

Article

“It’s a matter of the choices you want to make”: Literal and symbolic Africa in Isidore Okpewho’s *Call Me By My Rightful Name*¹

Carlo Germeshuys

Why shouldn’t it be possible for a person to regard his name as sacred? It is certainly, on the one hand, the most important instrument which is given to him, and, on the other, like a piece of jewelry [sic] hung around his neck at birth.²

Isidore Okpewho’s *Call Me By My Rightful Name*³ is a novel with an overt political purpose. Set in the 1960s, it tells the story of a college student named Otis, a young black American who journeys to Africa to find his ancestral roots. The novel begins when Otis starts experiencing strange attacks, seemingly of psychological origin, which cause him to emit incomprehensible, chant-like sounds. After consulting several psychiatrists and linguists, Otis learns that the language he is speaking in during these states is a dialect of Yoruba. He travels to the part of Nigeria where this dialect is spoken, ending up in a village for which he feels a peculiar affinity. He soon learns that this village was the home of one of his ancestors, who was kidnapped and forced into bondage in America, and that the words he has been uttering are part of a chant that his ancestor was performing when he was captured. Guided by his ancestor’s surviving twin sisters and the village’s *babalawo*, Otis sets out to learn the Yoruba language and become a cultural citizen of the village, all so that he can correctly perform the ritual that his ancestor never finished. In the process Otis learns a great deal about Yoruba culture and develops pride in his African heritage. Fortified by his experiences, he returns to America, where he fights for the establishment of a Black Studies program at his university.

With its narrative of “return” to Africa and its insistence on the power and timeless validity of African traditions, *Call Me By My Rightful Name* is a literary manifestation of the Afrocentricist discourse, which posits the rediscovery and

reclamation of African history and culture as an essential tool for empowering both Africans and members of the African diaspora. Okpewho, a Nigerian author and literary scholar who has taught extensively in Nigeria, America and England, admits that the Afrocentricist discourse has generated a lot of controversy, but maintains that its polarising effect is testament to its power and importance.⁴ On the one hand, there are “those who affirm the centrality of Africa in the identity and outlook of Blacks in Western society,” while “those who seriously question the validity of the effort” are on the other, with a host of positions in between.⁵ For Okpewho, the value of affirming Africa’s centrality lies in the continent’s cultural and political use. He is determined to argue against the Western colonialist view of Africa, which categorises (and dismisses) African culture, knowledge and ways of life as primitive, backward and inferior to “Western civilization.” Okpewho counters these conceptions by arguing that Africa must be understood on its own terms, and that such an understanding will successfully overturn Western prejudice. By achieving such an understanding, the African-American (or any member of the African diaspora) reconnects with his or her “roots” and gains self-respect. Otis, who constantly asks “who’s the real primitive” when he encounters an African custom and considers its depth and grandeur, seems a perfect example of someone who has experienced this transformation.⁶

The novel, both as a work of literature and as a literary manifestation of a discourse, raises many interesting questions. To what extent does it validate the Afrocentricist reclamation of African history and culture, and how does it do so? Is it “essentialist,” as some critics have claimed, and does it present an idealised, purely symbolic vision of Africa? Is it limited by its focus on a very specific African culture, or does its message and utility extend to all members of the African diaspora? This paper means to address these questions by focusing on Okpewho’s rhetorical techniques and exploring the various cultural discourses, particularly those of magic and ritual, which he uses in his representation of Africa. In doing so, I will argue that *Call Me By My Rightful Name* achieves its aim of making Africa a productive enabler of language and expression for

members of its diaspora, but that it also fails to fully engage with and question the problematic aspects of the African culture it celebrates.

Africa and the language of Return

In much of his critical work, Okpewho argues that Africa, as an idea, has always had a vital psycho-social-political function for members of its diaspora. He states that, for the victims of slavery and their descendants, “Africa remained in the subconscious as some kind of psychological surety, to be invoked against a system and a culture they revolted intensely against,” and was needed to “establish that they stood for something in the scheme of American life, despite all claims to the contrary.”⁷ Through its story of a black American’s journey to Africa, *Call Me By My Rightful Name* seems to invoke this idea of Africa as a surety, and to argue for its relevance. As such, the novel stakes a claim to validity for all black members of the African diaspora. There are various instances in the novel where the general validity of Otis⁸ quest is emphasized, such as when he is revealed to be the reincarnation of his ancestor who was captured into slavery. Chip McAdoo, a politically conscious black American volunteer worker, “cannot help feeling that [Otis’] experience has meanings for him, another black American, beyond the politically inspired program that has brought him to Africa.”⁹

