

## From the 'Cradle of Civilization' to Ben Okri's *Changing Destiny* (2021)

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*The paper begins with a brief discussion of myths and legends, 'the cradle of civilization', and an outline of the BA/KA relationship, the latter a pivotal mythological concept that underpins both the generative poem and its migration into a play, seen through the prism of a 4000-year-old Egyptian poem, Sinuhe. This is followed by a summary of the 1875 BCE funerary autobiography. A comparison of the framing poem with Ben Okri's drama, Changing Destiny, serves to explore the transfer and transformation of key ideas of what it means to be human and the nature of exile and homecoming. The discussion is bolstered by theories of hospitality encapsulated in Merle Williams's 2020 Hospitalities: Transitions and Transgressions, North and South. I conclude by arguing that despite the four-century gap and the dearth of literary criticism, the ideas in the poem, transferred and transformed by Okri in his drama, resonate powerfully with our times.*

### Introduction

This presentation explores the transition and transformation of the 4000-year-old Egyptian poem *Sinuhe* into its twenty-first century dramatic form by Ben Okri. Its production in London at the Young Vic, post COVID-19 in July 2021, was praised for its set but the script was adjudged as "too broadbrush" and the play as Okri's "sketchy foray into ancient Egypt" by Arifa Akbar.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps Akbar might have benefited by being apprised of the narrative's literary legacy and founding myth. The amazing journey of this true-to-life legend does require some discussion of generic classification, its seminal myth and why Egypt, its originating home, is known as "the cradle of civilization".

### The Legend of *Sinuhe*, the Rise of Early Egyptian Legends and the Plays's Founding Myth in the Cradle of Civilization

The basic argument is that the funerary autobiography of *Sinuhe* is an ancient Egyptian legend that has journeyed into modernity - first through Oxford's Professor of Egyptology and erstwhile Assistant Keeper of in the Department of Egyptian Antiquities at the British Museum, who resuscitated the poem at the end of the twentieth century and then, a quarter of a century later, the poem was transformed

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1. Arifa Akbar, *Changing Destiny Review - Ben Okri's sketchy foray into ancient Egypt* (The Guardian 1 August, 2021).

into Ben Okri's drama, *Changing Destiny*. Oxford's R. B. Parkinson tells us that "From antiquity, Ancient Egypt exerted a fascination as a land of strange gods, impenetrable symbols, magicians, and tyrants, and it was only in the 1820s that decipherment revealed that hieroglyphics were not allegorical mysteries, but a practical script used for a wide range of writing, including literature".<sup>2</sup>

Parkinson informs us of the salient features of Egyptian literary texts: they tended to be hybrid, conjoining "the general and the particular"; and, concerned with "self-definition and expression", they valued "aesthetic considerations" in dramatized interpersonal relationships. "Egyptian literature," he elaborates, "was also a predominantly secular mode of discourse, being concerned with the 'here and now', but it was one which spanned various spheres, and crossed the secular-sacred and royal-private divides; it was not limited to a particular single function".<sup>3</sup>

Pointing to the "physical mobility" of ancient Egyptian literary texts, he adds that they were "copied on privately owned rolls of papyrus". Funerary texts, such as *Sinuhe* were, by contrast, copied onto "tomb or temple walls" for perpetuity. The tale, Parkinson tells us, "was read for at least 750 years".<sup>4</sup> Okri enlarges on this, saying that although it had been "unread for three-and-a-half millennia, [it] retains an uncanny ability to speak to our times".<sup>5</sup> Alluding to the responsibilities of storytellers, whatever their mode, Okri<sup>6</sup> appraises us of the metamorphosis of the storytellers' art through the ages: "From battling dread in words and incantations before their people did in reality, they became repositories of the people's wisdom and follies. They became the living memory of a people." He adds that

These old storytellers were the true magicians. . . Their role was both simple and demanding. They had to go down deep into the seeds of time, into the dreams of their people, into the unconscious, into the uncharted fears . . . They had to see clearly. They had to see even what they hadn't seen, and make it more real to us than our most frightening experiences.

This casts the tellers of stories in the role of a culture's Griot [seer] or isanusi [medicine man]. Indicative of their sacred socio-historical trust, Okri elaborates, saying,

When great storytellers die, a thousand years of unfronted journeys, unguided journeys towards the deceptive lights of future civilisations also perish in their silence.<sup>7</sup>

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2. R. B. Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe and other Ancient Egyptian Poems 1940-1640 BC* (Oxford: OUP, [1997]2009), 2.

