Language, Identity and the Black Diaspora: Isidore Okpewho's *Call Me By My Rightful Name*

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Abstract
This paper uses Okpewho's tour-de-force, Call Me By My Rightful Name to explore the dynamics of language vis-à-vis identity (or more accurately, identities) and the crucial issue of diasporality. It examines how Okpewho charts the fate of the black man from the dawn of consciousness through the dark past of slavery and the Slave Trade to the present time, showing the role of memory, the stubborn tenacity of the oral tradition and the contested nature of the concept of the Self. The paper argues the need for greater understanding and respect from western centres/institutions of learning through the teaching of and research in African/African-American letters.

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Suppose you find yourself reading a copy of *Ebony*[1] anywhere in the world and you are bowled over by not only the glossy feel of the magazine but, more importantly, by the infectious blandishments of the main subject: a mixed-grill of African-American arrivistes; those hulking athletes, academics, singers, film stars, professionals and the like, all fulsomely caught in photographic technicolour. You are likely, if anything, to heave a sigh of envious saturation. And something like: 'Gosh! wish I were in their shoes! Perhaps, a desire to debunk and explode such myths of African-American social mobility in contemporary American society constitutes part of the originary impulse of Okpewho's novel entitled *Call Me By My Rightful Name*. This is a tale of a twenty-one-year-old African-American called Otis Hampton. On his twenty-first birthday anniversary, Otis is treated to a bash by his fellow basketball team-mates and

their coach. After the party, Otis and his Jamaican girlfriend, Norma, drive off into the night. As Otis tunes on the car stereo, drum music ostensibly African, resonates, enveloping them in its percussive force. Curiously, the music produces a violently convulsive effect on Otis who begins to mouth a farrago of deranged inanities. He soon afterwards regains his composure and control as though nothing unusual has happened. On a different day, Otis decides to go and have lunch in a public eatery called Tucci's in Boston. He encounters two African university students speaking an African language and immediately he begins to sense an undertow of psychic crisis coursing through his entire being. He undergoes a far worse crisis on Pleasure Island, a restaurant which specialises in serving Caribbean Cuisine owned by Mr. Barrett, popularly called Guinea Man. Norma, an undergraduate studying sociology, needs Mr. Barrett who is a thoroughbred Jamaican to enlighten her about their common culture, especially the so-called "Maroon Culture" in Jamaica. Sporting massive dreadlocks and speaking the piquant nation-language known as the "patois", Guinea Man answers Norma's enquiries with the authority and candour of a culture impresario, and playing his native music to boot. And no sooner has the music begin to play than Otis Hampton go into his spasms, or "chanting spell" (69). Luckily, Norma fortuitously records on tape Otis's garbled chant which is played to his nonplussed parents. Otis's father, a middle-class black professional, engages the services of a white psychiatrist, Dr. Fishbein, who tries to use the conventional process of neurotical medicine known as "talking cure" to address Otis's predicament. Seemingly clueless about the novelty of the psychological condition, Dr. Fishbein in his several sessions with Otis probes Otis's interests such as music, sports, love life and also hypnotises him in order to plumb the depths of his psychosis. As a result, Fishbein only manages to detect "certain strands that led to contiguous points in family history" (56). Thus, having probed "buried sensations" (56) in Otis, the psychiatrist engages "the hottest drum artist of the day", by name Olatunji, a Nigerian whose performance equally provokes the usual gyrations, and deranged and tortured

