

# Prophetic Myth in Selected Fiction of Ben Okri

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## Summary

Africa's intelligentsia, whether creative or critical, have always been yoked with the task of finding a framework that would provide some tranquility to this troubled region. Since the narcissism of negritude to the aestheticism of postcolonialism, the perennial issues about identity, the brain drain, political impasse, war and starvation still loom large. This article contends that, whilst debates continue to rage, it is pertinent to point out that with myth-making certain ideas and contradictions about the future of Africa can be foreseen. Economic failure, terrorism, kidnapping and religious crises are on the increase because leaders and followers are not taking cognisance of certain recurring patterns which forewarn of forthcoming events. Ben Okri, a renowned Nigerian novelist, is adept in using myths suggestively to foretell the future because he sees certain repetitive trends that are common to Africa's corporate existence. When viewed in mythical terms, these patterns could be predictive of crises, could serve as warnings, or could be suggestive of possible antidotes. Okri's *Astonishing the Gods* and *In Arcadia*, using the Journey Archetype, foreground the use of myth as prophecy because they present symbolic plots which offer imaginative insights into the things to come.

## Opsomming

Afrika se intelligentsia, hetsy kreatief of krities, was nog altyd belas met die taak om 'n raamwerk te voorsien wat aan hierdie geteisterde streek 'n mate van rustigheid sal bied. Van die narsisme van negritude tot die estetisisme van postkolonialisme is dit steeds die voortdurende kwessies van identiteit, die uittoeg van kundiges, politieke impasse, oorlog en hongersnood wat op die voorgrond bly. Hierdie artikel voer aan dat, terwyl debatte voortwoed, dit belangrik is om daarop te wys dat daar met miteskepping sekere ideale en teenstrydighede ten opsigte van die toekoms van Afrika voorspel kan word. Ekonomiese mislukkings, terrorisme, ontvoering en godsdienslike krisis is aan die toeneem omdat leiers en volgelinge nie kennis neem van sekere herhalende patrone wat waarskuwings inhou van moontlike gebeure in die toekoms nie. Ben Okri, 'n bekende Nigeriese romanskrywer, is bedrewe in die kuns om mites suggestief te gebruik om die toekoms te voorspel, omdat hy sekere herhalende tendense kan identifiseer wat kenmerkend is van Afrika se bestaan as geheel. Wanneer sulke patrone in 'n mitiese konteks beskou word, kan dit 'n krisis voorspel, as 'n waarskuwing dien of moontlike teenmaatreëls aandui. Okri se *Astonishing the Gods* en *In Arcadia*, waarin die reis-argetipe gebruik word, plaas die

gebruik van mite as profesie op die voorgrond, want dit bevat simboliese verhale wat verbeeldingryke insigte bied in dit wat voorlê.

## Introduction

A good life is the masterwork of the magic intelligence that dwells in us. Faced with the enormity of this thought ... failure, despair, unhappiness, seemed a small thing ....

Ben Okri, *In Arcadia*

## Understanding Trends through Mythic Cognition

In the search for a panacea for Africa's socio-political and economic malaise, social, scientific and artistic critics have embarked on an odyssey of thought. From the literary polemics, recent critical opinions have attempted to grapple with the continent's yokes in a bid to leave a blueprint for progress. They have done this by using the fiction of Ben Okri, renowned Nigerian novelist, as a template. With *The Famished Road*, Sam Raditlhalo suggests a breaking of "civil and ethnic identities bequeathed by colonial rule" (2005: 182); Mathew Green (*Romanticism*, 2008), armed with *A Way of Being Free* and *Mental Fight*, argues for an imaginative engagement with the economic base of history while Mabiala Kenzo, in his exegesis of *The Famished Road*, opines that there should be a borrowing of "insights from resources that are both endogenous and exogenous to Africa and their tribal contexts" (2004: 1). In her comparative analysis of *The Landscapes Within*, *Dangerous Love*, *Songs of Enchantment*, *Astonishing the Gods* and *Infinite Riches*, Sarah Fulford (2009) highlights the spiritual-reawakening strand that connects these narratives. To her, Okri's transcendental revivalism is politically bent. And Douglas McCabe (2005) and Esther de Bruijn (2007) in the context of *The Famished Road*, are in counter-dialogue of whether Africa's bankruptcy should be resolved by "New Ageism" or "Cosmopolitanism". In fact, speculations about an ideal Africa in this century have become divergent and are increasingly becoming problematic themselves, like McCabe and de Bruijn's intellectual hassle, because there are no perfect submissions.

However, there seems to be an area often disregarded but which has the potential of contributing to the search for an epistemological order for the African continent. That area is the use of myth as a means of foreseeing the things to come.

Myth-making is often seen as a mere mental exercise that has no relevance to quotidian experiences. Till now, some people still see myth as a "lie", a made-up story from an escapist. While the fictitious attributes of myth cannot be denied, it is imperative to note its epistemological potential. Myth is the human way of understanding life: a way of knowing and a way of



expressing. By this token, myth can be used to figure out how things would be. Myth is therefore steeped in reality. Alistair Fox corroborates this view while defending the postmodern utopianism in *In Arcadia*:

In constructing the fictive (that is the mythic) vehicle for his philosophical speculations, Okri blends the utopian genre with a number of other intertexts and fictive modes that deepen the representation at the symbolic level.

