

AFRICAN ART: A REEXAMINATION THROUGH TRAUMA AND HEALING IN BEN OKRI'S STARBOOK: A MAGICAL TALE OF LOVE AND REGENERATION (2007)

Souleymane TUO

English Department

Université Péléforo Gon Coulibaly, Korhogo (Côte d'Ivoire)

soultuo@yahoo.fr

ABSTRACT

This paper is a reexamination of African art in Ben Okri's novel *Starbook: A Magical Tale of Love and Regeneration*. This entails that beyond its aesthetic, social and ludic functions, art is also endowed with some unsuspected powers. Grounded on psychoanalytical criticism, this study emphasizes the essential role of artistic processes in the healing of mental troubles. The main focus here is that in Africa, sacred art can bring about mental trauma in people. But given its ambivalent character, African art also has a healing power by means of music and sculpture, what is known as art therapy.

Keywords: sacred art, power, trauma, heal, psychoanalytical criticism

RESUME

Cet article réexamine l'art africain dans le roman *Starbook: A Magical Tale of Love and Regeneration* de Ben Okri. Cela implique qu'au-delà de ses fonctions esthétiques, sociale et ludique, l'art est aussi doté de certains pouvoirs insoupçonnés. Avec la critique psychanalytique en filigrane, cette étude met l'accent sur le rôle essentiel des processus artistiques dans la guérison des troubles mentaux. Le point qui cristallise toute notre attention est qu'en Afrique, l'art sacré provoque des traumatismes mentaux chez l'homme. Cependant, compte tenu de son caractère ambivalent, l'art africain a aussi le pouvoir de guérison par le truchement de la musique et la sculpture, ce qui est perçu comme étant la thérapie de l'art.

Mots-clefs : l'art sacré, pouvoir, traumatisme, guérir, critique psychanalytique.

INTRODUCTION

The insights that are made on art in philosophical, literary and cultural writings often transpire in its aesthetic, social, playful, pedagogical functions, as also suggested by many writers. However, seeing art through the prism of such reductionism, amounts to narrowing the wide range of powers that is bestowed on it. A major privilege art is credited with is the influence it has on people's psyche. In her book *There is no Need to Talk about this: Poetic Inquiry from the Art Therapy Studio* (2015), Karen O. Wallace grounds this view. Through the issue of art, one gains insight into psychological and emotional disorders which consequently can assist in recovery measures. In her approach, Wallace (ibid) emphasizes the power of paintings, drawings, songs, poems produced by patients in the healing processes of depression and schizophrenia that grip their psyche. Ann Cattanach (1999), in her clinical work, *Process in the Arts Therapies*, does not take issue with Wallace on that issue. However, contrary to the first author who stresses both graphic design and performing arts, Cattanach's writing is solely interspersed with performing arts therapy with an emphasis on concepts such as music, dance movement and play therapies along with the theatre process in drama therapy.

This article grounded on Ben Okri novel *Starbook: A Magical Tale of Love and Regeneration* emulates the two aforementioned works in that it depicts the power of African art on the psychological disposition of the inhabitants of the imaginary kingdom. Unlike Wallace and Cattanach whose works underscore only the curative power of creative art, this paper substantiates both the psychopathological (i.e. the sickness) and psychotherapeutic (i.e. the cure) capacities of art. The thrust of this study is to emphasize the role of artistic processes in the healing of mental disorders caused by art. To art's traumatic effect, art's curing potency is needed. Thus, the double power of African art is seen along this thrust. To back the forthcoming analysis, I shall look into psychoanalytical criticism which is "itself a form of therapy to cure mental disorders" (Barry, 2005: 96). This theory depicts traumatic effects of art through the term 'depression'. Art therapy itself is a branch of psychological studies which "uses creativity to work with emotional, psychological [...] issues" (Wallace, 2015: xvi). In this respect, my aim is also to see what difference or perspective art therapy brings in the condition of depressed individuals. Thus, in a first instance, I investigate the depressing effect of African sacred art on people's psyche in Ben Okri's 2007 novel and in a second instance, I illustrate the restoration of mental health through artistic processes.

1. Sacred African Sculptures and Trauma

In some societies, some works of art are thought to be sacred. This entails that not everybody's eye should look into them. In fact, those who dare to transgress the sacredness of such objects are consequently victim of some sicknesses. This reality is seen in Okri's *Starbook*. In this novel, the uninitiated people of the kingdom who look at the strange sculpture, which is found on the public square, are affected by a weird mental disturbance:

Soon everyone for miles around heard about this mysterious work that wreaked havoc on the mind. They came in their multitudes to see it. High-pitched wailings were heard at noon from young girls who fainted in its presence. A man, howling, went mad with grief when he beheld it. [...]. Thus the sculpture which the tribe couldn't seem to do anything about continued its strange destructive work (Okri, 2007: 86).