To understand what these meanings are, we need to have some idea of *how* Africa functions as a psychological surety for diaspora blacks. In *Negotiating Caribbean Identities*, Stuart Hall argues that the invocation of Africa has a personal, rather than historiographical function. He characterises the diasporic relation to Africa as a question of identity. This identity is a construction, as all identities must be. Constructions of identity are questions “of producing in the future an account of the past, that is to say it is always about narrative, the stories which cultures tell themselves about who they are and where they come from”¹⁰. It would be a mistake to see such narratives of identity as attempts to represent literal, factual historical truth, since what constitutes their validity is “what they as cultural resources allow people to produce.”¹¹

According to this utilitarian approach, the focus on Africa has a symbolic, communicative function. Hall uses the example of the Jamaican Rastafarian ideal of returning to Africa. He argues that the Rastafarians did not literally want to go to the physical, actually existing continent of Africa; “that was not the Africa they were talking about.”¹² The actually existing Africa had changed, had become something different than what it was when the Rastafarians’ ancestors had left it.”¹³ Rather, they wanted to reconstruct the symbolic ““imagined community”” of Africa.¹⁴ Engaging with Africa enabled the diasporic community “to find a language in which they could re-tell and appropriate their own histories.”¹⁵ This language is a “symbolic language for describing what suffering was like, it was a metaphor for where they were”, and had both “a literal and a symbolic register.”¹⁶ How, then, does Africa function as a symbol in the language it enables?

In the context of Okpewho’s novel, Africa, as a symbolic enabler of language, allows Okpewho to utilize Michael J. Echeruo’s discursive concept of the “Return.” This concept is based on the similarities of the language of the Black diaspora to that of other diasporas. Echeruo argues that black theorists have appropriated both the language and the theology of the Jewish diaspora.¹⁷ This comparison allows him to theorise the “primary condition for the possibility of a diaspora,” which is “the burden of Return.”¹⁸ The diasporic community’s source of sustenance is “the idea of an eventual Return” to “a site from which they may be (for a while) excluded, but which is theirs, inalienably.”¹⁹ Such a site “is not important only as a physical place; it is even more important as the source, root, final location for a determinable lineage.”²⁰ Anyone who claims to be part of a diaspora must be able to trace his or her lineage to a place. As with Hall’s analysis of Rastafarians, such a place seems to have more of a symbolic function than a physical one. What is important is not “that a particular location on the map has been identified, but that a claim can be made to such a location.”²¹ A person also does not have to actually physically return to this place for the idea to be valid:

The power of the idea lies in the principle of it: that a return is possible forever, whenever, if ever. [...] The

commitment to return is not an obligation. It is only a prophetic expectation to be realised in Never-time.²²

The condition for being part of a diaspora is the “inalienable right to wish a return, to reclaim connections to a lineage,” and it is this that “permits us to be African.”²³

A large part of the appeal of *Call Me By My Rightful Name* lies in its author’s use of Africa as a symbolic destination in a narrative of Return. Brenda Cooper argues that the novel is structured around an idealised, metaphorical and symbolic Africa, one which is far from “the flesh and blood of the everyday and its concrete objects and bodies,” and operates chiefly in the symbolic, metaphorical realm.²⁴ The narrative itself presents a member of the African diaspora’s Return to his ancestral homeland. However, it is precisely through this Return that the novel goes beyond Hall and Echeru’s concepts, since it not only uses Africa in a symbolic register, but in a literal register as well. Otis’ Return does not happen in never-time, but in the early 1960’s, and he returns to a very specific location on the map. Otis’ commitment to return is indeed represented as an obligation, to himself, his extended family and eventually to all African-Americans. Furthermore, his journey is a result of very particular circumstances, happening to specific people at exact times. So particular are his circumstances that at one point, his father wonders: “is his reaction to Africa common to all black men in America, or is it something that goes back specifically to his family’s history?”²⁵ This question appears to set up a tension between the literal and symbolic registers of the novel’s narrative of Return. If Otis’ story is meant to be instructive to all black Americans, do the specifics of the story negate its general instructive validity? Furthermore, does the use of specifics indicate that Okpewho is advocating an actual, literal return to Africa for all black members of the diaspora? When approaching these questions, we must keep in mind that, according to the argument so far, the purpose of the novel is to construct a language through which the diasporic experience can be articulated. The novel itself contains a few observations about language which must be taken into account if one is to understand the complexity of its discursive construction. These observations suggest that the novel is presenting an argument for

specificity in language. When Otis learns of his ancestry and his sacred mission, he resolves to learn the Yoruba language. However, he soon discovers that this is not a simple process. As he writes in one his letters,

Language is a strange thing. I haven't been here very long, but I'm beginning to discover that there's a lot more to language than words. It's the whole culture of the people, with a lot of history and tradition locked into it.²⁶

Otis becomes very sensitive to the specificity of language, and its contextual use, so sensitive that he starts being “pretty careful what words [he uses] and in what situations!”²⁷ In this, he is guided by the *babalawo*, Awo Akinwunmi, who tells him that he

should remember that language does not exist by itself. Language is nourished by life, and in turn nourishes that life. So, to understand a language in all its dimensions and be able to speak it well, you must interact intimately with the life and the culture around it.²⁸

These statements have a great implication for our understanding of the language of experience presented in the novel. The view of language expressed here denies any possibility of an abstract, purely symbolic language. Language is rooted in the real, and must be understood as such. To be able to speak a language, one must share in the life-world of its context. This context is specific, and so is the language used within it.