3. Walter J. Ong, *Orality & Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 3.

4. *Ibid*, 21.

5. Ben Okri, *Changing Destiny* (London: Methuen, 2021).

6. Ben Okri, *A Way of Being Free* (London: Phoenix, 1997), 37-38.

7. *Ibid*, 38.

Writing and its literature are pivotal marks of civilization as we know it, yet both travelled to us via oral transmission. Terence Hawkes<sup>8</sup> counters any notions of the oral mode as being primitive, arguing that “Thought and expression in oral cultures is often highly organized but calls for organization of a sort unfamiliar to and often uncongenial to the literate mind”. This is because orality is participatory and “basically formulaic, structured in proverbs and other set expressions”. In contradistinction, literacy or literature “transforms consciousness, producing patterns of thought which to literates seem perfectly commonplace and ‘natural’ but which are possible only when the mind has devised and internalized, made its own, the technology of writing”.<sup>9</sup> In *Orality & Literacy*, as Hawkes adds as a correlation, “[Walter Ong] reviews the exciting new discoveries that have revised our understanding of the Homeric poems, of every-day African epics and other oral genres across the globe, and that have provided new insights into the rise of abstract philosophical and scientific thinking”.<sup>10</sup> I would agree with Ong that interest in Homer - in addition to religious mythology - “had roots reaching back to classical antiquity”.<sup>11</sup> Both aid in our understanding of what it is to be a human being, conscious of self and others and, in the present context, of cultural mores and the study of its various religious mythologies that are axiomatic to civilization, all represented as key ideas in Ben Okri’s *Changing Destiny* (2021).

As posited by Arthur Cotterell and Rachel Storm,<sup>12</sup> “The Ancient Middle East was the so-called ‘cradle of civilization’”; it was “the birthplace of Judaism, Islam and Christianity, the three faiths that came to have such an immense impact on human culture and, by tradition, originated amongst the descendants of Shem, one of the sons of Noah”. Pertinent to the argument in this essay, these co-authors also acknowledge the widespread religious sect of Zoroastrianism and the rise of the powerful Egyptian and Hittite empires. They surmise that this “remarkable achievement” accrues from the geography of the region that saw the inception of crop farming and the attendant beginning of “a settled civilized way of life”. Okri’s opening scene extols the virtues of Egyptian civilization, having Sinuhe inform the audience the “Other civilisations will light their torches from the celestial blaze of our mother civilization” (Prelude, 7). Civilized life or the changing of human destiny depends upon food production and a community lifestyle that, in turn, owes its origin to the geophysical nature of the annual flooding of the Nile that “inspired many myths of ancient Egypt”.<sup>13</sup> As myth-maker, Okri’s protagonist and his Spirit attribute Egypt’s exalted position to the activation of “the full dimensions of the

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8. Hawkes in Ong, *Orality & Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, 2002, n.p.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Ong, *Orality & Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, 2002, 17.

12. Arthur Cotterell, and Rachel Storm, *The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Mythology* (London: Anness Publishing, 2005), 235.

13. Ibid.

human spirit".<sup>14</sup> Central to the Egyptian human spirit is the BA/KA myth and an understanding of the retelling of the legend of Sinuhe, a high-born soldier in the Egyptian Royal Guard.

What then is a myth? Contrary to the notion that myths stand for that which is untrue, a myth is one of the ways in which we attempt to make sense of the unknowable; and, as Veronica Ions<sup>15</sup> reminds us, a myth is "a sacred narrative with a moral message . . . connected with ritual even if it is not scripture". Myths are thus culturally specific, an attempt to explain the meaning of the world and the human estate. Characteristically, myths are set "in the dim, distant past . . . Often too they originated in ancient times when traditions that held people together, in families and wider communities, were transmitted by word-of-mouth".<sup>16</sup> Legends too are compelling stories from ancient times that have stood the test of time, and have been handed down from one generation to the next. Okri portrays the genre by having a camp fire in front of the pyramids as his opening gambit. Legends are about specific people and events; they are also moralistic and may or may not be true. Nonetheless, they serve to enhance Africa's communal ethos and its once elevated human history.

One of the principal beliefs in ancient Egypt was then that of the BA/KA relationship. Underpinning the 4000-year-old poetic legend of Sinuhe, the BA/KA myth has travelled through time and across continents to be resuscitated and transformed in Okri's dramatic version of the Sinuhe legend entitled, *Changing Destiny* (2021).