From this sentence, the occurrence of mental illnesses can be accounted for based on African ontology. It holds that in Africa, sacred art seems to have a connection with human condition. This idea is evidenced through the view that the interconnectedness of art and life in Africa is evident in many African cosmologies which trace the origin of art to a Supreme Divinity or supreme beings (Lawal, 2012: 11). Thus, sacred art is thought to have some spiritual effects on human psyche and when the sacredness of a work of art is violated by a person, the divine forces that empower it react in reprisal. In a word, the person who willingly or unwillingly transgresses the holiness of such works of art should undergo the wrath of the gods which dwell in them. In *Starbook*, the kingdom dwellers who have looked at the sacred sculpture without permission are cursed by the angry spirits which reside in this figurine. This results in a mental illness for the infringers.

Moreover, Okri emphasizes the consequences of psychological troubles on mentally-ill people: when someone is plagued by a psychological disorder, it is his or her mind that is affected, his or her mind is prone to an unbearable shock that is characterized by persistent and unbalanced feelings. This state of insanity negatively affects his or her verbal competencies. It makes the patient utter sentences that do not make sense at all. In *Starbook*, the young maiden, who cast an eye over the strange sculpture, sinks into delirium. The narrator notes that she is so severely depressed that

The maiden was unable to sleep after her encounter with the work. At night she stared at the moon or the stars and sang lamentations and wept. At dawn she would be found muttering disconnected phrases about suffering and evil, pursued by demons and white spirits of the mind till she drowned at sea amid a chorus of alien hymns (Okri, 2007: 91).

Thus, the psychological trouble a person undergoes is thought to make him or her to focus attention when speaking. The fact that he or she utters incoherent expressions is predicated upon the negative and disturbing vistas that engulf the mind. As a matter of fact, his attention becomes totally diverted when speaking. Damien Ridge evidences such a condition. He pens: “Problems with thinking were described in vivid ways, such as having ‘things go around in your head’” (Ridge, 2009: 52). In addition to this, the fact that a patient keeps skipping from one subject to another in a manifest incoherence can be ascribed to both a problem of concentration and a lack of mental composure stemming from turmoil occurring in his or her head. Similarly in *Starbook*, the maiden is found uttering disconnected phrases about suffering at dawn surely because, throughout the night, her mind might have been overwhelmed with distressing visions displaying interethnic atrocities that are peculiar to Nigerian culture. The following sentence best illustrates this turmoil: “your mind ‘zoom[s] into miserable places’, and as a ‘sheer onslaught of negative thoughts’” (Ridge, 2009: 52). This can occur if, instead of holding an intelligible and clear-minded discourse, a person is found indulging in talks such as Boko Haram’s terrorist attacks, even if Boko Haram did not directly attack him or her.

A more serious issue can occur: the failure of memory which, according to Okri, is another consequence of psychological disturbance. To the author, the sick people’s incapacity of uttering logically constructed phrases stems from a loss or impairment of memory. As it can be observed, cases of *lapsus memoriae* can hinder their remembrance faculty, thus worsening their mental health. In *Starbook*, the depressed kingdom inhabitants experience an unprecedented amnesia which is the result of the cleansing of past and running events of their mind. The narrator seems to inform the readers that this condition occurs because the strange sculpture “haunted”, “troubled” and “paralysed” (Okri, 2007: 84) their every mental activity so that these brain-injured people cannot remember. The sculpture’s strong effect is like a curse or an anathema on the psyche. The contention that the vulnerability of those suffering from frequent bouts of depression is manifest in their having problems remembering (Wallace, 2015: 17) is a case in point. In order to remember, one needs to be able to build coherent phrases (as one speaks), just as one also needs to remember one’s previous discourses so as not to lose the logic of what one is saying. In other words, remembrance is a process of maintaining a continuous connection of elements in one’s verbal expression. Yet, the maiden in *Starbook* breaks with this assumption because the “*insanitas mentis*” (Frankl, 2004: 88) she is affected with makes it impossible for her to remember things she has just talked about. Since she has problems memorizing, she therefore fails to have a sequential connection in her ideas. That is what accounts for the logorrhea she develops.