(Fox 2005: 3)

In light of the destruction of lives and human values in Africa, the potential of the mythical imagination to foresee certain events should be considered as an integral factor in corporate development. In support of the positions of Georges Sorel (*Reflections*, 1961) and Wole Soyinka (*Myth, Literature and the African World*, 1976) on the pragmatic nature of myth, this article is concerned with the idea that with mythic imagination, the ability to decipher recurring patterns, Africans can come to recognise the universal in any set of material circumstances.

The term myth has been variously delineated and defined by sociologists (Emile Durkheim, E.B. Tylor), political theorists (Georges Sorel, Max Muller), structuralists (Claude Levi-Strauss) and African philosophers (Wole Soyinka, Isidore Okpewho), but what unites their views is the idea that a myth is a story. The word “myth” is derived from the Greek word “muthos”. This means “speech”, and “muthos” itself is derived from the Indo-European word “mudh”, which one can take to mean a “thinking-over or reflection”. O’Connor (2001), in his etymological analysis of myth, considers “mudh” to mean “imagine”, and he also suggests that another more obscure root of the word “muthos” may be the Lithuanian word “mausti” which means “to yearn for”. Myth is usually defined as a traditional story of unknown authorship, commonly with a historical basis, but serving usually to explain some phenomenon of nature, the origin of man, or the customs, institutions, religious rites of a people. Myth usually involves the exploits of gods and heroes, but if we take into cognisance the “mudh” and the “mausti” it is decipherable that myth is not a dated or ancient attribute of humankind. Since myth is an act of *thinking over* (“mudh”) or of *yearning for* (“mausti”), then it makes it innate, attributive and, therefore, contemporaneous.

Mircea Eliade contends that an account is mythic insofar as it “reveals something as having been fully manifested and this manifestation is at the same time creative and exemplary since it is a foundation ... of a kind of behaviour” (1967: 18). This idea is corroborated by Eleazar Meletinsky who opines that “[m]yths are a means of gaining insight into the human spirit” (2000: 56). The complexity of human behaviour is born out of diversity, variety and unpredictability, but myth presents plots and situations which are exemplars of probable human behaviour. An action or “a kind of behaviour” can be foretold through the medium of myth since the primary



function of myth is to explain, to describe. This correlates with Alan Watts's statement that "[m]yth is to be defined as a complex of stories ... which for various reasons, human beings regard as a demonstration of the inner meaning of the universe and of human life" (1953: 7). The future is also a "kind of behaviour" and it can be foretold through myth. The "demonstration of the inner meaning" of the universe is expressed through the creation of myths. But when this "demonstration" tends to explain "a kind of behaviour" in the future, we have a myth that is explaining the future.

The explanatory function of a myth makes it relatable to prophecy which primarily means a prediction. "Prophecy" comes from the Latin word *propheteia*, which literally means "to speak forth" (*pro*, "forth"; *phemi*, "to speak") as enunciated by W.E. Vine (2000: 116). According to *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th Edition, "a prophet can be one who foretells the future or one who utters divinely inspired revelations" (2008: 408). Many definitions of prophecy ascribe the term to a divine revelation of the future or an inspired utterance of a prophet. Such prophets are said to be revealers of God's will. However, in a literary sense, "God's will" is man's imagination: the seat of creativity, construction or fabrication. Prophecy is both foretelling (prediction) and forth-telling (preaching or pontificating) and it happens when an individual, not necessarily the one who holds the office of a prophet, engages in mental introspection as a result of a critical observation of the past and the present condition of the society. For instance, William Blake is a prophet because he observes certain trends in history and articulates his voice against rationality, reason and oppressive laws by abandoning contemporary images (and their inherent materialism and rationalism) and creating his own myths to forewarn humanity of the doom in following falsified, disjointed consciousness. Chinua Achebe in *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah* respectively envisions the Nigerian coup and dictatorship because he heightens his imagination to see history as myth which follows certain patterns and can therefore repeat itself. It is this imaginative engagement with history that Ben Okri, the 1991 Booker Prize winner, stretches in *Astonishing the Gods* (1995) and in *In Arcadia* (2002). Okri, who has often been labelled as a magical realist, perceives reality from a mythical perspective which we can identify with because the recurring patterns – what Carl Jung calls "archetypes" – are familiar to us and because the inherent messages have communal significance. Okri's mythical construct is inexplicitly prophetic because it provides warnings; it is a symbolic call to return to a particular "kind of behaviour" and it is an imaginative advice to desist from certain attitudes. Okri's narratives justifiably underline the connections between "myth" and "prophecy". First, both operate on the level of the supernatural or natural (gods, heroes, men). Secondly, they are narratives or stories and, third, they explain and/or warn. The fourth connective is in their roots: the Latin word "propheteia" (prophecy) and



“muthos” (myth) in Greek are about speech and the use of words to rationalise and explain the world.