### The BA/KA Myth

In *The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Mythology*, Cotterell and Storm explain the BA/KA myth:<sup>17</sup>

The BA and KA were believed by the ancient Egyptians to be the soul and spirit, or vital essence of a dead person. The Ba hovered over the deceased and was usually depicted as a bird with a human head. The Ka was said to appear to the deceased in the form of a blue phoenix and was believed to return to the tomb, where it ate food left by relatives and priests. So deeply entrenched was this belief that menus were sometimes inscribed on the walls of tombs.

This is the interpretation in the funerary autobiography, *Sinuhe* that dates back to c.1875 BC. In the somewhat more accessible modern parlance encountered in Okri's twenty-first century drama, the protagonist's living self appears to be divided

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14. Okri, *Changing Destiny*, 2021, 7.

15. Veronica Ions, *Hamlyn History – Mythology* (London: Reed International Books, 1997), 6.

16. Ibid.

17. Cotterell and Storm, *The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Mythology*, 2005, 271.

into embodied soul (Ka) and spirit (Ba), given that Sinuhe's BA remains 'at home' when Sinuhe finds himself, that is, his KA, compelled to flee for fear of being found guilty of conspiring with the conspirators to kill the king (Act 1, Sc.5-6).

In the poem, the split personality is merely implied in Sinuhe's subconscious emotional dis-ease, while in foreign Syria. It is metamorphized as his "heart". In a heartfelt prayer to his god, Sinuhe pleads:

Surely you will let me see the place where my heart still stays?  
 What matters more than my being buried  
 in the land where I was born?  
 This is my prayer for help, that the good event befall,  
 That God give me grace! (B155-60)

As Okri<sup>18</sup> acknowledges, "The metaphysics of these terms are too complex to go into here, but they are a fundamental aspect of what we are". "Like all ancient cultures, the ancient Egyptians believed that human beings are composed of two selves" as in the poetic Sinuhe life writing.<sup>19</sup>

### The Funerary Autobiography of Sinuhe and its Dramatic Transposition

Arguing that the poem foreshadows both the *Odyssey* and the tragedy of *Hamlet*, Okri foregrounds the complex thrust of the ancient Sinuhe narrative, saying:

Here we have a civilisation conceived on an exalted plane, but whose most famous literary text is about identity, immigration, social disorder, the mystery of power, changing fortunes, and the inexplicability of the deep motives of our actions.<sup>20</sup>

Parkinson<sup>21</sup> is less fulsome, describing *Sinuhe* as "a tale of adventure in foreign lands, but one which encourages reflection on the nature of Egyptian life, particularly on the individual's relationship to the King". More than an overlord, "[t]he king was quasi-divine, the political and ideological centre of Egyptian culture, and the representative of all its values. The king was the direct heir of the creator-god", a religious concept that has travelled into Roman Catholicism in the belief in the Pope's role as Christ's Vice-Regent on earth. Having introduced us to Sinuhe as ". . . a Follower who followed his lord/ a servant of the Royal Chambers" and to the Egyptian Queen Nefru in Stanza 1 (ll.5-6 or R5), the speaker loses no time in reporting the death of the godlike King in Stanza 2, (ll.11-15; R10) in conversational free verse

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18. Okri, *Changing Destiny*, 2021.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe and other Ancient Egyptian Poems 1940-1640 BC*, 2009, 21.

that endorses the godhead mythology. However, unlike the murder in Okri's play, no cause of death is given in the original:

The God ascended to his horizon;  
The Dual King Sehotepibre mounted to heaven,  
and was united with the sun,  
the divine flesh mingling with the creator. (R10)

Parkinson explains that the word "horizon" is a signifier for pyramid, deduced perhaps by the then cultural practice for the burial of the ancient Egyptian elite, and endorsed by the closing stanzas in which Sinuhe is accorded "a pyramid of stone" with his image "overlaid with gold" as a gift from the new king, son of the "Dual King", a reference perhaps to the two selves (BA/KA) belief or to his being, at once, human and divine. The following lines invoke Okri's exalted civilization in the courtiers' reaction to Amenemhat the First's sudden death, with "The Residence was in silence/. . ./ the Great Portal was shut,/ The entourage was bowed down,/ and the patricians were in grief." (ll. 16, 18-20), lines that suggest decorum and hospitality, where hospitality is not only seen as an urgent challenge for our conflicted present but also as foundational for ethics and resonant within the play of language.<sup>22</sup>