The novelist, namely Okri (2007), also notes that a psychotic disturbance negatively influences the emotions of people with unhealthy minds to the point of indifference to social life and activities. In fact, when they are mentally ill, people are amenable to dissatisfaction about life: they seem not to take delight in life. Evidence is blatant in the novel: “The world changes for them” (Okri, 2007: 85). This point is backed by Marten W. de Vries and Philippe Delespaul (2006: 148) who indicate that the condition is characterized by “the loss of interest or pleasure in most of one’s usual activities”. That is why, instead of delighting in life, in their daily activities and in friendship with their neighborhood, they display a lack of interest in work and social dealings. Thus, they become asocial. That is to say that they become completely withdrawn into

themselves, keeping themselves from their friends. As they are prone to dysphoria and anhedonia, people with depressive minds feel a permanent unhappiness and the inability to experience pleasure from things usually found enjoyable. In *Starbook*, the traumatic disorder the kingdom inhabitants are prone to seems to make them lose pleasure and interest in their agricultural activities. Consequently, their incapacity of coping with their daily activities and pleasures can lead them to commit suicide.

Furthermore, Okri considers the desire to commit suicide as an aftermath of mental pathology. He emphasizes that patients who suffer from such a condition are often pushed into killing themselves intentionally. Their amenability to suicide responds to their desire to put an end to long-drawn-out sufferings that have been undermining and engulfing their psyche. Okri's *Starbook* emphasizes that "the need to die" (Okri, 2007: 87) the depressed kingdom people feel is a good illustration of the intention to commit suicide. This locus also hints that people with a psychological disturbance develop suicidal tendencies and plead for liberation from their continual mental disintegration. Yet, such practices are forbidden by the Holy Scriptures. In other words, this negative feeling which is instilled in their minds actually hides from view their intentional sought-after-longing to shorten the sufferings induced by their severe brain injury. This idea is echoed through the premise that "the suicide option is choice which can give a sense of [...] hope" (Ridge, 2009: 59). In fact, mentally-ill people become suicidal because they see in suicide a sense of hope, the expectation to flee suffering, and therefore the possibility to rest in eternal peace. Therefore, in Okri's novel, the depressed ones are those likely to attempt suicide because they seek refuge in death. Death, in this case is thought to pave the way for future good; which is the reason why these sufferers desire death and seem to welcome it with open arms. Thus, under these circumstances, suicide should not be viewed as a dishonorable act. It should be praised because it gives meaning to the death of those who suffer. Specifically to the case of the depressed people in *Starbook*, death is considered as a noble phenomenon whose nobility is predicated upon its contribution to relieving the suffering souls of their burdens.

From the foregone development, sacred African art, through its traumatic power, stands out as a paradigm which has negative influence on people's psyche. On account of this, it can doubtlessly be compared to evil. But given that art is an ambivalent reality in Okri, it can therefore be assimilated to a positive paradigm.

2. Art Therapy: Healing Trauma through Music and Sculpture

In Okri's text, African art is also endowed with the power of healing psychological disorders. That is the reason why people who suffer from cerebral troubles readily turn to it as a curing means. On account of this, art becomes a positive paradigm owing to its medicinal capacities. In *Starbook*, the Nigerian author suggests two strategies of art therapy one of which is music therapy (the other being sculpture therapy, which I shall deal with, later). In Music therapy, music is supposed to have a therapeutic use for depression. According to this cure, a brain-injured person who hears or listens to drum beats can recover from his or her sufferings. In *Starbook*, this approach proves efficient in the recovery of the agonizing prince by means of the "healing drums" (Okri, 2007: 58) of the kingdom musicians. As it can be observed, the function of music goes beyond the simple act of producing sounds for fun. In art therapy, art (music, here) is rather conferred with a calming, tranquilizing and relieving effect on depressed minds. This confirms the proverb that music hath charms to soothe the savage breast. In other words, through music, trauma ends. Michael H. Thaut seems to elucidate this when he observes:

Neurophysiological studies have shown that music can arouse and excite the spinal motor neurons mediated by auditory-motor connections at the brain stem [...] Patients with neu-

rological movement disorders can benefit from this effect of music and rhythm to retrain their motor functions [...] Thus, music provides a stimulus that substitutes for compromised internal functions, accesses compensatory networks in the brain, and may help build new pathways, thus shaping the plasticity of the brain (Thaut, 2005: 79).

