

The Spiritual Background of Slavery in the Americas

The year 2023 has already graced us with a great literary contribution, or an enhanced version of a previous one, that of Ben Okri's long-awaited *The Last Gift of the Master Artists*. The book is the rewrite of his *Starbook* of sixteen years earlier.

Why a Book Rewrite?

Why a re-write may become more apparent at the end of this exploration. For now, let us hear Okri's disclosure: "*Starbook* was a book that had cost me a lot emotionally. I paid a price for it, and I think it's one of my important works."¹ He adds "I never re-read my novels because I don't like looking back, ... but when *Starbook* came out, I was aware that some of the responses did not pick up on one of the key themes of the book, especially in the central passages, which are all about the slave trade to come. Reviewers are not stupid and if they're not picking up on something, there's a reason."

From Africa then comes an essential piece for understanding the history of the Americas, especially for those countries where slavery played such a pervasive role, southern US, the Caribbean islands, Venezuela and Brazil ahead of the rest.

Many things I had read in *Starbook* found answers, or deepening, in *The Last Gift of the Master Artists*. The previous book is called *Starbook* for a reason which has little to do with the theme of the story, but rather with its origin. Okri wants us to understand that "This is a story my mother began to tell me when I was a child, the rest I gleaned from the book of life among the stars, in which all things are known."² More of this is made explicit in the book's rewrite, to which we will return at the end. The second book's title—*The Last gift of the Master Artists*—now indicates the larger theme of the story and the role of the tribe that more than any other prepared the African soul for the trials of slavery.

Who is Ben Okri?

Ben Okri, who has been described as "a child of the Nigerian Civil War", has received numerous literary awards, starting from the prestigious Booker Prize for Fiction for his 1992 *The Famished Road*. The novel, which portrays his native Nigeria from the perspective of the spirit child Azaro, was the first of his books I laid my hands on.

The story in *The Famished Road* is seen through the eyes of Azaro, a "spirit-child," one of those spirits who, in Yoruba belief, hovers between life and death. Though he knows he is incarnating for a life of sadness and misery, he still embodies positivity. He knows the contrast between the land of the living, where violence and strife are commonplace and the land of the spirit, where reigns harmony and peace. His parents struggle for his survival and, in the attempt, are almost turned destitute.

¹ Vanessa Thorpe, 19 March, 2022, *Booker winner Ben Okri rewrites published novel to drive home message on slavery*, at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/mar/19/booker-winner-ben-okri-rewrites-published-novel-to-drive-home-message-on-slavery>

² Ben Okri, *Starbook*, 3.

The critics of the time called the book "dazzling, hypnotic, mesmerizing, a feast, a masterpiece." I read it with complete absorption, even though the background theme of this 500-page novel is the searing reality of Nigeria's present miseries. What makes this possible is Ben Okri's capacity to encompass all dimensions of reality, the spiritual level treated almost as a matter of fact, both in its beauty and in its frightening aspects. And all of it is redeemed by a writing mid-way between prose and poetry.

That book was soon followed, after its own two sequels, by the marvelous and cryptic *Astonishing the Gods* (1996), which I cannot tire of reading again. That one was hailed as "philosophical, impressive, brave and often beautiful, graceful, enigmatic, bewitching." It is that and more, a true soul journey.

Ben Okri is not an anthroposophist, yet to people in our circles, the question could naturally rise if he were, so much he is conversant with both sides of reality and can sense and convey the finality of all evil and ugliness toward ultimate redemption. Such is the case in his latest book. No matter how much ugliness the author portrays, the soul can bear it, without losing touch with truth, beauty, lightness and humor on the other side. The author can extend understanding and empathy to all, and is not afraid of the direst darkness, such is his trust in the strength of the human spirit. The poetic sensibility, expressed both in the language and the quality of the images, renders the reading a true pleasure. The book is prefaced by a blank page with a footnote saying "Read slowly". In effect, this is a book to be savored in an almost meditative way.