*Astonishing the Gods* is a dreamlike prose (Okri prefers this term) that relates the story of the soul’s pilgrimage towards new levels of self-realisation, the false conceptions which must be jettisoned on the way as the seeker follows a guide. The reader is transported on a journey by a narrator’s encounters and experiences through an enchanted island. The island is home to invisible beings. This place is characterised by images and themes which this discussion observes as having prophetic properties because it contains startling archetypal features that underscore the hero’s desired future.

*In Arcadia* is a story structured around a group of people who are damaged by life and thus seeks Arcadia (a place of tranquillity, rest, meaning and peace) by embarking on a journey. The book presents Okri’s mythical sense of how people seek a desired future by portraying fictitious members of a TV film crew that embark on a trip in search of Virgil’s mythical paradise called Arcadia. Okri appropriates Arcadia to suggest a desired future. These texts commonly adopt a strong universal archetype called the Journey to show the readers what the future looks like if certain patterns are either eschewed or embraced in the course of history.

## **Journey as Archetypal Template**

As with academics, critics and African philosophers who struggle to map out a befitting theoretical framework for troubled Africa, Ben Okri, from a creative episteme, adopts the Journey Archetype for the delineation of the future. Okri’s use of this aesthetic template is born out of the influences he receives from African philosophical thought like the “Abiku” metaphysics (birth and rebirth journey); Western mythical models and mystical masters like Daniel Defoe (*Robinson Crusoe*), Jonathan Swift (*Gulliver’s Travels*), Thomas More (*Utopia*), and Francis Bacon (*New Atlantis*) who have mythologised the idea of the journey to suggest universal themes. In support, Fox reasons that Okri’s intention in this collage of European and African cultural traditions is

to undertake a journey that is speculative and mythical as well as literal and real, designed to find a way of responding to the postmodern condition of humankind that can provide the individual with an alternative to despair.

(Fox 2005: 5)

Journey or Quest Archetype is apt in capturing humanity’s (Africa’s as an instance) existential crises as it progresses towards change and renewal.

The Journey Archetype is about the hero in search of some truth to restore order and harmony to the land. It often includes the series of trials and

tribulations that the hero faces along the way. Usually the hero descends into a real or psychological hell and is forced to discover the certain truths. While the Journey Archetype is deployed in a multifarious sense, Okri's interest hinges on transformation and change. Otherwise known as the archetypes of metamorphosis, the quest for transformation and change personifies the process of seeking out new options; tearing down what no longer serves; committing to people, values, and activities; and creating new forms. The utilitarian value of the Journey Archetype is useful in transitional periods in individual lives (adolescence, midlife, retirement) as well as in corporate organisations (management reshuffling, change of policy statements, recruitment). For the perennial issues in Africa, though not peculiar to the continent, the Journey Archetype is apt in capturing the lost values such as discipline, collectivity, respect, communality and hard work. To achieve this, Okri argues that individuals must leave the known to discover and explore the unknown. To save Africa in this century the inner rugged individual must brave loneliness and isolation to seek out new paths. Thus the Journey Archetype is unconventional, unorthodox. Often oppositional, this iconoclastic archetype helps us discover our uniqueness, our perspectives, and our callings.

The Journey Archetype connects with our idea of prophecy because it suggests a connection with the past and a movement or a travelling into the future. Like prophecy, a journey looks ahead, anticipates ahead and moves ahead. A journey involves a search; prophecy looks for what is in the future. A journey intends to solve a riddle by looking for a solution; prophecy seeks to answer the now by looking at the thereafter. Prophecy is like a journey: it can be a travel into the past, an observation of the present and a look into the things to come by a symbolic analysis of causes and effects. It is this to-and-fro movement of the imagination that correlates prophecy with journey. This same imaginative odyssey informs myth-making.

### **In Search of the Future: Mythical Paradigms as Prophecy in *In Arcadia***

Early in *In Arcadia*, Okri announces the state of the nation and the tragedy of every individual as he bemoans:

We had all lost something, and lost it a long time ago and didn't stand any chance of finding it again. We lost it somewhere before childhood began. Maybe our parents lost it for us, maybe we never had it ....

(Okri 2002: 6)

The predicament of loss in the individual and corporate contexts is the crux of *In Arcadia*. The loss in this narrative is artistically defined as "treasures hidden in Arcadia" (p. 5). By critical inference, these "hidden treasures"



refer to the future because the author hints that Arcadia, which denotatively means a place of tranquillity, is a place of panacea which must be arrived at by following the instructions of certain archetypal patterns (inscriptions/messages) and characters (Malasso). Arcadia is a lost innocence, a missing factor, a blueprint for progress, a master key for the recovery of purpose and vision. Paradoxically speaking, the future is what is missing in the past. In the context of Africa's socio-political predicament, the future means the loss of progressive attributes such as discipline, creativity, tolerance, forbearance, equity and what Okri calls "a refuge from the corrupting cities" (p. 65). Arcadia is not a place: it is an act, a system. When this system is followed, then the bliss in Arcadia will naturally follow. Though the persona laments that he "didn't feel that we could ever find it again" (p. 6), the mythical pattern of finding a loss through the archetype of journey is immediately set into motion as the narrator begins to chart the way for journey into Arcadia, the future. Hence the story begins as certain disillusioned archetypal characters (Lao, Propr, Dane, Sam, Jute, Husk, Riley) are set on a journey of instructions to Arcadia, the place in their future where, at least, "to get away from our miserable attempts at propping up falling lives, away from the dehydrating boredom of the daily round in this inferno that we call the modern world" (p. 5), a place of meaning. Though the losses envisioned in the future are not peculiar to Africa, it is inferable from Okri's narratives that if these attributes could be incorporated into the experiences of the African nations, the future would arrive well.

