evaluate the epochal speciation (from crouchers to standeruppers).

Spanning three days and two nights such illumination is ushered in by "the light-god" and "the god of night". This timeframe is evidently Okri's conception of the time it takes for full illumination, as discussed in my article on his most recent novel, *The Age of Magic* (2014).² His poetic prose *stoku* problematises the notions of chaos, the collapse of order in reference to Yeats's "The Second Coming" with its sobering opening octet and celebrated aphorism:

2. Gray, R. 2017. An interval in the Enchantment of Living: Ben Okri's *The Age of Magic* (2014). *Analecta Husserliana*. Forthcoming.

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Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

(1955: 210-211; added emphasis)

The “ceremony of innocence” lost in the “blood-dimmed tide” is reflected in the Okrian echoes: “Changing too fast ... changing too fast”; “much redness came from us in that battle with the wall”. The posthumous edition of the *Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* (1955) includes an author’s note (1955: 536) that explains the symbolism of “the widening gyre”.³ It alludes to Macrobius’s comment on ‘Scipio’s Dream’ (Lib I. Cap. XII. See 5):

... when the sun is in Aquarius, we sacrifice to the Shades, for it is in the sign inimical to human life; and from thence, the meeting place of Zodiac and Milky Way, the descending soul by its defluxion [*sic* for defluxion] is drawn out of the spherical, the sole divine form, into the cone.

Third millennium quantum physics has since verified the ancient astrologer’s mind changing observations.

Conclusion

To conclude, Okri’s insight into man in Nature in his “The Standeruppers” *stoku* is comparably mind changing. He is considered here as griot, shaman or socio-cultural seer: the writer speaks through his rock poems and yet unpublished *stoku* to apprehend an imminent precipice in time. Although this piece is ostensibly about the beginning of man’s journey on earth, it is a cautionary tale about our end. This brings the argument back to Burdick’s indictment of *Homo sapiens* as “the most successful invader in biological history’ (2014: 210) quoted at the outset; and to Kolbert’s sobering comment on mankind’s *modus vivendi*: “... no matter how big an animal is, we don’t have a constraint on what we can eat” (2014: 233). Both Okri’s *stoku* and his Olduvai Gorge rock poems reveal the destructive nature of *Homo sapiens*, while subtly inculcating cosmic accord and natural harmony through poetic symbolism and lacuna. In the context of the Okrian *oeuvre*, my reading posits

3. The note is on Yeats’s poem entitled “Chosen” and its allusion to the “learned astrologer” (1955: 311).

that this humanist strand awakens in the individual sympathies for all fellow creatures on planet earth, nurturing a sense of natural community.

Okri foresees the cyclical ending of the gyre of human inhabitation of the planet. His plea in *A Time for New Dreams* (2011: 3) pertains to his poetic prose *stoku*: "Heaven knows we need poetry now more than ever. We need the awkward truth of poetry. We need the indirect insistence on the magic of listening." As poet/priest/*vates*/insanusi or griot, Okri envisions the Anthropocene: self-annihilation of the human species through gross disregard for the ecology and animal inhabitants of our world (be they two-legged or four-legged). In this green philosophy and prediction of the end of our species, Okri adopts a specific position, tone and intertextual association: he tempers the frightening irony of what is endemic to Anthropocene humankind, what Kolbert (2014: 236) calls the "madness gene", by pointing to our *animus/ anima* urges or the destructive/constructive dichotomy of human nature. Derek Wright's summation of the Okrian approach is useful. Okri, he writes, has

None of the older writer's faith in the remedial political action and improved leadership. Instead, there is an inward movement away from protest and polemic and toward interior psychic healing; there is also a visionary introjection of the world into the artistic consciousness that places a tremendous emphasis on the redemptive energies of dream, myth and the imagination.

(1997: 158)

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Appendix

"The Standeruppers". For some time now he had seen them crouching and struggling with the crouching. For some time now he had seen them trying to reach for something in the air that was not there. From the sky the gods were speaking and sprinkling the earth with the vigour of their water. The god was pissing and another was growling and the earth was replying and there we were dancing in the water of the gods. It was a good day when we had followed the wild beast across the grass. We had followed it morning and night with our noises and our cries. Someone had brought the image of the beast with them in the chants they made. When they made the chants we saw the beasts in our minds as if they were there. Sometimes with a grunt we saw them. All we did was crouch in the round light of the light-god. Most of us ran with our four legs when we chased the beasts across the grass. We had sharp stones to stab them with. We dreamed of them all night, crouching in our caves. When the blackness came suddenly we would be in the caves waiting to see what the god of night would do. Then we went to the place where we could do anything and where many other beings live that we did not know. We watched them all night in the blackness and when the light-god returned the other place went with our getting up. The best among us were the crouchers. Those on four legs moved fast but low and sometimes the grass moved when they moved but you could not see them. We ran across the dust and I saw one running on three legs. We thought it odd and we growled at him later as we tore the flesh of the beast with our teeth. He growled back with an odd face as if he knew something. Maybe we thought of killing him. So fast it all changed, no one knows how. Many times the blackness came and the round white in the sky moved across the field high up and many things we saw in the other side of the dark where the shadow people live. Then some one showed something in the cave not there before. We saw the beasts on the walls and we tried to kill them but they would not die. Much redness from us came in that battle with the wall. Then we noticed one laughing. Watching us and laughing as we fought the beasts on the wall. We thought we were on the other side of the dark where we went, closing our eyes. But it was there before us on the wall and the other one laughing as our sticks broke against the beasts that would not move on the wall. Not beasts that you can eat or touch. Made of rock, those beasts, but made us hungry, and when the light-god came back and we could see we started the chant again and went to find the beasts in the grass and we knew how to fight them now that they were made of stone. The one who laughed did not come with us. But something was strange about him as we went. He seemed higher than us and we the crouchers had to look up at him with the light-god in our eyes. Maybe we thought of killing him as we went, but he was laughing and filled us with fear. The beast was easier to kill now that we had fought it on the wall. Since the battle with it in the cave we feared the beast less. So many noises we made and with our sharp stones we waited and when it ran at us we the crouchers were ready. Some of us jumped on its back. But there was one who not crouching rose and found a way to hold its neck. Then its blood wet the ground and with our voices raised we bore it home. The one who laughed looked strange when we got back. High he was, as if risen. He began it. Afterwards the crouchers grew fewer. But first we wanted to kill them that did not crouch anymore. Hard to be like them. Many blacknesses it took me to be three feet. In the fields I tried. Hair filled my face and those who did not crouch became the heads of the cave. One of them put the beasts on the wall in secret. He had the power of the gods. He had a woman help him and both their eyes

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were dark. They were the first standeruppers and we did not know what to do with them but because of them it was easier to have meat between our teeth and grass under our heads. Changing too fast. With the beasts on the cave walls and the [sic] not crouching anymore, changing too fast. I liked it best when we watched the light-god coming over the grass.

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