The novel's plot itself is centred on the attempt by the characters to construct a language text: the chant that Otis has to perform to honour his ancestor. The process and descriptions of this text's construction again reinforce the novel's insistence on specificity in language. Otis' initial seizure is accompanied by, “his mouth ejaculating strange, unintelligible words”²⁹. Through a series of circumstantial events, these words are recognised as being of African origin. However, merely designating the language as African is not enough, as Norma, Otis' American girlfriend, realises when she asks a Sesotho-speaking student who has no idea what Otis' speech means.³⁰ To place the language, Otis' family and psychologist must consult three different linguists, each of whose special expertise is needed to produce a transcript of the chant. The text is only

understood fully after Otis meets his ancestral twins in the Nigerian village. This is a painstaking process which takes several days. In addition to finding the correct forms of the words which have been corrupted by Otis' pronunciation, the "coded idioms of Yoruba oral poetry" have to be taken into account³¹. Otis' ancestral twins have to dig deep into their memory of the first time the song was performed to decipher some of the words. Even with a correct transcript, the song's "final, *final* version" is only available once Otis has performed the ceremony³².

If one takes the process of linguistic construction discussed above as a guide to the novel's language of Return, Okpewho's project seems very essentialist. It is as if the idea of Africa must be uncompromisingly purified, until one reaches a thoroughly, specifically African language, rooted in the real life context of its African speakers. As such, one can see the novel's plot as a journey from a generalised concept of language to a specific one. This seems to be the antithesis of a universally accessible language of symbolic Return. However, one must be very careful not to take the process of language construction itself too literally. There are many other narrative elements which seem to contradict this idea of static, austere purity. Okpewho gives us a clue as to how the novel should be interpreted when Otis discusses the traditional children's stories and riddles of the village. Otis notes that the stories seem senselessly contradictory if one judges them from the "Western way of looking at things"³³. However, "the people who made up those stories couldn't have been so stupid as to think people would take their statements at face value"³⁴.

One could read Otis' statements as Okpewho's guide to how we should read his novel. If so, one should not take the story's events at face value, and attempt to judge them from a non-Western perspective. One of the most effective ways of doing this is to take the novel's use of Yoruba oral narrative tradition and culture into account. Cooper cites Eileen Julien's argument that "the elements of oral traditions that are present in modern fiction are clues to the particular purpose to which the writer is putting the work."³⁵ These "strategic devices" are "called

upon to serve particular functions,” and solve formal or aesthetic problems³⁶. I will focus here on Okpewho’s use of Yoruban cultural elements, specifically magic and ritual, and his representation of them in the context of Yoruba oral tradition.

Magical Discourse

Magic plays a large role in Okpewho’s novel; its central dramatic premise, that Otis’ answers a seemingly supernatural calling, can be seen as a magical event. A significant part of Otis’ character development comes from his accepting the magic of his ancestors. If the novel is an attempt to articulate a language of Return, magic is one of its integral discursive elements. As such, one needs to analyse this magic, and the magical worldview that accompanies it, to understand Okpewho’s purpose. As a discursive element, the concept of magic and its manifestation in the novel clearly dramatise and elucidate the tension between the symbolic and the literal, as well as the general and the specific.

The novel’s magical discourse is also the terrain on which it truly challenges the Western colonial view of Africa, and the philosophical tradition that sustains this view. Okpewho’s depiction of magic provides a counterdiscourse to that of the Enlightenment Project, Western modernity’s central philosophical tradition. It is vital that Okpewho challenges this tradition, because he is not just up against a set of prejudices, but an entire dominant epistemology. It is no coincidence that Western modernity developed in conjunction with Western colonialism. One of the central ideological justifications for colonial expansion was the Hegelian notion of the “myth-history of reason.” As Bertrand Russell defines it, this notion posited a universal history moving towards a single end of logical and ethical perfection, guided by reason and assuming the aspect of total integration of knowledge.³⁷ This ideal of perfection was, of course, based on contemporary Western civilization, and was therefore not an impartial, objective discourse. As Johannes Fabian argues, this conception of the world allowed the West to see the Rest as being situated at an earlier point in history.³⁸ Consequently, the colonised were “primitives” and “savages,” and therefore “not yet ready for civilization”

and self-determination³⁹. It is worth noting, as Simon Gikandi does, that Hegel himself “insisted on the nature of the black as a subject of lack and of Africa as a place without history.”⁴⁰