In Okri's mythology, this mythical pattern of the journey carries with it other archetypes which help to reinforce the pursuit of Arcadia, the future. From our reading we see repeated images that show the unity of humans, vegetations, seeming opposites and ideas (Oneness Archetype); we see recurring images that show noiselessness, stillness and quietude (Void Archetype), and Okri's diction repetitively evokes images of longing, yearning and thirst (Nostalgia Archetype). These archetypes are derived from James Hillman's (*An Inquiry into Image*, 1977) approach to the Jungian notion of archetypes. Hillman argues that we can have images which can be considered as archetypes. This deconstructive approach to archetypes aligns with the debate of non-Jungians or post-Jungians, such as Michael Fordham and Andrew Samuels (*Jung and the Post-Jungian*, 1985), who hold the view that what Jung means by archetypes are innate ideas or what our perception holds of an image. To Hillman, any and every image, even the most apparently banal, can be considered as archetypal. Delineating the post-Jungians, Michael Adams ("The Archetypal School", 2006) argues that Hillman and other archetypal psychologists believe that "the archetypal, or the typical, is in the eye of the imaginer – or in the imagination's eye. In a sense, the archetypal is in the eye of the beholder – the subject who beholds an image" (p. 104). Hillman adds that the archetypal is "a move one makes rather than a thing that is" (1977: 62). This discussion



has made “a move” to endow the value of prophecy on the images decipherable in Okri’s narratives. Okri’s tendency to see archetypes from a subjective point of view and his ability to use them as communicative symbols in reference to the future are the crux of this article. They also form the basis from which we derive the sub-archetypes of Oneness, Void and Nostalgia. These three are in support of the central Journey Archetype.

The first motivating archetype which whets the appetite for the future is the Oneness Archetype. This vision of Arcadia is portrayed in “Book Two: Initiation in the Garden”, where, like the Biblical Garden of Eden, everything is the same “woven in the cloth of mystery” (Okri 2002: 42). There is no consciousness of good and evil since nothing is labelled in binary opposites. Popularised by William Anderson in *Green Man: The Archetype of Our Oneness with the Earth* (1990) where he makes moral images by showing the harmony of man, beasts and vegetation, this archetype is symbolic of a better material condition where the world is seen in its complementarities and therefore avoid the dangers of tribalism, religious sectionalism, racism and ethnic rivalry. Though this may not be plausible in a quotidian sense, the pursuit of an Arcadian myth of Oneness is a step towards progress. What drives the travellers into the pursuit of Arcadia is the enormity of division in the modern world where the Oneness Archetype is far-fetched, where everything is “in broken pits” (p. 5). The insistence on names, partitioning and divisionary tactics often lead to the pollution and consequent loss of Arcadia. The challenge ahead of the travellers is to see that every human is connected to another just like the vegetation, forestry, tapestry and symmetry of Arcadia. Hence, Lao’s dehumanising description of the co-travellers is technically and mythically corrected by the aesthetics of order, respect and oneness when the character comes to a self-realisation through the rebirth of the mind. Lao who, at the beginning of the odyssey, cynically dismisses members of the filming crew as “engenderers of chaos ... interesting specimens of stressed humanity” (p. 63) now, after experiencing transformation at the sight of Arcadia, opines: “Living ought to be the unfolding masterpiece of the loving spirit” (p. 230). What Lao evolves from is the un-Arcadian attitude of setting boundaries, which naturally inhibits cross-cultural exchanges and knowledge acquisition. For instance, certain principles in Africa such as strictures of religious practitioners often prevent the adherents not only from learning the myths of other cultures but also from seeing the oneness in all myths. The hermetic nature of founding epistemologists and apologists of these socio-religious and political groups usually leave the followers indoctrinated, thereby causing them to cast a myopic look on issues. Using the Oneness Archetype, therefore, Okri foresees a possibility of change in the future if humanity, Africa as instance, embraces what will guarantee that future: the myth of seeing things in a comprehensive, all-inclusive fashion. This perspective of seeing the oneness



in myths is probably underlined by Okri's exposure to Africa and European myths.