mouthings in Otis. Upon further consultations with leading psychiatrists and psychologists, it is learnt that Otis Hampton is suffering from "xenoglossy" or "recitative xenoglossy" (58), a psycho-mental condition similar to speaking without prior training of an unknown language. Fishbein, having reached his wit's end, refers Otis to Professor Baldwin, a scholar who had spent a total of seven years studying the Yoruba language among the native speakers in Nigeria between 1952-1959. Baldwin reduces the taped "chant" to a script with the help of a dictagraph. With the aid of both recorded oral chant and script, Professor Baldwin is able to tentatively conclude that Otis's "heavily corrupted text" (68) is a Yoruba-based praise song, otherwise known as *oriki orile* (lineage panegyric chant). Despite using the latest trends in error analysis and transformational grammar, Baldwin fails to bring the script to good semantic health. As usual with scholars, he refers Mr. Hampton to a more informed and experienced hand in the profession, a certain professor Bolaji Alabi, a homegrown indigene, who is on a post-doctoral fellowship programme at Northwestern University, specialising in African Studies. Professor Alabi, however, finally resolves the conundrum and in a lengthy but highly exegetical letter, explains to Mr. Hampton the problem with Otis: his garbled chant "originated from somewhere possibly among the Ekiti, an ethnic subgroup in north-eastern Yoruba land" (72).

Consequently, Otis, his father and the psychiatrist, Dr. Fishbein, travel to Nigeria in order to solve Otis's problem. Members of staff of the U.S. Embassy in Lagos accompany the threesome to Akure where they are joined by two American Peace Corps volunteers and a Yoruba drummer before heading for Ikere-Ekiti in search of the Hampton family ancestral origins. As soon as the party gets to Akure, Otis's instincts come strangely alive. Thereafter, Otis guides the rest of the group to the very spot in a thick forest at Ijoko-Odo, near Ikere Ekiti where three generations earlier, his forebear, Akinbowale, alongside his two younger twin sisters, Taiwo and Kehinde, were finalising the burial rites of their late father, Akindiji, a hunter and warrior and also the *Baale* of the village, before

Akimbowale was set upon by slave raiders and taken away as a captive to the United States. With the help of a herbalist named Akinwunmi who is an indigene of Ijoko-Odo, the search party is able to trace Otis's ancestral homestead in the village and, curiously enough, the old twin sisters still alive. Otis is persuaded to remain in Ijoko-Odo for about two years during which, in spite of the resurgence of old antagonisms towards his family, he learns the Yoruba language and culture and joins in completing the rites his ancestor Akinbowale was performing when he was captured by slavers. Armed with a recovered identity and a chastened wisdom in African culture, Otis (Akinbowale) Hampton finally returns of the U.S. to play his part in the burgeoning and fiery civil rights struggle of the 1960s.

Human speech or language is one of the characteristics which set *homo sapiens* apart from other primates and, indeed, the rest of the animal world. There are various and, sometimes, mutually exclusivist and contradictory theories spawned by language experts, philologists and linguists the world over trying to explain the phenomenon of the origins of language, its modalities of acquisition, the various phases and stages/levels of competence and performance as well as the various factors accounting for language spread, its duration through time and its diasporicity. Isidore Okpewho appears to have all of this in mind when he was writing his novel, *Call Me By My Rightful Name*. This impression is informed by the fact that the novel's narrative development, it would seem, turns largely upon the subject of the intriguing complexity of the psychodynamics of language. There is need, at this juncture, to stress that language should in this context be construed to embrace the symbolic and cognitive spheres of awareness. To that extent, we look at the various implications and ramifications for acquiring a particular human language: its ramifications in terms of social conduct and morality; we shall also consider language as culttre vector or repository and, more importanthy, t`e relations`ip between the language we speak and oub personal sense of selfhood and Identity, and how other Para ver"al, supra-linguistic co`es ultimately bound up with oral speech to make up the overall communicative channels of human experience. The point, i4