It is partly this way of thinking that Okpewho is reacting against in his use of magical discourse. Wittgenstein’s *Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough*, and Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* help frame a critical challenge to the rationale and methodology of Western Enlightenment thought by challenging the myths of “progress” through “reason” and the Enlightenment’s consequent dismissal of non-Western cultures as “primitive” and “superstitious.” The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* argues that Enlightenment is itself a myth, one which reduces all of human existence to pure function and domination, and which has made the earth “radiant with triumphant calamity.”⁴¹ In his *Remarks*, Wittgenstein attacks Sir James Frazer’s attempt to “explain” magic and religious ritual by reducing them to primitive forms of science. Wittgenstein accuses Frazer of a lack of imagination, and an inability to conceive of the possibility that a culture could be fundamentally different from his own. Wittgenstein had the greatest respect for religion in any form, and was therefore greatly offended by what he saw as Frazer’s barbaric reductionism.⁴² He also criticized Frazer’s evocation of a modern obsession with science, which he saw as incompatible with serious thinking, since it had “progress as its form rather as one of its features.”⁴³ So, although the two texts make vastly different arguments, they share a certain critical spirit that exposes the ideological shortcomings of modern Western philosophy. In particular, they reject the concept of a unifying force or idea that determines all of human life and culture, and see this concept as the tool of domination that it is. It is through this spirit that they compliment Okpewho, who is very much involved in the same struggle. Also like Okpewho, Wittgenstein, Horkheimer and Adorno locate the conflict between the general and the specific at the centre of their magical arguments.

There are many ways in which magic, as a language, mirrors the ideas of language set forth in the novel. To understand magic, according to Wittgenstein,

is to understand the entire way of life of its practitioners. When describing a ritual festival, for example, one must include “the kind of people who take part in it, their behaviour at other times, that is, their character; the kind of games which they otherwise play.”⁴⁴ To understand an act of magic, one must understand “the *surroundings* of a way of acting.”⁴⁵ This description is in accordance with Wittgenstein’s critique of the philosophy of language, most famously set forth in his *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein dismisses Western philosophy’s search for a grand, unified field of concepts, and holds that, instead, we understand the world through its language-games, all of which are rooted in specific contexts and have specific use values. Likewise, for its practitioners, magic is a part of an entire way of life, and must be understood as such. Okpewho adheres to this concept, as evidenced by the scene in which Otis encounters the village *babalawo* training his protégés. Every would-be *babalawo* “gets to learn practically every aspect of Yoruba life,” not just divination.⁴⁶ As such, their training could take over a dozen years, since they learn by direct instruction, as well as observing their elders’ meetings and all other social interactions, from the important to the trivial.⁴⁷ Otis himself realises that he will have to take part in a magical ritual, his initiation into the “Cult of the Strong Men,” if he is to perform the ritual in honour of his ancestor. As he writes to his parents:

It is not enough to speak our language to be a full citizen of our town. After all, some Europeans speak our language well. But there is more to it. You have to be fully involved in the life of the place and play a part recognized by tradition for a true native son.⁴⁸

Otis must take part in the local magic if he is to speak the local language. As such, magic and its real-world context of practice are inseparable.

In addition to its basis in a specific context, magic also functions in terms of specific attributes and effects. In contrast to Western science, which sees specific objects merely as material specimens, there is specific representation in magic.⁴⁹ The uniqueness of the magical practitioner, and the object on which he or she acts, must be recognised. In a magical act or ritual, one cannot substitute a

generalised object-class for a specific object. Horkheimer and Adorno use the example of cursing an enemy. To have any effect, the magical ritual must make use of the enemy's spear or hair, not just anyone's spear or hair⁵⁰. The central events of the novel's plot are predicated on this attribute of magic. Otis, as a specific person, is called back to the exact, specific spot where his ancestor was captured⁵¹. When Otis meets his ancestral twins, they identify a scar on his shoulder, which his parents had dismissed as a birthmark, as instead the mark of an injury inflicted on his ancestor during his capture⁵². It is also revealed that his ancestor's capture occurred at the age of "twenty-one years, exactly the same age as Otis!"⁵³ The exclamation mark indicates the emphasis placed on these seeming coincidences. Of course, being part of a discourse of magic, these events are not mere coincidences. The specificity of events and personages are important, and the magic would not work without these particular actors, in a particular geographic setting, at a particular time.

The specificity of magical language is evident in the chant by which Otis is called back to Africa to perform. The chant itself is an *oriki*, which salutes or describes important attributes of people in Yoruba culture.⁵⁴ Specificity is central to the *oriki*: "The *oriki* used for one person or object can hardly be used for another person or object," because "a family's *oriki* often carries attributes that belong to that family alone"⁵⁵. Otis/Akimbowale's *oriki*, reproduced in different forms at many times throughout the book, would not make sense if one did not understand its cultural purpose, the way of life surrounding it, and the specific circumstances of its performance.