Here, Thaut celebrates the agency of music in the revivification of brain neurons after a neurological disorder. Through his insight, one recognizes that the effects of drumming on the psyche of the mentally-ill people is laudable. When percussionists keep instilling soothing melodies into sick people, their traumatic brains of the latter regain their composure. Their alarming mental states take a turn for the better because tapping stirs the defective nervous cells in their brains. A plausible explanation of this holds that not only does rhythm rekindle the damaged cerebral functions, but it also helps patients reconstruct the vitality of their nervous tissues. In *Starbook*, music has successfully healed the prince. Tapping provided the necessary stimulus that has substituted for his compromised cerebral functions; this has therefore helped him shape the well-being of his cerebral condition.

In addition to this scientific explanation of mental illness, Okri emphasizes the spiritual dimension of music therapy. This mainly occurs in societies where mental illnesses are assumed to be caused by paranormal factors. The fact that cases of *insanitas mentis* are caused by malevolent creatures is the perfect illustration of this epistemology. To address such a discomfort, both patients and therapists necessarily use spiritual means for the healing. Thus, in *Starbook*, the occurrence of mental disorder is predicated on the existence of liverish spirits and invisible creatures that slide into people's minds. Being so, their recovery is possible only by means of music. This is the case of the prince whose therapy requires tapping and thumping sounds:

The wondrous drummers beat out astonishing rhythms on their talking drums, their healing drums, their wailing drums, [...] rhythms that shook the land and retuned the nerves and altered the heartbreak of the kingdom, rhythms that communicated to the spirits and summoned the ancestors in the farthest reaches of the invisible realms of dreams (Okri, 2007: 58).

The point being raised here is that ancestors are central to the recovery from mental illnesses. This idea is ascribed to the fact that when they are summoned, the spirits of ancestors give a new impetus to drum melodies. When they assist a mentally-ill person, ancestors enhance the therapeutic power of drumming by driving back the malevolent spirits that withstand the power of melodies. Taken together, drumming and spirits give rise to 'spiritual music therapy', which is understood as a form of healing mental trouble through the action of both and music and divinities or gods or supernatural beings. Along similar lines of thoughts, the therapy used for the prince alludes to 'logotherapy', that is, a "therapy that engages the spiritual dimension of the person" (Frankl, 2004: 51) for a successful recovery.

On account of the scientific and spiritual dimensions of music therapy, Okri undeniably affirms that this healing approach is efficient. Though mental troubles may seem hard to cure, they still can be overcome through drumming. This contention makes one think that melody can be viewed one of the best antidotes to depression. In *Starbook*, the prince's healing gives credence to the efficiency of this therapeutic approach. One may hear him exult at his recovery when he yells: "I am recovered. I am well. I am no longer ill" (Okri, 2007: 258). Through this character, the author suggests that music therapy brings comfort and that through melodies, even the most desperate cases of psychological troubles can be cured. Again, people who are on the brink of suicide because of the severe mental health problems they are affected by can rely on music therapy to get through their predicaments. This hope through music therapy also includes people who can no more bear their long-drawn-out sufferings, and those who keep

themselves aloof from social dealings. When they are exposed to musical sound in a therapy session, depressed people are not only joyful, but they also feel safe and secure (Wallace, 2015: xv). That is the reason, music should be promoted in African societies. It should not be the concern of only musicians, sound producers and youngsters- the latter being are interested in it just for fun. Today, music should be the topmost priority of African governments. Music should be important in the eyes of our leaders in the same proportion as education, economic development and public health, among others. The reason is that melodies are assumed to bring relief to people's sufferings.

Sculpture is often used for the cure of emotional and psychological unrests. Family sculpture, as an example of sculpture therapy, is an expressive technique which consists in solving affective conflicts between family members. Contrary to this American technique which requires ready-made objects¹, Okri suggests a sculpture therapy that is focused on effective artistic activity of the troubled person. This entails that the depressive minds can be cured through the art of carving out pieces of wood. When people are victim of psychogenic disturbance, it is irremediably through the creation of crafted works of art that they heal. In *Starbook*, the sick maiden seems to have understood the importance of the therapy based on sculpture. For a fact, to heal from her mental disorder, she sculpts a figure. The narrator evidences: "as the maiden lay obsessed by the work that gripped all minds, it became clear that she had to create the art of her own healing" (Okri, 2007: 100). In elucidation of this point, the Nigerian author predicates that sculptures are important paradigms for curing psychological traumas. In fact, when a depressed person creates a work of art, the efforts he or she makes are not just physical activities. Yet, these actions are endowed with the power of influencing the psyche. As patients make sculptures, their manual activities crystallize all their emotions and their being. When they are focused on the work of creation, they develop a feeling of absence or emptiness in their minds which finally touches their deepest feelings. This is what the following insight confirms: "Art therapy uses creativity to work with emotional, psychological [...] issues" (Wallace, 2015: xvi). Heedful of this, one can contend that in Okri's *Starbook*, sculpture therapy uses artistic creativity to deal with both emotional and psychopathological troubles.