seems, Okpewho is making with his work is that there is more to language use as a eedium of expression afd verbal exchanee than most people realise. Bound up with language are a variety of social issues ranging from historical experience, cultural production, race relations, a clash of discourses, and, ultimately, questions of power and individual/collective identity. Let us take a closer look at Otis Hampton, the twenty-one-year-old basketball player and undergraduate at Boston University. He is the model American youth: he is blessed with a great physical build; a hulk of a man, an only son of a middle-class black family, treasured and pampered by his doting parents, academically promising – and, more significant in the social context of American society addicted as it is to basketball, Otis is the fulcrum of his team. He is nicknamed "Tiger" by his team mates on account of his daring athleticism. On the face of it, Otis cannot ask for more from his creator, since he has the world at his feet. On the issue of language, Otis is quite fluent in his "chatty dialect of American basketball" (see Niyi Osundare on the novel's Blurb). In other words, Otis can and does speak the English language, the global language of power and influence, native to Britain and transported to and domesticated and appropriated by America. Besides, the British had gone ahead to conquer large swathes of the world, thereby planting her culture on all the continents. The British culture has survived the vicissitudes and ravages of time and history to the contemporary times. British cultural imperialism embodied in and transmitted through language, that is, English, still waxes strong to this day, facilitated as it is by such media as religion (Christianity) music, sports, western education, political domination, international trade and commerce, among others.

Among all the stated media of western cultural hegemony, the one that concerns us most is the seeming collective self-betrayal and self-immolation committed by our writers in their continued adoption of the languages of dispossession, namely, French, Portuguese and, in this instance, English. It is common knowledge that, to be able to speak a language you must *think* in that language. The arbitrary nexus between sound-image (or its written substitute) and concept, or,

to use Saussure's terminology, *signifier* and *signified* is negotiated by language. That is to say, the world "out there" can only be perceived or *cognise* through language. The implication, therefore, is that we all may see an object but *perceived* it differently (the popular story of the elephant and the blind men exemplifies our point). So, our perception of the world around us is mediated through the language we think in and speak. And when we give up our own indigenous languages to adopt a foreign one as our medium of expression as well as our link to the object world, a major epistemological crisis is let loose and we suffer the fate of the Half-child.[2] The reason for this is that one's mother tongue like an umbilical cord ties one to and unites one with one's roots, and, the essentially accretive and agglutinative nature of language facilitates its recording and processing of the existential dimensions of experience. Thus, a people's customs, mores, social conventions, rites, taboos, belief-systems and metaphysic are embedded in their language. Thus, one's identity and, indeed, one's ontology is principally rooted in one's language.

But for the protagonist of Isidore Okpewho's novel, the issue of identity is highly problematic. It is enough that Otis is a legitimate citizen of America by virtue of the fact that he was born and bred in the United States by equally freeborn American parents. It is equally instructive to note that as part of the novelist's ironic project, the Hamptons are portrayed as comfortable, well-to-do, well-liked, highly enlightened and upwardly mobile. By American standards, the Hampton family is a great paragon of success. However, American society, multiracial, multi-religious and multicultural as it is, is a maelstrom of a kind, a melting-pot in which one's ancestral origins continue to inform one's present, thus promoting advancement or impeding it. It is in this light that the collective fate of all African-Americans in the so-called New World has to be interrogated. The novelist, Isidore Okpewho, provides in his novel this all-important dimension by recounting the bitter experience of slavery as had by Otis's forebears: Otis Jeremiah and Ella Pearl are the two children of Miz Odetta, their mother and Daley Hampton, their father. Daley Hampton is described as

a man of few words who must "cultivated silence as a discreet strategy of self-preservation" at a time when "slavery was a fact of life if not exactly law" (18). The son of an ex-slave, Daley Hampton, upon enquiry about his own father, has this to say: "Good man. Stubborn African Didn't let no man give him no horse shit" (18). For her own part, Otis's mother, Melba Abigail Warfield, had a traumatic upbringing, her parents, Abel and Olive Warfield, having passed away in unhappy circumstances. However, both Melba and Otis Jeremiah "succeed" in putting their ugly past firmly behind them through education and its consequent enhanced social status. And Otis, their only child is the beneficiary of their achievement.