Along with Otis' family's *oriki*, the central Yoruba magical text in the novel is the *Book of Ifa*, the collection of *Odu* verses used in divination. In one of his discussions with the village *babalawo*, Otis mentions the seeming contradiction between two of the verses in the *Ifa*. One verse extols the virtue of always looking to one's elders for guidance, while another verse insists that youths must use their own initiative to re-create themselves⁵⁶. The apparent contradiction of these two verses raises a central question about magic and the magical

worldview: how do “progress” and “development” function within them? As Achille Mbembe argues, the prejudiced Western idea about African societies is that they are ruled by unchanging custom, oppressed by their magical traditions, and resistant to change and progress⁵⁷. While Otis does not fully share this view, he tells the *babalawo* that he finds his ancestral village’s respect and deference to its elders confining. The *babalawo*’s answer to Otis’ question addresses this complaint, and reveals something of the nature of the village’s idea of “development.”

In answer to his question about the conflicting verses, the *babalawo* tells Otis that “there is no contradiction between verses in the Odu”, because “each text is intended to answer one question or address one problem, and they may arise in different situations or use different individuals to make their points.”⁵⁸ One verse may apply in a certain context, while another may apply in a different one. This means that both verses are right, but that their use values depend on the contexts in which they are invoked. The flexibility of the magical worldview is what allows it to change and adapt, and the principle of a multiplicity of positions is an integral part of the Yoruba worldview. Citing Drewal, Cooper argues that Yoruba ritual “is neither one-dimensional nor authoritarian,” and that “ritual is not restricted to a cyclical, primordial time but embodies ‘movement and change’”⁵⁹. This does not mean that the tradition and its attendant specificity are denied. Indeed, as Olabiyi Babalola Yai argues, “innovation is implied in the Yoruba idea of tradition”⁶⁰. The Yoruba word for tradition, *àṣà*, is derived from the verb *ṣà*, meaning “to choose, to discriminate or discern”⁶¹. One can only act within tradition if one is making a deliberate choice, based on an informed awareness of historical acts and practices. However, “since choice presides over the birth of an *àṣà* (tradition), the latter is permanently liable to metamorphosis”⁶².

If one considers Yoruba culture on these terms, there is indeed no contradiction between following your ancestors and using your own initiative. Indeed, there is very little chance that you can be truly innovative if you do not take your ancestral tradition into account. This flexibility contrasts markedly with the

modern Western idea of “progress.” According to David Scott, the modern consists of negating past tradition; it forces a “*break* with what went before, a break beyond which there is no return.”⁶³ Yoruba creative culture combines “what went before” with innovation, to create something that both builds on and recreates tradition. The novel presents a paradigm of this process in its discussion of jazz, which it explicitly classifies as a form of African music. Chip explains to Otis that African music operates on the basis of transferring chords or note sequences from one context to another, “where it takes on a life of its own.”⁶⁴ Elements can be lifted from songs into other songs, or be used to create new songs, which can be very loosely related (or even entirely unrelated) to their sources.⁶⁵ This is in contrast to classical Western music tradition, where the musicians, “think that, like scientists, they’ve achieved a system that should be capable of being reproduced again and again.”⁶⁶ It is extremely important, however, to know what the different musical elements mean, since one could end up in a “heap of trouble” if one used the wrong elements in a certain context⁶⁷. In this way, tradition becomes a creative force when it is consciously used.

Okpewho’s presentation of magic and tradition in *Call Me By My Rightful Name* give insight into his rhetorical purpose. Okpewho counters Western ideas of “primitive,” generalised African culture by presenting a specific African culture and its philosophy. He presents this culture as equally complex as any Western culture, with its own, perhaps more meaningful, forms of “progress” and knowledge. Otis’ journey of intellectual and emotional development is a process of coming to understand and accept this culture on its own terms. In this culture, tradition can be used as a creative force, which can generate meaning and understanding. When making use of tradition, as when using magic, one must make choices that are informed by specific elements of that tradition. If it didn’t employ of specific elements of Yoruba culture, the novel would not be able to generate meaning. Without learning the Yoruba language, way of life and magical practice, Otis would not be able to understand his situation as an American with an African lineage and ancestry. Thus, the novel suggests Yoruba

traditions which Otis learns are not so much timeless and unchanging as timelessly relevant and useful.

Useful traditions?

Call Me By My Rightful Name's engagement with the discourse of magical tradition, as I have discussed it, allows the author to go some way towards resolving the tension between the use of cultural and narrative specifics, and an apparent aim of making the novel relevant to all members of the African diaspora. As Okpewho presents it, tradition (particularly Yoruba tradition) is useful in two ways. First, it gives one a solid basis from which they can make informed decisions. Second, it encourages innovation and change, as long as the choices that one makes are informed by tradition. In this way, Okpewho suggests that those who would utilise Africa as an enabler of language must take its specific traditions and cultural practices into account, but that these specifics can be adapted and changed to suit present needs. One can see this dual engagement with tradition in the latter part of the novel, in which Otis returns to America.