Colonialism and Slavery

Both books I will review are written in short segments forming pieces of a tapestry, It's a little as if Okri painted vignettes, moving from one general perspective, or an interesting aspect of African life, to the life of one individual or another, the life of the kingdom or of the tribe. All individuals are treated as archetypal figures—as you would in a legend—although there are concrete indications that they correspond to historical figures at the time of the incipient slavery trade in the Atlantic coast, in the area that runs from Senegal to Angola. We have a king, a prince, a maiden and a master as the four main characters, surrounded by elders on one hand and master artists on the other. And there is a tale of initiation through the events caused by the 'white wind' and the 'white spirits' a clear reference to the spiritual beings behind slavery, and their physical agents.

We are told "[The white wind] was a wind that 'blew from across the great sea' creating empty spaces wherever it blew. At first it brings a sense of expansion, of possibility and novelty, but this is short-lived. Then it starts to erase parts of geographical features, of animals and plants, and the memories of the people. It alters the seasons and brings down one by one all the gods, even the great father god. Then disappear philosophies and traditions, and finally young men and women and whole villages. This was the work of white spirits. No one sees these spirits except those who are captured. Wise men see them in dreams. Rumors about the extent of the cruelty are such that many can only settle in denial.

Exceptional individuals lived and were initiated at the time in which Western Africa was beginning to experience the scourge of slavery. The spiritual world prepared those who were to suffer bondage to make their sacrifice meaningful and fruitful, implies Okri, though this in no way diminishes the offense or whitewashes anyone of their responsibilities. So here is a place to turn to that phenomenon and its widest implications.

The slave trade was also known as the "triangular trade" between Europe, Africa and the Americas. From Europe, ever since the early sixteenth century, the ships were laden with those goods which could be traded for slaves at their African destination. On the other side of the Atlantic slaves were sold and the ships loaded with goods from the New World. All of this was made possible, followed and studied by the first growing corporations of the London stock exchange, such as the West Indies Corporation. But before the English and the French there had been the Spaniards, the Dutch and the Portuguese.

Because the slaves' ordeals could be divided in three stages, the long Atlantic voyage was called "the Middle Passage." It was preceded by the indigenous people's capture and their captivity in the harbors from which they sailed off and followed by slavery proper. It is estimated that over the time it lasted (1525 to second half of 19th century) the slave trade affected roughly 12,5 million Africans in the Middle Passage. Some two million did not make it to the other end. And an estimated 2 million died in Africa between capture and delivery to the slave boats.

For the slave trade to be effective, not only did there need to be technological feats for the transport and preservation of the valuable 'cargo.' Improvements devised for the Africans' comfort were really meant at minimizing casualties and loss of value, mutinies, death of the sailors themselves. This can be understood keeping in mind that the estimated value of a newly sold slave in the 18th century stood between \$ 800 to \$ 1,200, or the equivalent of today's \$ 32,000 to 48,000 after adjustment for inflation.³

Deception had to pervade the whole chain through and through. Stakeholders no doubt preferred to ignore the plight of the captives, considering the operations from a purely technical standpoint. The captains entrusted the dirtiest tasks to sailors, which most of the time had no choice in the matter. The slave trade was despised and only prisoners, or those weighed by debt, would be conscripted. Few would volunteer. And many knew they were risking their lives, almost as much as the slaves due to illnesses, not to mention rebellions which were the lot of about one out of ten ships. When the captains reached Europe at their return, a smaller crew meant higher profits.

On the other side of the Atlantic a privileged class was born, but one economically shackled by debt to the different empires. And the lands would not derive incentives for cultural or social change, as slavery required a constant state of preservation

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Middle_Passage.

and status quo, with stagnation of intellectual, artistic or technical advancements. Where monoculture reigns, we know, so does ecological degradation. Everything that today has exploded in magnitude, was in essence laid down at the beginning of the age of the consciousness soul, as Okri intuitively.