Next is the Void Archetype, which is another handmaiden of the journey motif. Void, in mythical epistemology, signifies stillness. Void is akin to the yoga practice of meditation. It is not mysticism but a human character of self-discipline that involves separation from distraction. It is a condition which fosters inspiration and philosophical moorings because it is a conscious attempt to avoid noise, the very undoing of postmodernism. It may be argued that the Void Archetype clashes with African notions of communalism (the extended family, the market, the village square), which are characteristically noisy. The archetype of Void denotes retreat, space-finding and inner communication. One can be in a place of noise (kid-napping, bomb blast, post-election violence), yet keep searching for alternative myths either to end the crises or to forestall future problems. "Book Three: Intuitions in the Dark" starts with noise: Lao, Sam, Husk, Riley Jute and Propr (a name suggestive of "Malapropism") are at the centre of pandemonium and perplexity which the author aptly captures as the spectacle of "our receding soul" (p. 64). Husk and Riley are busy giving significance to the show of turmoil by taking pictures of all the events. This reign of anarchy and fiesta of bedlam is deliberately and immediately set as a mythical binary opposite to the inspiring silence of Arcadia. Hence we see the ideal, the antidote to noise-making, the opposing reality to the reign of disorderliness.

From the character of Arcadia, Okri describes the Void Archetype as a progressive humanist act, where "[t]he vistas of the world disappear, and the world surrenders to an omnipotent darkness .... The mind contracts. The spirit folds inward. An open sky gives way to a closed world" (p. 67) because the "tunnel", Okri's artistic term for the Void Archetype, "makes us see inward, against our will" (p. 69). The value of the Void Archetype or stillness in the journey towards the future is that revelations, self-criticism and comprehensive awareness are impossible where everybody seeks for attention and where significance is given to outward shows of carnality, impropriety, and vulgarism as exemplified by the ingloriousness of Jute and Sam especially. The Void factor demands separatism, objective clarification, impersonality where one can see "strong sunlight and strong shadow" and perceive the values of their complementarities. It is in Void that we, like Okri, can arrive at the disturbing conclusion that "darkness" (which imagistically means things, ideas and people that are unwanted, unconventional, often wasted and neglected such as farming, forest/ ecological preservation, crafts and so on) has immense value.

The Journey Archetype, as a tool for prediction, also carries with it the Nostalgia Archetype. In Okri's mythical construct, the Nostalgia Archetype captures the travellers' longing and yearning for a transformation. Nostalgia as an archetype means a wistful desire to return to a former time in one's



life or a sentimental yearning for the happiness of a former place or time. It complements the Void archetype in that it underlines a condition where humanity longs for results as it separates from the noise/distractions of the modern life. The Void Archetype births the Nostalgia Archetype in the mythical odyssey of the characters in *In Arcadia*. The Nostalgia Archetype is noticeable in Lao's remark at the beginning: "We had all lost something ..." (p. 6). Though they are all enmeshed in almost irredeemable quagmire, each character in *In Arcadia* nurses cherished dreams of Arcadia, the future.

In "Book Five", the nostalgic feelings of each of them carry peculiar labels such as "Jim's Nightmare", "Mistletoe's Dream", "Riley's Regret" and so on. Each designation denotes the missing dream, the lost vision of each character. The intent of this mythic device is to create a thirst for the future where, longingly, the characters believe they can find fulfilment. In "Jim's Intuition", for instance, we can read Okri's concern for the activation of mental potentials as well as the cultivation of natural resources. He foresees a situation in the future where the inactivity and indolence can, again, lead to a loss, thus making the Arcadia destination far-fetched:

Immensity of the land  
And spaces of the sun.  
They slept too long in paradise  
And ended up in prison.

(Okri 2002: 178)

Jim intuits for humankind that the opportunities provided by "spaces" and "immensity" must be utilised, else if they stay "too long" uncultivated, the whole bounties would end up "in prison". This intuition from Jim's longing is an antidote to his flaw. Jim, following Lao's introduction, is "squat and fat and balding" and "[h]adn't directed anything in at least seven years .... Incompetent beyond description" (p. 10). Jim needs the Arcadian template to get back on his feet; he knows that there is something he has lost, the reason he has not directed a film for many years. The African continent is bedevilled with Jims who are the directors of dreams and corporate visions. They are the parliamentarians who cannot enact a profitable law because they have failed to utilise the "[i]mmensity of the land". There are individual Jims also. There are "spaces", and ideas that are yet to be cultivated in the community because of indolence. In Jim's intuition, Okri projects the consequence of following a pattern of idleness: "prison".

Jute, the puritan and spy, suffers a character deformity which makes her long for a future where she will no more be seen as "the intolerant ... the echoing corridors of dreadful institutions" (p. 15). From her intuition of Arcadia, she sees the future implication of sternness, bland inhumanity, wanton callousness and institutionalised calumny, which are her chief attributes. Jute is symbolic of organised religion, motivated by the selfish doctrines of charlatanism, bigotry and extremism. She knows what she has



lost as the images of Arcadia warn her of the implication of her insensitive fastidiousness. Every overly critical officialdom and suspecting policing institution has hidden contradictions such as hypocrisy, high-profile secrets and hidden agendas. Hence, they read their fears in other people's affairs. But Jute foresees that "tyrants and dictators all had their Arcadias to cleanse their souls of the brutalities they had unleashed" because puritanical expectations have implications on the Jutes of this world. But shouldn't organised institutions have laws, monitoring officers and principles? Yes, but every Jute archetype must have an Arcadian human face which executes punitive measures with temperate eyes. This is what Jute has lost; hence, the nostalgia.