One of the remarkable effects of Otis' journey to Africa is the change it brings to his political worldview. Prior to being called by his ancestors, he has little interest in the civil rights struggle, despite occasionally suffering from isolated racist acts, for example when a white policeman harasses him and his girlfriend⁶⁸. However, on returning to America after his time in Nigeria, he becomes involved in the Civil Rights struggle in general, and in the fight for a Black Studies program at his university in particular. In a letter to Chip, he writes that, previously, he could have "shrugged off the agitation for Black studies as just another nuisance by troublemakers"⁶⁹. However, his journey to Africa has made him conscious of the extent to which Africa has been (often wilfully) misunderstood and misrepresented in America. He exclaims his shock at finding that his university textbooks describe African societies as primitive and without history, since his own experience has confirmed the "amazing sophistication" of African traditions, cultures and philosophies⁷⁰. Thus, his experiences make it impossible for him to stand by "while other people continue

with the same tactics that caused our people to lose a sense of themselves”⁷¹. This is an important statement, since it suggests that Otis could not have become politically conscious without gaining a sense of self, something which he could only access by reconnecting with his specific ancestral village and its culture and traditions. Earlier in the novel, he wonders “how many black Americans would have gone through the experiences I’ve had to discover who they were”⁷². This leads him to ask Chip: “What if you don’t find where you came from, what difference would it make?”⁷³ Chip answers that, “It’s a matter of the choices you want to make.”⁷⁴ Thus, the novel suggests that members of the African diaspora need a firm grounding in their ancestral African cultures and traditions to gain a sense of self, which will enable them to make informed political choices.

However, the novel also shows that, important though these traditions are, they do not have to be preserved unchanged, and can be adapted to one’s present needs. The emphasis on personal choice in Yoruba tradition allows Otis to modify some of the elements of his heritage for his own use. After his ritual recital of the *oriki*, the twins give him his ancestor’s arm bracelet. Otis asks whether the bracelet must be worn on his arm, and they tell him that he can wear it any place he chooses⁷⁵. He decides to make a necklace of it instead. The twins also confer on him the name of Akimbowale, his ancestor’s name. If we take the novel’s title into consideration, it is perhaps curious that he does not militantly insist on being called by his “rightful name.” He tells his parents that it would be naive of him to expect that they’ll call him by any name other than the one they gave him, but that he would appreciate it if they did. He also allows them to call him Kimbo, if Akimbowale is too difficult⁷⁶. The point here is not only that Otis is being considerate, but that he is able to choose his name, bringing to mind a Yoruba proverb cited by Babalola Yai: “Outside the walls of your birthplace, you have a right to choose the name that is attractive to you”⁷⁷. As such, the novel shows that tradition, while giving one a sense of self, can change over time and with circumstances to remain useful.

Even so, this understanding of the novel’s rhetorical purpose does not entirely resolve the tension between its generally valid purpose and its specific narrative

and cultural elements and events. Although one can see the novel as an argument for the creative possibilities of African (and specifically Yoruba) traditions, it is still founded on the premise of an unquestioning acceptance of those traditions. The very form of the novel, based on the Yoruba oral narrative form of the initiation story, seems to confirm this. Julien writes that the initiation story, as opposed to a Western *Bildungsroman*, seeks “to preserve an already extant order, to preach the virtues of continuity and conformity to an established set of truths”⁷⁸. The initiation story is the story of “initiation *into* an order”, where “there is no suggestion of shaping our own destiny, except to the extent that we follow the path ‘charted’ for us since birth”⁷⁹. Otis’ journey is indeed one of initiation into an order (he even goes through an actual initiation, into the “Cult of the Strong Men”); his life path has been determined by what happened to his ancestors, and he *must* fulfil his obligations to them. As he writes in his first letter home, “I have come to accept the logic of my existence: I have been chosen by the spirits of our ancestors to set our interrupted destiny in order”⁸⁰. Likewise, his development as a character consists of his acceptance of the established truths of the culture of his ancestral village.

Established Yoruba cultural tradition has many positive, creative aspects, and can generate a useful counterdiscourse to Western philosophy. However, there are some events and discursive features in the novel which many readers would find highly problematic. Cooper takes particular issue with the novel’s gender bias. She notes, for example, that the descriptions of Otis “ejaculating” his trance-chant place the novel firmly within a tradition of masculine epic.⁸¹ One can also point to the passivity of the female characters; when Otis asks Norma what she would do if she were to accompany him to Nigeria, she answers that she would like to “take care” of him.⁸² The novel’s focus on a young black male, symbolic of all black Americans, who must go through a challenge of initiation to restore his family, seems to provide an example of the kind of gender bias Paul Gilroy’s criticizes in *Afrocentricity*.⁸³ Gilroy writes that, through this bias, “the integrity of the race is thus made interchangeable with the integrity of black masculinity, which must be regenerated at all costs.”⁸⁴ Otis’s stable nuclear family, and the many similar examples he encounters in his ancestral village,

seem to underlie the belief that “the patriarchal family is the preferred institution capable of reproducing traditional roles.”⁸⁵ As such, one could argue that the novel is not, in fact, generally relevant to all members of the African diaspora, since its form and many of its discursive features exclude women, or at least make them subordinate to males.