From the examples of the prince and the maiden's healing approaches, Okri seems to recognize or to portray a difference between passive and active art therapies. In his contention, a passive art therapy implies the passivity and lack of implication of the patient in his or her healing process. It is also understood as a therapeutic approach in which the patient does not take part in his or her own cure, but relies on a therapist. In this healing strategy, the mentally-ill person does not play a musical instrument or create a work of art for his or her own recovery; an art therapy expert does it on his or her behalf. On the contrary, active art therapy requires the responsibility and the commitment of the patient. In this therapy, the patient does not rely on the help of an artist (taken in its broad meaning) for his recovery like in passive art therapy. He or she does not need the artistic skill of a therapist for self-healing. Since it involves the patient's responsibility, active art therapy seeks to get the patient in charge of his or her own restorative process. This therapy holds that the depressed individual is conscious that it is through his or

1 This technique, invented by experimental family therapists David Kantor, Fred Duhl and Bunny Duhl, requires clay depiction of every family member. It does not aim to make a lifelike representation of family members. It is just an abstraction whereby the person, who organizes and re-organizes figures in relation to each and other family member, not only gives the therapist information about conflicting members but also helps to overcome misunderstandings.

her involvement that he or she can recover from the mental trouble. So, instead of relying on a therapist's expertise, the patient is aware that he or she is the one who should create the art of his or her own mental health. By way of illustration, Wallace rightly observes that "[t]herapy is solitary" (2015: xv). And if we were to make a choice between these two therapies, we would surely elect active art therapy as the better artistic healing process because it is a strategy which is controlled by those who are mentally-injured themselves, but not by other people who are less involved in their cure.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this study, I have elaborated on how art is an effective means of healing mental illnesses. Through Okri's *Starbook: a Magical tale of Love and Regeneration*, I have shown that, in Africa, sacred art is endowed with a traumatic power in that it can cause mental troubles in people. In the same vein, I have also shown that African art also has a healing potency, which is known as art therapy. Through this therapeutic strategy, mentally-ill people can recover their mental health by means of the powerful influence that musical melodies have on sick people's psyche. Additionally, the art of carving sculptures (as also seen in the novel) is also endowed with medicinal potencies.

Thus, literature is a powerful tool to depict values that are often taken for granted: here, music and sculpture. The positive as well as the negative impacts are told as stories in novels but interpreting them and unravelling them adds to knowledge and, the power of what we see (images, sculpture) and what we hear (music, drum, melodies), which, if ill-used in Africa, create mental trauma but at the same time can be used to provide therapy for these same conditions.

WORKS CITED

BARRY, Peter. *Beginning Theory: an Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (2nd Ed). Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005

CATTANACH, Ann (Ed). *Process in the arts therapies*. London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1999.

FRANKL, Viktor. E. *On the Theory and Therapy of Mental Disorders: An Introduction to Logotherapy and Existential Analysis* (James M. Dubois, Trans.). NY and Hove: Brunner-Routledge/Taylor and Francis, 2004.

HILLECKE, Thomas; NICKEL, Anne; and BOLAY, Hans Volker. "Scientific Perspectives on Music Therapy". *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1060, (2005): 271-282.

OKRI, Ben. *Starbook: A Magical Tale of Love and Regeneration*. Rider: London, 2007.

LAWAL, Babatunde. "Embodying the Sacred in Yoruba Art". *Embodying the Sacred in Yoruba Art: Selections from the Newark Museum Collection*. New Jersey/Union: Kean University, (2012): 11-44

RIDGE, Damien. *Recovery from Depression using the Narrative Approach: A Guide for Doctors, Complementary Therapists and Mental Health Professionals*. London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley, 2009.

THAUT, Michael H. *Rhythm, Music, and the Brain: Scientific Foundations and Clinical Applications*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

VRIES (de), Marten W. and DELESPAUL, Philippe A.E.G. "Variability of Schizophrenia Symptoms". Marten W. de Vries (Ed). *The Experience of Psychopathology: Investigating Mental Disorders in their Natural Settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 97-109, 2006.

WALLACE, Karen O. *There is no Need to Talk about this: Poetic Inquiry from the Art Therapy Studio*. Rotterdam/Boston/Taipei: Sense, 2015.