

An African Elegy – Ben Okri: a brief analysis

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“An African Elegy” is the titular poem of Ben Okri first poetry anthology, *An African Elegy* (1992). As always, a good place to start, is at the beginning. The title of the poem situates it both within a certain space, and within a certain tradition: the space, Africa, and the tradition, the elegy. First the tradition. Although there is no fixed definition of what constitutes an elegy, it usually refers to a form of lamentation, a poem where the speaker grieves for someone or something, and exhibits intense personal reflection. The elegy is a literary form popular in European writing at least since Antiquity. The ‘space’ of Africa is pertinent not only because Okri is Nigerian and is well known as a pan-African writer, but also because the elegy is known primarily as a European form. An ‘African elegy’ can therefore be read as something speaking back to that ‘other’ elegy, the ‘European elegy’. The title is however ambiguous, for it can also refer simply to an elegy situated within Africa – an elegy about Africa. The title, therefore, opens up to possibility, to readings in the plural.

1. We are the miracles that God made
2. To taste the bitter fruit of Time.
3. We are precious.
4. And one day our suffering
5. Will turn into the wonders of the earth.

It is not merely the title which can be read in the plural, but the speaker himself or themselves): “we are the miracles”. This is the first inversion of the traditional elegiac form, for the speaker is not an individual reflecting and pondering, but rather representing a plurality – a communal we, not me. Who constitutes the we? Miracles – those made by God, and who are precious. These precious miracles made by God have however been tried and tested – they have to “taste the bitter fruit of Time” and suffer. Time is personified, a being which God places in the path of those whom the speaker represents. Why? Because, one day, the suffering of God’s precious miracles “[w]ill turn into the wonders of the earth” – despite the bitter fruit of Time, the suffering they endure, they will be more than they are now. The

speaker alternates each 'positive' line, with a negative one, but ends triumphantly. Lines 1, 3, and 5 see the speaker describe those spoken of as miracles who are precious, and will one day be wonders, whilst lines 2 and 4 describe their suffering and tasting of bitter fruit. It is, however, important to note that these more negative lines are in the minority, and the speaker succeeds in presenting an image of positivity – an image of overcoming the negative in the face of adversity.

6. There are things that burn me now
7. Which turn golden when I am happy.
8. Do you see the mystery of our pain?
9. That we bear poverty
10. And are able to sing and dream sweet things

11. And that we never curse the air when it is warm
12. Or the fruit when it tastes so good
13. Or the lights that bounce gently on the waters?
14. We bless things even in our pain.
15. We bless them in silence.

The second and third stanzas continue the atmosphere of hopeful reflection – those things which are troubling, uncomfortable, and hurtful, those things which “burn ... now”, are simply temporary. Rather, these things “turn golden when [the speaker is] happy”. Line 8 includes a rhetorical question which echoes the extended question which runs from lines 9 through 13 – why would the speaker, and those spoken of, suffer pain? Why do they “bear poverty”, and still “sing and dream sweet things”, do not “curse the air”, nor the sweet fruit and lights on the water? This reflective question draws the reader in, forcing him or her to reflect on the reasons for this suffering and pain, yet decidedly hopeful response to such suffering and pain. Because, the speaker argues, they continue to bless the things around them, even in pain, and even in silence. This paradox is like a bitter sweet enabling.

16. That is why our music is so sweet.
17. It makes the air remember.
18. There are secret miracles at work
19. That only Time will bring forth.

20. I too have heard the dead singing.

Stanza four provides an insight into the result of such a hopeful disposition. The speaker attributes the sweetness of music, the memory of the air (another personification), to their endurance of pain and suffering in silence. “There are secret miracles at work”, conveys the speaker’s belief in miracles that “only Time will bring forth”. Here we see a meaningful antithesis to line 2. Where Time is initially introduced as an instrument of God through which bitter fruit is given to the speaker, here the speaker acknowledges that Time will also bring forth miracles. A further link is created between the miracles at work, and the miracles which God made. Line 19 continues by presenting a meaningful intertextual play on the English idiom, “only time can/will tell” meaning that one can only know/realise/understand after a given situation has run its course. Through referencing, and yet slightly altering, this idiom, the speaker acknowledges and heightens the atmosphere of hope, and trust within, the flow of time. When the speaker confesses to “[having] heard the dead” sing. This accentuates the deep connection between past, present, and future – there is both meaning and motivation in, and resulting from, Time, and by opening oneself up to this meaning and motivation, one is able to experience Time itself in its totality. But what do the dead sing about?

- 21. And they tell me that
- 22. This life is good
- 23. They tell me to live it gently
- 24. With fire, and always with hope.
- 25. There is wonder here

- 26. And there is surprise
- 27. In everything the unseen moves.
- 28. The ocean is full of songs.
- 29. The sky is not an enemy.
- 30. Destiny is our friend.

The dead remind the speaker that “life is good”, and they offer guidance: one should live life gently, with “fire, and always with hope”. Here, once more, we hear the emphasis which is placed on positivity, on looking forward to the future with optimism. Line 25, the last line in the fifth stanza, speaks back to the last line in the first stanza – where the speaker, in the first

stanza, is promised that suffering will one day become the wonders of the earth, here the speaker is told to behold that wonder – here, in life. The speaker is made aware of this wonder, this embodied hopefulness, which is already around and present. But, one could argue, being aware of this wonder could take all the fun out of it – is ignorance not bliss? No, for “there is surprise/ [i]n everything the unseen moves”. There is ever-present beauty and wonder which surrounds one; and recognising this makes one receptive to this beauty and wonder: the ocean is filled with song, and the “sky is not an enemy”. This line echoes another English idiom, “the sky is the limit”. Whilst both line 29 and the idiom are equally positive, line 29 goes further – it offers a view of the very expanses of our understanding and perception of the world as being something to embrace, to cherish, to love. And it is for this reason that the poem’s closing line is so resonant with beauty and power: destiny is, in fact, “our friend”.

The poem consequently challenges many of the received ideas of the elegy – it is not sombre, nor filled with grief. It is, rather, the opposite. Filled to the brim with hope and awe at the miracles of life, living, and the miracles which we both are, and are apart of, one could ask how this relates to Africa? The speaker refers to those who suffer, those with great pain, those who might otherwise be regarded as having no future – it is, therefore, not only an elegy written *from* Africa, but an elegy *for* Africa. It argues for a recognition of the fundamentally positive nature of the future, something which will still show the best of who we are – a space and time where we will be more than we are now. The speaker is, therefore, reflective, but not mournful; introspective, but not self-centred. It is, rather, one rooted within Africa, and the miracle which is the African continent. The speaker acknowledges, and invokes, the dead, the ancestors, those who came before us, as being perpetually present within the present, past, and future – always-already within time. The poem, although intimately spiritual and connected to all facets of the life, is political. It challenges the notion of the “dark continent”, a place of death, disease and lost hope. Through the speaker’s voice, Africa is a place of profound interconnections with all aspects of being – a place where time itself enfolds and enmeshes, and where destiny is our friend. Africa, and Africans, indeed form part of the greater miracle “that God made”.