Although the word "hospitality" does not occur in either text, it is a theme that underpins both versions of *Sinuhe*. As Parkinson explains, formal court life was idealistic, without "any trace of intellectual rebellion or dissent";<sup>23</sup> Middle Kingdom literature was evidently a palliative, allowing "its privileged audience to explore or enact various complementary realities, as the poets taught, meditated on, or narrated their interpretation of the nature both of humanity and of the divine. . . ; literature seeks eternity through humanity, and creates a space for entertainment as well as wisdom".<sup>24</sup> As with Islamic and other belief systems, the ancient Egyptians preached "permanent perfection" in eternity, in life after life, whereas literature is, by definition of its fictionality, essentially polemical. Poetry's task, says Parkinson, "transforms an imperfect world into 'perfect speech'".<sup>25</sup> This can be illustrated in Mary Olden's poem, "Mostly Water":

"We're mostly water, not solid at all."  
That's what the travelling man said to me,  
lifting his full glass absent-mindedly.  
"If you want to stay true to what you are,  
keep changing: fixed opinions are the devil's food."

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22. cf. Rosemary Gray, "Review of *Hospitalities: Transitions and transgressions, North and South*, Edited by Merle A. Williams," in *English Academy Review* 39, no. 1 (2022): 118-119.

23. Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe and other Ancient Egyptian Poems 1940-1640 BC*, 2009, 16.

24. *Ibid.*, 17.

25. *Ibid.*

I turned to answer him, but he had gone:  
 shifting shapes, no doubt, without a pause.  
 Stumbling outside, into a pouring rain,  
 I felt my bones dissolve, and I was home.

Okri, however, capitalizes on the dramatic potential, having Sinuhe as an unwilling witness to the courtiers' plot to murder the king. Perhaps this is to explain Sinuhe's overhearing of the king's death and his irrational flight in the seminal version. Stanza 3 (B1-5) is fast paced, telling of the accession and deification of the king's warrior son, Prince Senwosret - Okri's San-Usert -, and the dutiful Sinuhe's ensuing panic attack. The hyperventilation is conveyed in graphic detail:

My heart staggered, my arms spread out;  
 Trembling fell on every limb  
 I removed myself, leaping,  
 To look for a hiding place.  
 I put myself between two bushes,  
 until the traveller had departed from the road. (ll.41-6; B1-5)

The description reflects the customary ancient Egyptian world-view that this world is fundamentally chaotic, a notion encapsulated in Sinuhe's overwhelming terror.<sup>26</sup>

There is a stylistic shift after the panic that functions as the generating circumstance. In quick succession, the poetic narrative details Sinuhe's near-death from thirst in the desert, his rescue by a nomadic sheikh, his acceptance and performance of menial tasks, followed by heroic exploits in internecine strife with the Libyans, all dramatically replicated in Okri's retelling. The poem's quick-paced rising action culminates with his capture by a Palestinian King. En route to Syria as a fugitive alien, Sinuhe turns philosopher, expatiating on the merits of his fellow Egyptian Macbeth-like warrior, the current king, in an expansive eulogy that articulates Egyptian values and foreshadows the king's largess with which the poem closes.

Now, he is a God who is peerless,  
 before whom no other exists.  
 He is a lord of understanding, excellent of plans, effective orders;  
 Coming and going are by his command.  
 He subjugates the countries.  
 His father stayed within the palace,  
 and he reported to him that what he had ordained was done. (B 45)

This praise poem typifies the African cultural mode and, here, prefigures a royal decree from King Senwosret I (c.1875 BC) to the homesick Senuhe to return to Egypt.

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26. Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe and other Ancient Egyptian Poems 1940-1640 BC*, 2009, 22.

In Syria's Retjenu, Senuhe had striven to establish a social identity by proving himself willing to turn his hand to the most menial of tasks, such as scrubbing floors, herding cattle and emptying night soil slops - work that the local inhabitants frown upon - much as is the plight of immigrant labour today, particularly in Europe and the Middle East. The turning point in the plot occurs when he is challenged by the local unnamed he-man (Okri's giant, Telluhi) to a duel and, notwithstanding his victory, he collapses in desperate prayer as he realizes that life outside Egypt is meaningless, despite the fact that the Syrian King "... placed me at the head of his children./ He joined me to his eldest daughter./ he had me make my choice of his country" (B 80); "He appointed me the ruler of a tribe/ of the choicest of his country" (B85), transformed in Okri's play where Senuhe becomes King of Syria after marriage to the deceased king's daughter.