Furthermore, Cooper writes that Okpewho holds on to his “quest for sources” of positive black tradition, “in the face of his clear recognition that many of these stories serve powerful interests and are not innocent of oppressing other people, like women.”⁸⁶ This is a very serious charge, since it potentially negates the validity of the very concept of the Afrocentric turn to African traditions as sources of empowerment and emancipation. The novel itself refers to some oppressive traditions in Otis’ village, and registers Otis’ unease with them. The most revealing instance is Otis’ participation in a female circumcision ceremony. Though Otis did not want to be involved at all, he is compelled to stand by and comfort Sumbo, the daughter of his host family⁸⁷. While those who performed the ceremony try to console the little girl, Otis “felt like screaming at them, Shut the fuck up and stop brutalizing the poor child!”⁸⁸ Otis is deeply disturbed, but he attempts to rationalise the event in the following way:

Mind you, I’m not so arrogant as to condemn the practice of female circumcision outright. Though I can’t defend the fear of female sexuality that might well be part of its logic, the Yoruba must have reasons other than sex for keeping the ritual alive as long as they’ve done. Still, growing up in a different culture makes it more difficult for me than most home-grown Yoruba to accept this tradition without question.⁸⁹

Here, Otis is caught in the classic dilemma of a moral relativist attitude towards the Other, complicated by that fact that he strongly identifies himself with the Other. Should he condemn the specific practice according to a supposedly universal standard of human behaviour, or should he adopt the position that all cultures are different, and that the idea of a “universal” position is tantamount to cultural imperialism? Nothing further is said about this incident. Should we take Otis’ rationalisation for Okpewho’s own position? There is no evidence to the

contrary, but I would argue that Okpewho is not describing an oppressive African custom merely to rationalise it. Rather, I propose that this incident is a symptom of a deeper problem at the heart of Okpewho's project, one that is articulated in Simon Gikandi's question about the use of Africa as an enabler of discourse: "How do we recover the idealism that makes pasts usable without cleansing them of their excessive and transgressive elements?"⁹⁰

It is in resolving this question that *Call Me By My Rightful Name* fails. As we have seen, the novel proposes a return to African pasts and traditions, and argues that these things can be used to create an idealism that will help members of the diaspora, such as Otis, in their political struggles. Also, passages such as those in which Otis witnesses female circumcision show that Okpewho is conscious of the "excessive and transgressive" elements of African tradition, so we cannot accuse him of trying to erase these elements from his symbolic Africa. However, the rationalisation of these elements suggests that Okpewho is not prepared to engage fully with the Africa he is invoking as an enabler of diasporic language, an engagement that would necessitate actively challenging those elements of the past and of tradition that are oppressive. A truly radical test of vision, on Okpewho's part, would have been to let Otis fully identify with *all* the oppressed people he encounters, including the women and children of his village. If this had happened, the novel would have a truly general validity for all members of the diaspora, including women, and perhaps for all of humanity as well.

Nevertheless, these criticisms should not lead us to discard *Call Me By My Rightful Name* outright, or to dismiss its fundamental project. The novel presents a convincing argument for the utility of (certain) African traditions, histories and cultural practices for members of the African diaspora. Its invocation of language and culture is complex and thought-provoking, and contributes to our philosophical understanding of (a particular) African world-view. Okpewho's use of Yoruba traditions of cultural discourse, especially those connected to magic, presents a powerful refutation of Western prejudices about African culture, and manages to challenge some of the philosophical assumptions underlying those

prejudices. Onene could argue that the novel's faults do not lie in any overt focus on African histories and traditions, but rather in that its engagement with these histories and traditions does not go far enough in challenging some of them. As such, Okpewho's novel is not the result of a misguided project, but of an unfinished one.

Notes

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² L. Wittgenstein. 'Culture and Value'. Edited by Von Wright, G.H. and Nyman, Heikki. Translated from the German by Winch, Peter. (UK & USA: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1998) p.125-127

³ I. Okpewho. *Call Me By My Rightful Name*. (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2004)

⁴ Okpewho, Isidore. "Introduction." In *The African Diaspora: African Origins and New World Identities*. Okpewho; Boyce Davis, Marzui (Eds), (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1999), p.xi-xxviii

⁵ *Ibid*, p.xi

⁶ *Ibid*, p.211

⁷ *Ibid*, p. xv, p.xvi

² I have decided to use the name Otis throughout this paper. This may seem incongruous, given the novel's title. However, as I will argue at the end of the essay, Otis/Akimbowale himself is not so particular about which "rightful name" we should call him by.