Propr is nostalgic about the times people used to listen to him, but he lost it on the grounds of his indifference to people's voices. He loves to make sound (meanings, statements, ideational remarks), but he is deaf, "tone deaf" to other people's perspectives, corrections and points of view because he spends his time "listening to garbage" (p. 11). He is thus reaping what he has sown. Propr has lost audienceship: he is a player without spectators. On his way to Arcadia, he longs for that missing link in his sound-making career: how to carry people along, how to project, how to be democratic. On a larger scale, he is a leader without followers. Arcadia, to him, is a picturesque manifestation of the values inherent in listening by not ignoring "the cries of the people" (p. 178). Here, Okri, in conjunction with the universal law of Karma, uses the Nostalgic Archetype to foresee the future of a non-listening leader as exemplified by Prop's nostalgia.

We can intuit the future from Okri's narratives because the characters, accompanied with "fears ... failures, the problems that had haunted their fathers" (p. 6) are on a tortuous journey. They are looking for commonly lost values, namely discipline, equity, charity and management. These things have been lost as a result of carnality, indolence, hypocrisy as characterised by the miasmas of the travellers. He warns, using the foregoing archetypes, of the dangers of repeating the miasmatic attitudes so that the bliss of Arcadia can be experienced. Arcadia is in the mind: it is not a place that can be reached physically. It is only attained through the process of evolving and constant rebirth.

### **"Challenged Episteme": Unorthodox Archetypes as Predictive Myth**

In the kingdom of this world  
We can still astonish the gods in humanity  
And be the stuff of future legends.

Ben Okri, *Mental Fight*

There are many ways to die ...  
 A lot of them have to do with living. Living many lies...  
 Living the life imposed on you, the dreams and codes  
 Of your ancestors.

Ben Okri, *A Way of Being Free*

Okri's *Astonishing the Gods* initiated the probing of reality through the journey archetype continued in *In Arcadia*. Unlike *In Arcadia*, however, the narratives revolve around a nameless character who embarks on a quest that leads to the island of the Invisibles. Following the instruction of invisible guides (a man, a child and a woman), he roams through strange terrains and hallucinatory landscapes. Later, he finds a bridge that is characterised by myth, magic, ideas and dreams. Crossing it, he leaps into an ethereal land, a potentially utopian city. While this plot structure is reminiscent of Wole Soyinka's *Forest of a Thousand Demons*, the point of departure is that *Astonishing the Gods* is about humankind's discovery of personal and institutional flaws. While a *Forest of a Thousand Demons* is preoccupied with the themes of will, survival, tenacity and determination, *Astonishing the Gods* is about the unearthing of individual and corporate potentials in order to challenge a reigning ideology or to "astonish" "the gods" of this world.

The word "astonish" in "astonishing the gods" connotes assessing, anticipating, predicting, challenging and thereby subverting the ways of inhumane establishments in order to counter their narratives. The "gods" means those who hold the reigns of power, not necessarily divine beings. In order to astonish the gods, each individual must embark on a personal quest (it is a collective quest in *In Arcadia*, though the characters received individual intuitions) to probe the future of those who impose pain and difficulty. This narrative, therefore, is about change. The change is to challenge a current ideological process which has attributed universality to certain issues that are highly contingent. To challenge the hegemonic structure of institutionalised iniquity and inequity by searching for alternative patterns is the change that the nameless hero of *Astonishing the Gods* seeks for. This change is necessitated by the use of language to paint a desired future.

In searching for an alternative challenging episteme, Okri stretches and strengthens the Journey Archetype with the use of unusual or seemingly contradictory statements that have predictive qualities (Unorthodox Archetypal Statement) and he evokes strange images which are reminiscent of a lost ideal (Unorthodox Archetypal Sight). Like the Oneness, Void and Nostalgia Archetype, we derive these archetypes from Hillman's deconstructive notion that any image, insofar as it advances a point of view about human affairs, is archetypal.

In the first archetype, unusual expressions are stated in a way that challenges readers to ponder for a while before they begin to identify with them. The meaning of these strange statements by Okri unfolds in the



course of the narrative. The seemingly weird expressions lead the reader on like a guide into the future, the end of the book. These unconventional remarks make the readers share in the burden of the nameless character because there is an inward, unconscious connection with what they mean. They are strange but we can identify with them. They are the statements that are missing in our constitutions, Bibles, Qurans, policies, proposals, publications, educational curricula, myths and folklore. They are not there because the ruling ideas (which are also myths but with inhumane values: oppression, suppression and so on) have expunged them, leaving the credos of carnality, hypocrisy and instant gratification. While we may call these strange statements “paradoxes”, this discussion designates them as Unorthodox Archetypal Statements because they make us remember deep-rooted truths and they inspire the imagination to reflect on the things to come. These “deep-rooted truths” (myths) are different from the “ruling ideas” (myths) because the former are born out of the human imagination, untainted by a materially prejudiced condition though inspired by the happenings in the society.