The Kingdom and the Tribe of the Master Artists

We will now go over some of the salient points of the initiations of prince and maiden. Their soul journeys and encounter form the fulcrum of the book and the heart of the question of the spiritual background of slavery. The prince of the story is Okri's mother's ancestor.⁴ And looking further back, Okri helps us surmise their Atlantean origin. The prince dreams "of his ancestors who had come from the land now forgotten under the sea ..."⁵

The maiden too comes from a very unique background, that of the wandering tribe of the master artists. These are people who do not want to belong to structures that would undermine their mission. They want to remain free to offer their contribution for the spiritual welfare of all neighboring tribes. About these too we are told "the ancestors of the tribe who had come from somewhere not of this earth, and whose civilization perished under the sea."⁶ They lived deep into the forest, dedicated to making art from the inspiration they received from the oracles. They created anonymously and displayed mostly sculptures in the center of the village, in the shrines, or other places according to the need. Much of this art had a healing purpose of warning about some danger or helping to absorb its impact. Due to the service they thus offered to all other tribes, they had been given the freedom to live as they wished.

The art of the tribe could be works of beauty, but others could be deeply disturbing. The masters live on another plane of existence and are difficult to find. In veiled terms we are told they have access to the Akashic chronicle: "It was as though they had access to a place where all the things that happened in the universe were registered." However, they are not interested in prophecy and facts, only "in creating different kinds of beauty... They were interested only in what exalted states the work could induce in you, for you to use as your intelligence or need best suggests to you. And so they had no word for beauty in their language."⁷ In the midst of growing sorrows of the land the masters produce more and more works of art. "It was as though sorrow were being converted, instantly, into beauty; as if sorrow was beauty's secret, and its mother."⁸ And the sorrows we are addressing are those caused by the white wind and the white spirits.

The Prince and the Maiden

The prince and maiden come from remarkable family lines; a noble line on one hand, a family of masters on the other. The prince's father, the king of the story is the one whose "Laughter was the king's way of breathing. ... Behind his laughter lay

⁵ Okri, *The Last Gift of the Master Artists*, 373.

⁶ Okri, *The Last Gift of the Master Artists*, 146.

⁷ Okri, *Starbook*, 326-27.

⁸ Okri, *The Last Gift*, 360.

a profound soul that was deeply into the mystery of things."⁹ He had greatly loved his wife, whom the prince had hardly known. Before dying she revealed to the king that his son would need much support to fulfil his destiny and that she would provide it from the other side. The king laughs often because he can sense his wife's presence at his side.

On the side of the maiden are some very special masters. Some of them can see into the life of the tribe, others into the life of the land, and only one or two of them can intuit what is going on in the wide world. The master of the story is certainly one of them. He can sense the importance of his daughter's destiny and of the meeting between her and the prince. "

The maiden's father is an enigmatic master, he is in fact the spiritual guidance of the tribe. His wife is of royal descent. Before marrying her the master had been an orphan raised by a master bronze-caster. Even then he was already one of the best artists of his time. Together husband and wife ally the boldness of genius with the weight of tradition.

The master is not only one of the greatest artists of the tribe; he is also the guardian of its esoteric traditions. He does much of his work with the help of invisible companions, elementals. He can conjure up spirits in succession: first the spirit of fire, then the spirit of making, finally the spirit of inspiration.

The tribe of masters are aware of the ills originating in the land, from which they want to help it purify. "In those times, across the savannahs and in the forests, tribes danced to a multiplicity of gods. They killed and sacrificed one another. They were led astray by babblings from oracles and false priests steeped in the stupidity of men and women. In those times a clear light came from the austere images of the tribe of artists."¹⁰ Some of these ills, or the spirits that represented them, appear among the regular councils of the masters, speaking of sacrificed victims, tyranny, infanticide, and other horrible rituals, even in the middle of much that was good, joyful and lovable in the lives of the tribes.

The Prince

The prince is one with very unique capacities; he can see the elemental beings around him and rejoices in nature. Even in his early youth he questions some of the decadent practices of his tribe; chiefly among them the practice of slavery, even though confined to vanquished enemies, and also the tremendous onus and expectations piled up on women. Upon his request, he is allowed into the mysteries of initiation of the women, to which no male before him was ever given access. Through these he enters in contact with his deceased mother.