⁹ See note 3, p.129

¹⁰ S. Hall. 'Caribbean Identities' In *New Left Review*. 209, 3-14, 1995, p.5

¹¹ *Ibid*, p.14

¹² *Ibid*, p.11

¹³ *Ibid*, p.11

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p.12

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p.13

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p.13

¹⁷ M.J.C. Echeruo. 'An African Diaspora: The Ontological Project' in *The African Diaspora: African Origins and New World Identities*. I. Okpewho, C. Boyce Davies, A.A Mazrui (eds)(Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), p.3

¹⁸ *Ibid* p.13.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.13

²⁰ *Ibid*, p.13

²¹ *Ibid* p.14

²² *Ibid*, p.14

²³ *Ibid*, p. 4

²⁴ Cooper, Brenda. "The Rhetoric of a New Essentialism versus Multiple Worlds: Isidore Okpewho's *Call Me by My Rightful Name* and Buchi Emecheta's *The New Tribe* in Conversation" in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 42, 19, 2007, p. 20, p.26

²⁵ Okpewho, 2004, p.62

²⁶ *Ibid*, p.157

²⁷ *Ibid*, p.158

²⁸ *Ibid*, p.167

²⁹ *Ibid*, p.7

³⁰ *Ibid*, p.50.

- ³¹ *Ibid*, p.143
- ³² *Ibid*, p.220
- ³³ *Ibid*, p.176
- ³⁴ *Ibid*, p.176
- ³⁵ B. Cooper. *Magical Realism in West African Fiction*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) p.3
- ³⁶ *Ibid*, p.3
- ³⁷ B. Russel. *History of Western Philosophy*. (England: Allen & Unwin, 1961) p.706
- ³⁸ J. Fabian. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. (New York: Columbia UP, 1983) p.7
- ³⁹ *Ibid*, p.26
- ⁴⁰ S. Gikandi. "Introduction: In *Research In African Literatures*, 27 (4), 1-6, 1996, p.2
- ⁴¹ M. Horkheimer. & T. Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Translated from the German by Cumming, John. (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1991) p.1
- ⁴² R. Monk. *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*. (London: Vintage. 1991) p.310
- ⁴³ Wittgenstein, 1998, p.9e
- ⁴⁴ L. Wittgenstein. 'Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*' (Rhees, Rush)Eds). Translated from the German by Beversluis, J in *Philosophical Occasions, 1912-1951*. Klagge, James C and Nordmann, Alfred (Eds) (Indianapolis: Hacket Publishing Company, 1993) (Original work published in 1967) p.145
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p.147; original emphasis
- ⁴⁶ Okpewho, 2004, p.180
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p.180 - 181
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p.197
- ⁴⁹ Horkheimer and Adorno, 1991, p.10
- ⁵⁰ A. Mbembe. *On the Postcolony*. (London, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001) p.10
- ⁵¹ Okpewho, 2004, p.120
- ⁵² *Ibid*, p. 128
- ⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 152
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 72
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 72
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 188
- ⁵⁷ Mbembe, 2001, p.4
- ⁵⁸ Mbembe, 2001, p.189
- ⁵⁹ Cooper, 1998, p. 45
- ⁶⁰ Wittgenstein, 1993, p. 35
- ⁶¹ *Ibid*, p.35
- ⁶² *Ibid*, p.35
- ⁶³ D. Scott. "The Colonial State". *The Nation and its Fragments*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1995) p.200
- ⁶⁴ Okpewho 2004, p. 209
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p. 209
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p. 209
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p. 211
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 8 - 9
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 251
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p. 249
- ⁷¹ *Ibid*, p. 251
- ⁷² *Ibid*, p. 169
- ⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 169
- ⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 169
- ⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p. 224
- ⁷⁶ *Ibid*, p. 224
- ⁷⁷ O. Babalola Yai. "In Praise of Metonymy: The Concepts of 'Tradition' and 'Creativity' in the Transmission of Yoruba Artistry over Time and Space" in *Research in African Literatures*, Vol.

24, No. 4, Special Issue in Memory of Josaphat Bekunuru Kubayanda, (Winter), 1993, pp.29-37.
p.36

⁷⁸ E. Julien. *African Novels and the Question of Orality*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1992) p. 95

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p.78

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, p. 55

⁸¹ Cooper, 2007, p. 32

⁸² Okpewho, 2004, p. 95

⁸³ P. Gilroy. *The Black Atlantic*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993)

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, p.194

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p.194

⁸⁶ Cooper, 2007, p. 31

⁸⁷ Okpewho, 2007, p.238

⁸⁸ Okpewho, 2007, p.238

⁸⁹ Okpewho, 2007, p.239

⁹⁰ Gikandi, 1996, p. 3