In the second archetype, Okri presents novel sights that provide a sense of *déjà vu* for the traveller/reader. These seemingly strange sights are not really strange because they appear as if they had been seen somewhere before. Though the visual elements presented are different from the pollution of the material world, the traveller can identify with them, because they are the ideals that he longs for. These sights are graphic images which generate the intuitions for and the recognition of what is to come. Unorthodox Archetypal Sights are used as prophecy because they are presented as desired visions different from the malevolence of ruling establishment. They are set up by Okri to astonish, subvert and counteract the self-imposing “gods”.

Actually, the traveller has lost his identity and visibility because his education, fashioned after the curriculum of human imperialists, does not teach him that he exists. Hence, his search is to look for visibility, for meaning:

It was in books that he first learn of his invisibility.  
he searched for himself and his people in all the history books  
he read and discovered to his youthful astonishment that  
he didn't exist. This troubled him so much that he resolved,  
as soon as he was old, to leave his land and find the people  
who did exist, to see what they looked like.

(Okri 1995: 3)

The statements and pictures that this character has been used to have robbed him of his personhood. He is so psychologically retarded that he does not see himself.

## Unorthodox Archetypal Statements

The statements are as follows: The first is: “You are seeking something that you have already found but you don’t know it”, made by “a gentle voice” (p. 6) to the traveller after travelling for seven years. The second is: “You must master the art of happiness” (p. 9). The third is: “Retain your bewilderment. Your bewilderment will serve you well” (p. 11) while the fourth is: “Understanding leads to ignorance, especially when it comes too soon” (p. 30). Others are: “When you make sense of something, it tends to disappear. It is only mystery which keeps things alive” (p. 30), “Too much beauty is bad for the soul ... want some ugliness ... some suffering” (p. 77) and, the last guide says, “... things lose their reality if you are not aware of them” (p. 104) . I have taken the statements in the order in which they appear in the narrative and as they relate to Okri’s mythic idea of prediction.

From the foregoing it is clear that Okri, through the traveller’s travail and the guiding statements he receives, is disenchanted with current protocols. The statements, paradoxical in nature, are geared towards making readers remember some primordial ideas that materialism and carnality have made them forget. These words reawaken patterns of wisdom that humankind shares but has not remembered. They provide insights into how the future can be better.

Individual and corporate entities (Africa, for example) seek aid, loans and assistanceship that are not necessary because of the abundance of material and human resources needed for progress have been found, but the places where these potentials are kept can no longer be remembered. Something else such as oil bunkering, political manoeuvring, election-rigging, and power tussling have cast amnesia on the creative memory. To guarantee a better-looking future, the continent must take into cognisance the archetypal statement of looking for the missing future inside the region rather than begging. This is also a way of mastering “the art of happiness”. Happiness and corporate well-being are experiences that must be prepared for. Tranquillity does not come on a platter of gold. By finding the lost resource from the inside, the happiness of the future is secured.

Okri, with the archetype of “Bewilderment”, foresees a future guaranteed by the sustained character of curiosity, wonder, and search which are all connotative of *research*. There is no progress without research. It is inimical to growth if the fundings allocated to instant gratification, materialism, welfare, bonuses and benefits, are larger than the time and resources devoted to research in health and education. “Bewilderment” is an asset because it imbues in us the progressive temper of curiosity. To pretend that there is much “understanding” is the greatest inhibition to postmodern development. The claim to full wisdom on the grounds of pomposity and self-aggrandisement is a threat to the future because it is “only mystery which keeps things alive”. Inferably, the person or society that has lost the



sense of “bewilderment” (research) and “mystery” (myth) has lost the future.

## Unorthodox Archetypal Sights

The signs and symbols of governing institutions are ideologically marked because they inexplicitly advance the world view of the institutions. These signs are *archetypal* because, over the years, they have been ingrained into the activities of everyday living. In Christopher Flood’s view,

[t]he ideological colouring may be more overt, as in the cases of party-political speeches, broadcasts and advertisements, campaigns by lobbies and political pressure groups, or partisan newspaper editorials .... Or .... less overt ... TV documentaries, writings ... teaching of educators, the pronouncement of dignitaries at school ceremonies, preachers of sermons in churches ....

(Flood 2002: 16)

Governing institutions seem to measure success on the basis of questionable wealth acquisition. This idea is advanced in media through advertisement of awards, red-carpet celebrations, corporate greetings in the newspapers and so on. These lifestyles have been accepted as the gospel truth for living because the governing myth has become the language used to impose interpretative structure on the psyche of the people. Thus, it is taken as an acceptable “archetypal sight” to see rewards and awards for every act done. The principle of selflessness has been subtly replaced by medal-craving ideology of formalised institutions. But Okri deploys mythical images, using symbolic plots in the traveller’s journey, to show the dangers of following an “archetypal sight” that directs humanity to carnality.