As part of the continuing crisis of a devastating history, the American society of the 1960s witnesses race riots, civil rights struggle, black activism under varied guises, all of them as part of the black revolutionary consciousness. Totemic and iconic personages and figures such as Elijah Muhammad, Malcom X and Martin Luther-King Jr. are portrayed in the novel as the major shapers of public opinion, and it is around these figures that the various factions of the black movements revolve. Against this backcloth, therefore, Africa is made to acquire the therapeutic and recuperative functions of a homeland, however distant or/and imaginary. By the same token, Otis's girlfriend, Norma, consciously tries to reconnect with her roots through the process of academic research. It is also noteworthy that she is studying sociology (that is, the science of society and social behaviour and institutions) and, that she elects to carry out a major research on Maroon culture, otherwise known as the Kramanti subgroup in Jamaica. And, according to Mr. Barrett, "a son of the soil", the Kramanti trace their origin to Ghana. Thus, Norma is able to use her scholarship as a much-needed watering-hole to sustain her sense of cultural and racial identity as well as stay sane and relevant in a xenophobic, racist white world. Also, as part of the African renaissance, scholars like Professor Baldwin and other English anthropologists do extensive fieldwork on African languages and cultures, Bolaji Alabi, a Yoruba-born Nigerian scholar in the novel also teaches African studies to Americans and more promising, we are told of

American school children on a study trip to Nigeria supervised by a Yoruba man.

Yet in our post-Cold War, unipolar world order in which the United States is the main dominant superpower, the issue of the staking-out of one's ontologic space as well as the definition of the self has necessarily assumed greater importance. And in the global commerce of discourses, the symbolism of colours has also acquired agonistic colouration, thus eroding old certitudes, exploding orthodoxies and routing complacencies. Wealth, educational credentials, social connections and status are a little more than sand-barriers against the tidal waves of rampaging xenophobia and the threat of loss of metaphysical wholeness and the crises of exile. And, when a people come to a desperate pass as the grim scenario described above, the need for sacrifice arises: like the Pascal lamb or the red heifer of the Old Testament or Jesus Christ of the New Testament or, to cite a few examples from classical literature: a Sisyphus or Prometheus or, to cite a more familiar example from our own African metaphysical experience, the Yoruba *adimu* (that is, carrier in Eyo purification rite). However, in *Call Me By My Rightful Name*, Otis Hampton, the only member of the third generation in the Hampton family is the chosen Christ-figure to right the wrongs of the past. And he queries the logic of it all:

> Why me? And why Africa? He had nothing against Africa. In fact, if there was anything his recent brushes with things and persons African had done to Otis, it was to make him increasingly aware of the current nationalist mantra: Africa as the proud homeland of all black people. But why should he be made to champion the cause of the race with neuroses no one seemed so far to have an answer for? Why not one of those activists who spoke on television and continually got into trouble wiph the police and their dogs? (57).

In the darkness of Otis's doubts, not even his adoring parents can shed some light mn the rnot-cause of his dilemma as they themselves fear the worst for their only child. However, Ella Pearl, an unmarried devout Christian-activist and community leader who flies into town brom Augusta, seems to have an idea of the reason why Otis is tha chosen one:

> Now don't ask me why your son was chosef to bear the burddn of our familq. That's just the way it is. There's no point in fighting the voice of our ancestors manifesting in our family at this point in our history. If your son has been chosen by the spirits to go to Africa and lay down whatever burden our folks brought across the sea, I know, I *know* the same spirits will take care of him (91).

Otis's predicament is described as "a peculiar case of racial memory … (which is) manifesting as family trauma three generations old …" (96). And his private cross symbolically intersects with public fate, coming as it does at a time in black history when the entire race in the American community seems suspended on the skewer of white racism.

Africa, "the proud homeland of all black people" does not seem to come through as one seamless picture of an Arcadian Idyll. But rather we have contradictory images of the black continent: for the likes of Ella Pearl and other Afrocentric human or civil rights activists, Africa is a "proud homeland"; yet, there seems to be some disagreeable tinge to Pearl's image of Africa as can be inferred from the above-cited excerpt. She speaks of going back to Africa to lay down some burden, possibly false and inhibiting, on the continent as though Africa is some kind of Evil Forest into which the tribe's detritus is cast.