The prince consults with the oracles at the shrines, which predict the coming of the "white spirits."¹¹ They bid him find the "hidden masters." But before he can do so the

⁹ Ibid, 43.

¹⁰ Ibid, 130.

¹¹ "Strange people will come in silence, with fire, bearing new words that will destroy old worlds. Gods will be in flames. There will be an earthquake in which the earth does not tremble, but in which the people will be silent for one hundred and forty years period. A new sun will rise. The

prince is tormented by the visits of evil forms and unspeakable evil in his dreams. This is what precipitates his state of illness. The youth, affected by the sorrows of the land, finds himself at death's door. His fate seems to affect people from all tribes come to show their love.

In his illness the prince dreams about the maiden and, in conversation with her, decides to suffer the evils visiting the land upon himself. He recovers from death after this dream. His illness has been much more than an ordeal of the body. It was the prince's initiation: "He had done it all in advance, in depth. Now his body had to catch up with what his spirit had already gone beyond, transcended. To those who have been awoken from a true death, this is the peculiar grace, and a unique burden. They are unsurprised a moment before the big events of their lives. They live a constant, accentuated *déjà vu*."¹² The prince starts to see the effects that the slavery of the white spirits has on the land. He starts to perceive growing gaps in the sky, in plants and animals and in people. He lives a tragic isolation because nobody else sees what he does. In a dream the king tells him to seek the tribe of the maiden. This will mature in the resolve to become an apprentice and servant to the master.

The Maiden

At her birth the mother intuits that "For most of her life it will seem as if she's lost. Then one day she will wake up and she will be comfortable in her body. Then her real life will begin, beyond the sea. She will bring the music of a distant star into the narrow spaces of this earth, and reconcile the people to their forgotten origins."¹³

The maiden has an otherworldly behavior; she walks the land like a stranger, like someone whose real home is in the spirit, thus communes with the elemental spirits as a matter of fact. She is alien to her own body and her own life. It is only through the trials and initiations that she comes close to her distant destiny, one that unites her with the future of the land and the future of the slaves.

The maiden grows up working in her father's workshop and absorbing much of his knowledge. She has the feeling she has a real home on a distant planet and feels like an exile on Earth. When these beings are described something of them is revealed. "They had been through eons of excessive memory and it paralyzed them for millennia. Their forgetfulness was not forgetting, but acts of genius. ... They were masters of the present moment. In the present all things, all worlds, all possibilities exist. Their sense of irony was inexhaustible."¹⁴ These are entities which to spiritual science appear as Saturn beings, able to instill in the soul understanding of the cycles of time, through which the soul can start to unveil what is hidden behind the larger world karma, and thus accept karmic necessities.

people will be made new with the dance of the gods. Made new and blessed. But only after the lamentation of flowers, the rebirth of rivers, and the reuniting of brothers and sisters across the great sea." (Okri, *The Last Gift*, 37)

¹² Okri, *The Last Gift*, 261.

¹³ *Ibid*, 97.

¹⁴ Okri, *The Last Gift*, 346.

The maiden is deeply affected by a particular work of art, believed to originate from her father. It is a disturbing sculpture of three men and a woman bound together at the ankles by chains. It bears the stamp of the master artist thus: "And yet they shone, like gods, unconquerable even in the vilest suffering. Something about the towering nature of the work suggested that only the great can bear such suffering. They bore evils and still their light shone through. They bore it as a sacrifice, a purification, for the human race."¹⁵ The maiden intuits that the sculpture marks the end of an era and a closure in the tribe's ability to bring full spiritual renewal, and in it she fathoms a glimpse of her own destiny.

The maiden is initiated into womanhood. She is ritually buried in the "cave of transformations" for seven days, where she is as if dead. During that time she ascends to a place of light and sees a prince waiting for her. After that she creates a sculpture of the dying prince, without knowing of the prince, nor of his actual illness. The work causes a stir in the village and disquiet in her soul. She keeps dreaming that the prince would awake. Finally the maiden succumbs to illness, and for a second time goes through a spontaneous initiation death of seven days. Upon returning she speaks of a "love beyond reason, a love sweeter than madness."