One of the undercurrents in *Sinuhe* is the quasi-religious idea that questions the justice of the gods and an innocent man's labouring under the burden of imagined guilt. The notion opens up a dialogue that challenges different ontological interpretations, an idea that seems to have migrated, for instance, into some Christian sects' concept of the confessional and forgiveness of sins. Parkinson evokes the idea of *hamartia* or fatal flaw and its cathartic resolution, stating that, "The king is the representative of gods and in some sense a god himself, and in his letter he distances himself from any responsibility for Sinuhe's suffering and assigns all responsibility to the man's *fallible heart* . . . The king dismisses the chaos and the preceding events with the words 'he shall not fear', and Sinuhe is recreated as a courtier" (emphasis added).<sup>27</sup>

Sinuhe's homecoming and reinstatement, in addition to the Royal gift of a pyramidal tomb, invokes hospitality writ large. Initiating the polemics, the compelling opening chapter of Merle Williams's 2021 compilation on *Hospitalities*, largely informed by an article entitled, "Hospitalities, Justice and Responsibility. A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida", offers the reader a Derridean definition of "absolute hospitality" which he says,

... requires that I open my home and that I give not only to the [approved] foreigner . . . but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, that I give *place* to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names.<sup>28</sup>

Put simply, this implies that all conditions, be they of gender, belief, nationality, or of identification, are automatically suspended by the host.<sup>29</sup>

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27. Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe and other Ancient Egyptian Poems 1940-1640 BC*, 2009, 24-5.

28. Richard Kearney, and Mark Dooley (Eds.), *Questioning Ethics and Contemporary Debates in Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 65 (original emphasis).

29. cf. Gray, "Review of *Hospitalities: Transitions and transgressions, North and South*, Edited by Merle A. Williams," 2022, 119.

Okri offers an interesting transgressional transposition of the marriage of Sinuhe and his return to Egypt. Here, the only (not eldest) daughter is at first incognito and watches Sinuhe's dedication to his menial tasks in fascination; love blossoms and the marriage of Hotemi and Sinuhe follows. Moreover, the Syrian King chooses Sinuhe as his heir, and it is the ultra empathetic wife, Hotemi, who travels to Egypt to plead clemency for her husband, who silently hankers after the homeland, affecting marital bliss.

## Conclusion

This presentation has attempted not only to provide a brief account of the two primary texts under discussion but also to provide a context in which to interpret both the ancient generative poem *Sinuhe* and Ben Okri's *Changing Destiny*. The essential argument is that Ben Okri's drama, *Changing Destiny*, serves to explore the transfer and transformation of key ideas of what it means to be human and the nature of exile and homecoming, ideas that have journeyed intact from the seminal Egyptian poem to Okri's dramatic revival. The discussion concludes that despite the four-century gap and the dearth of literary criticism, the ideas in the poem, transferred and transformed by the Nigerian-born Londoner, Sir Ben Okri in his drama, resonate powerfully with our times. Both the poem and the drama are, like life and death, cyclical as symbolized by the three point setting - from Egypt to Retjenu and back to Egypt. And, as Parkinson<sup>30</sup> points out, "The Tale ends as it began, with Sinuhe in his tomb, addressing the tomb-visitor". Okri transposes and elaborates on the King's assurance to Sinuhe that "he shall not fear" (a coincidental prefiguring of Psalm 23) with a hospitable sermon-like exhortation to illustrate the activation of "the full dimensions of the human spirit" with which Okri's play begins:

**Sinuhe** We are the initiation chamber for future civilisations.  
**Spirit** The world will forever wonder at how we rose from nothing to this exalted place in the history of human achievements.

*They enter the pyramid. Before they shut themselves in, they address the audience.*

### Sinuhe and Spirit

You who dwell in this house of life and death,  
 Who draw in the sun with each breath,  
 Where is your spirit?  
 Where is your spirit? (Act3, Coda)

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30. Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe and other Ancient Egyptian Poems 1940-1640 BC*, 2009, 24.

Characteristically, this closes the hermeneutic circle and far from being “Ben Okri’s sketchy foray into ancient Egypt”, the love story, in particular, in lieu of the Middle East’s customary arranged marriages, as well as the reuniting of Sinuhe’s BA with his KA befit a resolution to a drama choreographed as the first post-covid pandemic play to celebrate the reopening of London’s theatre world after the trauma of a lengthy period of lockdown and multiple sudden deaths worldwide, as an appeal to and comment upon the resilience of his multi-cultural British audience.

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