There is an intensification of this negative image of Africa in Otis's mother, Melba Hampton who, the novel informs

us, worries herself sick about "the horrors that American cinema has inscribed in everyone's mind" (73). We shall return to this matter in the latter part of this study. The increasingly charged climate of political activity among blacks lends Otis's mission to Africa a messianic gravity as it gets increasingly clear that the problematic present is being experienced as the unresolved sequel of a desperately tragic past, "a past that would not go away" (60). It should, however, be borne in mind that in the narrative universe of the novel, language constitutes *the* site of conflict and without its proper resolution, everything will flounder into historical epistemic limbo. Hence Dr. Fishbein, the psychiatrist tells Mr. Hampton that, "There's nothing anyone can do unless we deal with the language problem. Everything hangs on it" (47). And it is enough that Professor Bolaji Alabi, a Yoruba man himself, interprets Otis's praise song and thus establishes beyond reasonable doubt Otis's Yoruba origins. We are given to believe that Otis's journey of return across the sea to Africa is a *sine qua non* for his complete rehabilitation and that of his race, by implication. The question is, why is it supremely necessary for Otis to *learn* Yoruba on its home soil? And, why is the acquisition of the language the panacea for his trauma? In order to authoritatively answer these questions, Isidore Okpewho ingeniously introduces into the novel's hermeneutic project a key figure in Yoruba society: the *babalawo*. According to Niyi Osundare, "It has to be admitted that even under normal, neutral, circumstances, words like '*babalawo*' do not surrender to easy rendering across languages. A highly multifaceted, multi-functional figure, the *babalawo* is a doctor, physician, psychotherapist, occultist, priest, diviner, griot, historian, bard, community leader, etc" (6). Thus, Akinwunmi, the school teacher turned-herbalist in *Call Me By My Rightful Name* comes across as social and cultural agent; an interpreter and mediator, he occupies a decisive position in the discursive space of the narrative. His pre-eminence, therefore, as the organic bearer of the collective memory more than qualifies him as the voice of the race. A muse of memory that he is, Akinwunmi bears witness to the movement of history as he provides hortatory vistas of the past and equally furnishes guiding insight into the future.

Consequently, Otis is made to learn Yoruba under Akinwunmi's tutelage. And, shortly afterwards, Otis remarks: 'Language is a strange thing. I haven't been here very long, but I'm beginning to understand 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 (157). Gradually, Otis is exposed to the niceties of tone and glide and the nuances of signification in the Yoruba language. He is able to learn that 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 … (167). With time, Otis learns to speak Yoruba fluently and comes to realise that the total semiotic universe of the Yoruba culture offers points of orientations and provides a global system of reference (Irele, 2001, 102). Armed, thus, with his ancestral tongue, Otis undergoes both psychological and mental transformation. A new attitude of healthy scepticism enters him. He vouchsafes: 'And I'm beginning to ask many questions: why this is that, and what's the relation between this and that' (168). It is equally important to know, or rather stress the point that, Yoruba is a syllable-timed language, "operating through a complex system of tones and glides. In this language, prosody mellows into melody. Sounding is meaning, meaning is sounding. The music which emanates from the soul of words is an inalienable part of the beauty of the tongue. Tone is the power point, the enabling element in a Yoruba communicative event" (Osundare 8). Being a tonal language, Yoruba also makes use of a lot of ideophones and onomatopoeia in its significatory system. These sound images "transmit their meanings by evoking the drama of the referential process"; (9) facilitated by the indirectness and the suggestiveness of the communicative process (9-10). Thus, in Yoruba communicative event, sounds matter. This point brings into focus the role of African drum music in the thematic scheme of *Call Me By My Rightful Name*.

