Once Upon a Tomorrow

One of the most wonderful things a story can do for us, is to transport us to places we have never been: to see things that we've never seen. Some of us are lucky to experience that outside of books, such as **Safurat Balogun**, the Head of Library Services at the Goethe-Institut in New Delhi, and **Miriam Bruns**, Director, Goethe-Institut, Pune. There are so many questions about storytelling, that start much before a page is turned, and a few months ago, these two collaborators came together to try out an experiment that would change the way not only they, but the Goethe-Institut, would explore storytelling and narrative practices in the future. Excerpts from an interview:
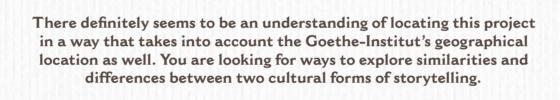

Interview with Safurat Balogun & Miriam Bruns

How and when did the idea of *Once Upon a Tomorrow* come about? What compelled the Goethe-Institut in two different cities to collaborate on something like this?

BALOGUN: The way it works at the Goethe-Institut is that each year, everyone is invited to pitch an idea for a project. For me, the idea emerged after I watched a German news programme broadcast on one of the prominent TV channels. It was a panel talking about Black people — and there wasn't a single Black person on that panel. I'd been thinking about representation for quite some time now; and especially after I moved to Delhi a few years ago. I was constantly asked about whether I felt comfortable living here, and I thought that we should talk about diversity; not just in the Indian context, but the South Asian one too. I'm keen about storytelling and the narrative forms, and there is always that question about who is allowed to tell stories, and how. When I submitted the idea, we found out that there were a few other storytelling ideas from the Library Departments in other centres as well. We found a way to merge those ideas, and that led me to join Miriam and her Library Department in Pune.

BRUNS: What was interesting to us as a department was that in South Asia, there are so many forms of storytelling in the subcontinent. So, is it even a profession here? We ask this because in Germany, while there is a culture of storytelling there, it is not such a well-known and respected profession. Every library department at the Goethe-Institut has worked with local talents and experts across formats, from the written to the oral traditions, from paintings to shadow puppetry; we wanted to bring them together, along with some experts from Germany and Europe, to explore the questions surrounding storytelling, from communication, to ownership, to representation. So, this project is an experiment — let's put them in a room together and see what comes out of it, and what would they advise us to do next.

There definitely seems to be an understanding of locating this project in a way that takes into account the Goethe-Institut's geographical location as well. You are looking for ways to explore similarities and differences between two cultural forms of storytelling.

BRUNS: I would agree, because at the Goethe-Institut, we do see ourselves as collaborators. Safurat and I have been posted here from Germany, but we have experts here in our Indian offices as well. They steer us in a number of directions that we would have otherwise not known of. Whenever we come up with a project, it is our aim to co-collaborate, and not just be 'guests.' The beauty of this project, at the very start, was the coming together of so many different voices within Goethe-Institut, which definitely had an impact.

BALOGUN: Yes, exactly. When I came here, I knew that I didn't want to be in a bubble; that way you don't meet people, you don't get to partner with them and come up with something new. We already do storytelling at the Goethe-Institut, it's not new for us. But the aim of this project was to ask ourselves, what do we not know? And how can we go about informing ourselves in a way that fosters inclusivity and diversity?

How did you pick your experts?

BALOGUN: The departments involved in the project already had a list of people they wanted to work with. Personally, I was interested in working with journalists, bringing in people from Germany — we had to see who was interested and who was available. We had to see whose work aligned with what we were hoping to do with this project.

BRUNS: It really is a cross-departmental effort. We have the language and educational outreach, the program departments of different centres; we all work in some shape, way or form with storytelling. The final list of experts is a cross-section of the work we do at the Goethe-Institut.

On the organisational front, what was the main challenge?

BRUNS: It's always fascinating when so many different people in the same organisation have different ideas about storytelling. First, we have to find a way to condense all those ideas. I think one of the other challenges is to get the audience to understand a process that takes place behind closed doors; we do it because we want to provide a safe space without any institutional interference. Then, we have to think about translating those findings from the workshops or deep dives into our work. The challenge with this project is that storytelling normally has a community aspect to it, it's not hidden away; but here, we're doing the exact opposite. We put people into a room that nobody else can enter, a place where ideas about inclusivity, representation and diversity are being explored. That is definitely a critical aspect of this project. You have to trust the process.

Safurat, you were one of the experts in this project. What was your experience like?

BALOGUN: It's one of the biggest projects in my career at the Goethe-Institut. It made me question so many things and it's important to question things. It has made me become aware of certain things in my professional and personal life. There were so many instances when I would enter a deep dive and not know where we were going with it, only for me to think 'This makes so much sense!' at the end of the session. One of the most important questions that we ask before we start any initiative here is 'Who is our target audience?' We don't ask 'Who is not our target audience?' In the past, I didn't raise that second question as much as I should have. That question is now forming the background of a project that I'm working on now, which is about representation in children's literature. I know there's a lot of work that has happened on that front in South Asia, and I want to look at how well representation is being addressed in children's books, what are the voices in there — and I'm not sure if I would have had the idea for this if I hadn't participated in *Once Upon a Tomorrow*.

In this experiment, what was the first bit of discovery for you as someone who works with narrative practices?

BALOGUN: Dr Nishant Shah, the project lead, would issue really wonderful prompts — sometimes, they'would start off by being something in the personal domain but gradually move into questions about narrative practices. When we were doing the exercise for the *Gallery of Lost Objects*, of things that we'd left in our past, I had talked about a tribal mark, which is a very personal subject for me; I was able to see how it became part of something outside of myself and my experience, and connect with an audience that had no link to it, in an authentic way.

What is the way forward for the Goethe-Institut after *Once Upon a Tomorrow* ends?

BALOGUN: We really want to do a 'Festival of Ideas' with the different departments of the Goethe-Institut, where there are several programs in the course of a day or a week, both online and offline. I'm hoping we can take the learnings from *Once Upon a Tomorrow* and use them when we're planning projects about storytelling — and even go beyond storytelling. Now that we have a team of co-collaborators who went through this process together, we have the opportunity to create properties and projects with them in the future.

BRUNS: I'm looking forward to the recommendations we will receive from the project facilitator, Dr Shah, and from each of the narrative experts. It'll be exciting to see the ways in which we can use them concretely in future programs and make sure that the general audience can also benefit from these recommendations.