Prince and maiden seek each other through their initiations and through dreams in which they see each other, know each other. This will culminate in the prince seeking initiation into the secrets of the tribe of the master artists. He becomes an apprentice to the master, the maiden's father.

In a parallel progression maiden and prince start intuiting the future destiny of the African tribes all around them at the hand of the slave trade. They start having visions of their own personal fate following slavery. This renders them able and willing to bear the unbearable in a spirit of service to their fellow human being.

The growing sorrow of the tribe brings about a brief revival of inspiration, after which their last artworks are spread out on the great trade routes. In the middle of the growing sorrow the prince is everywhere bringing solace and comfort. He starts to preach about "one God, one father-mother, one source as the source of all." And he starts to teach that death is only a transition not to be feared. Finally, he performs healings.

In slavery the prince undergoes his final test. "As a slave he endured his last crucifixion. Among slaves he spread dreams of freedom, dreams of illumination. Those dreams never perished. By all accounts he was a secret master who saw it all, suffered it all. That was his last time on the wheel, in the dust of living."¹⁶ The maiden plays a similar role, no doubt among the women, though Okri doesn't specify further. Together, with those who know them they can teach the fellow slaves on the Middle Passage and on their land of arrival. Others sent by them will later do the same.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 84.

¹⁶ Okri, *The Last Gift*, 483.

The African Mysteries on the Other Side of the Atlantic

We can now look at the spiritual perspective from the other side of the Atlantic through the eyes of Orland Bishop, who is versed in African spirituality. He confirms that African elders who had some clairvoyance offered ritual initiation to their fellow slaves in order to be prepared to confront the future reality, already during the Middle Passage.¹⁷

The new African American spirituality focused on the communication with the elementals and the nature spirits, and with the spirits of the ancestors. The newly arrived wanted to carry into the new land their ancestral spirits. "Their work in the fields became a way to establish their Earth shrines, so the plantations became places of dreams and the seeds of the prophecy of the Promised Land were sown there."¹⁸ Central to all of this was geomancy, the ability to recognize the Earth's energy streams and its elemental beings. Through this sense of connection the slaves could preserve that little sense of freedom, which would make bondage bearable.

The African initiates helped their fellow human beings to establish Earth shrines, in which the memory of events was recorded in trees and close to rivers. Here rituals were conducted and further initiations took place. Some of these shrines still survive as, for example, off the Georgia coast among the Gullah communities, in Cuba, Haiti, Jamaica or Brazil.

In light of our exploration of the part the African Mysteries played in preparing the African victims to endure the trials to come, we can surmise Okri's urge in rewriting the book. Reading the "book among the stars" is an endeavor that requires humility and ability to question oneself, as the author renders clear: "Not all events glimpsed in the book of life among the stars are clear. Only while dreaming does the dream make sense." The dream shows a wholeness but upon awakening only pieces are recaptured, "fragments of what was a magical vision. With these fragments one tries to recreate a beauty that is lost when one returns from the book among the stars."¹⁹ In light of this it may appear clear why the author decided to rewrite the book sixteen years later; reading from the book in the stars requires continuous inner maturation.

Coming from these sources, what renders the work of Ben Okri remarkable is the ability to honor all agony and suffering, which leads him to wonder "... why some peoples had such an extraordinary gift for joy and ecstasies of the spirit: it was the excess leftover from the suffering to come and the suffering that has gone. It was the conversion of suffering into moments in paradise while alive, a divine compensation for enduring the unendurable."²⁰

¹⁷ Orland Bishop, *The Seventh Shrine: Meditations on the African Spiritual Journey; From the Middle Passage to the Mountaintop*, Part I: chapter 2, "The Middle Passage."

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 23.

¹⁹ Okri, *The Last Gift*, 392.

²⁰ *The Last gift of the Master Artists*, 430.