First, as the traveller passes through the verandah of the Invisible City, Okri gives a description which evokes the vision of order, reminiscent of John the Beloved’s portrayal of the New Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation: “Lost in wonder, he stared at the white harmonic buildings round the square. He noticed their pure angels, their angelic buttresses, and their columns of gleaming marble .... He noticed how all things invisible seemed to become attentive to the glorious singing which poured a glow into the limpid moonlight” (Okri 1995: 7). In Okri’s mythic view, the future could be saved from the incongruence of divide-and-rule tacticians, if only there were a strong sense of stressing socio-political harmony and institutional coherence. Differences must be understood as individual parts is “attentive to the glorious singing” of other parts. This archetypal sight of harmony is apt in capturing Okri’s perspective of how the future would likely be if orderliness and coherence were stressed. Even in diversity and

multiplicity, such as natural ethnic groupings and tribal differences, there should be an ideology of respect for the other.

Apart from the physical buildings that are visible, everything else on the island is described as invisible. Okri, in his paradoxical style, portrays in Books Three and Four how futile it is to be looking for visibility. *Visibility* in this context means the quest for validation, acceptance and society's confirmation; it is the orthodox endorsement of what is normal, beautiful and applaudable. There is much sadness and disillusionment in aspiring for societal acceptance through the medium of their own constructed signs and symbols. The seeking of visibility is a sign of weakness, imitation and parody. We must make our own visibilities or else we would be lost in other people's vision. The more invisible an individual or corporate society is, the more progressive, because to be visible is to follow the status quo of depravity and insensitivity of oppressors' visibilities.

The archetypal sight of nothingness or invisibility inspires the quest for growth and meaning-making. Seeing nothing around us should make us want to create, not buying things and proclaiming other people's constructs. Those who set up disturbing appearances have done so to project their mythic conviction which is born out of greed and wanton calumny. No wonder William Blake (in Marsh 2001: 88) avers that "I must create a system or be enslaved by another man's". To be safe and to guarantee a future worth living, individuals must form their visibilities. In *Astonishing the Gods*, the readers are taken through the travails and tragedies of those who seek for visibility. Okri presents an overdressed lady in her odyssey to the Invisible City. The traveller inquires where she is going and she replies, "I am going to where I can see people and where people can see me" (Okri 1995: 77). But the traveller observes that the more she craves for visibility, the more she disappears: "Just before she vanished into the temple, he thought he saw her smile. It occurred to him that ... she too was a paradox" (p. 78). In order to avoid a future of contradiction and nothingness, one must not seek societal acceptance, or what Okri connotes as *visibility*.

## Conclusion

### Inscribing Change: The Imperatives of Individual Messianic Vision

So far, the journey archetype has been delineated as a mythic device used by Okri to construct the image of the lost ideal as it applies to the future. Actually, Arcadia is not a place that humankind can reach because it represents the "idyllic" future. But since the "idyll" cannot be attained in actuality, the quest for Arcadia is an impulse to strive towards perfection, orderliness, harmony and corporate beauty. It is an intuition that inspires the



desire for reconstructing the ill-patterns of the past by deconstructing inhumane ideologies. The future is always renewed by the unending visitation, researching and reinterpretation of lost ideals. This, in Okri's narratives, requires personal sacrifice and self-criticism. The messages, inscriptions and intuitions given to each character in *In Arcadia* are to inspire them to rectify their individual anomalies in the light of what they want their future to be. Arcadia is an aesthetic vision meant to ameliorate individual and mass disillusionment of humankind. From Okri's myth-ological stance, the change required in the future must start from the sacrifice of every individual.

Self-sacrifice remains a timeless panacea for an ailing society. That is why Okri, in *Astonishing the Gods*, uses a single character to paint a future where individual responsibility is highly revered. Corporate beauty is a function of individuals' performance. We need not wait for government policies and democratic ideals to shape the future for us: we can individually predict what is to come and, if need be, change it for positive result. Sacrifice entails the consciousness of the voice of conscience (what the Malasso archetype is to the travellers in *In Arcadia* and what the guides are to the nameless traveller in *Astonishing the Gods*), the practice of selflessness, the love of creativity, the use of perception and the engagement of self-reflection, which are all characteristics of the mythical art of prediction.

But are all these elements in *In Arcadia* and *Astonishing the Gods* prescriptive enough to ameliorate the suffering continent of Africa? Is the myth of prediction capable of liberating the African continent from the shackles of neocolonialism, corruption and oppression? Are Okri's "pictures" not "sophisticated and unsettling" as Green observes (2008: 18)? Okri's prophetic myths of Africa and the world may appear descriptive in the narratives, but these visions of "Arcadia" and the "Invisible City" are artistic prescriptions which suggest to us the invaluable rewards of the discernment of causes through the observation of recurring patterns either in the past or the present. The utilitarian value of this artistic/psychic attitude is to prevent such undesirable features to recur in the desired future. We can raise an ideal Africa of the twenty-first century if the lost purity, decency and orderliness which represent "the first foundation of the golden age" (Okri 1995: 130) can be mythically deciphered, embraced and utilised to address the problems of insecurity, tyranny and violence. The myth of future discernment is Okri's artistic contributions to global debates on the preservation of the human species.

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