The African "talking" drum is sometimes referred to as "surrogate speech" in that the drummer in working the face of the drum, endeavours to coax sounds which tend to mimic human language. Extensive fieldwork has been done on this, that

we need not go into detail here.[3] But suffice it to say, the African drum is more than just an instrument of music to the African: it is the icon of his culture. Depending on how it is played, its oral-aural bang resonates "back to primordial times with (its) pagan winds and feathered legends" (Osundare 16); the African drum speaks the people's language, its "redolent tonalities" bespeaking either war, hunting, farming, harvesting, initiation rites, death/passage, birth, festival or natural disaster, among other things. Little wonder, then, Gabriel Okara in his poem "Piano and Drum", intones:

> When at break of day at a riverside
> I hear jungle drums telegraphing
> The mystic rhythm, urgent, raw
> Like bleeding flesh, speaking of
> Primal youth and the beginning … (Nwoga, 1967, 36)

This African drum music is part and parcel of the total semiotic universe of the Yoruba of which we spoke earlier on. It is in this connection that the role assigned to the African-American Peace Corps Volunteer, Chip of providing detailed "expert" background information on the nature and function of African music makes good sense. And, for good measure, Olu, the Yoruba drummer, is made to furnish samples of the peculiar texture of drum sound (211). It is after what seems a complete immersion in Yoruba culture and metaphysics that Otis, the returnee "Native Son", is able to make sense of the full ramifications of his predicament. In one of his letters to his girlfriend, Norma, Otis comments.

> In other words, since Africans moved from here to America, taking their drums along with them, some of these peculiar codes have a chance of cropping up whenever drums are played. If I am a reincarnation of my enslaved ancestor, as everyone seems convinced I am, I can see why some drum sounds, buried deep in memory since the traumatic movement of his capture, might

> excite certain sensations in me every time I heard drums play. And it may make no difference whether the music is from the U.S. or the Caribbean… it's clear that the sound of drum music provoking those sensations in me must be some spirit reminding me it's time for me to go and finish the job left undone when my ancestor was captured by slavers and taken to America (212).

The trauma provoked by the dislocation of the system of symbolic references that sustained and gave meaning to collective life (Irele 108) is summed up in this counsel by Akinwunmi to Otis: "You have to be initiated into the cult of strong men… 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' (197). In other words, the violent severance of the umbilical cord (that is, Yoruba) which connected Akinbowale, Oti's enslaved ancestor, to his indigenous African culture and the consequent rupturing of his hitherto secure world by a conquering external force (English, in this regard) have to be remedied and put right through ritual means. And a mere facility for language use is grossly inadequate under the circumstances. Therefore, to overcome his predicament, to paraphrase Abiola Irele again, requires an effort of reconfiguration of the world, "an effort to establish a new congruence between the structure of words and the universe of experience" (109). It can easily be inferred from the foregoing that our understanding of language transcends the narrow-minded, rigidified conception of it as tool for verbal communication to embrace a more totalist apprehension of the full complement of the various channels and modes of exchange, verbal and otherwise. As tradition therefore demands, Otis undergoes initiation rites successfully and later completes the ritual funeral ceremonies begun by Akinbowale and his (then) young twin sisters. This time around, Otis (who is also given the

name of his enslaved ancestor, Akinbowale) *and* his centenarian sisters, *iya wa meji* (Taiwo and Kehinde) perform the *oriki orile* (praise chant of their father, Akindiji) before the entire community amid pomp and ceremony. A few days after the all-important ritual ceremony, the aged "weird sisters" – Earth mothers, that they are – pass on. The soul of Akindiji is no longer floundering in the void of strangers, but is finally at peace. Otis himself is whole again. But he is no longer who he was: a basketball player and fun-loving college student. He is now a Yorubanised American: in his soul African animist consciousness confronts western Cartesianism.

This brings us to the vexed question of identity for the average westernised black person, and, more so for a "rehabilitated" African-American beset with conflicting allegiances and loyalties. In the modern context, or, better still, in the post-modern condition, it is fashionable in supposedly intellectual circles, to assume that the concept of self is under relentless epistemological onslaught. We are told that we can only meaningfully talk of "selves", and not "self". By the same token, we can also talk of "identities" and not "identity". The reason usually adduced for this befuddling scenario is that the human person is a combination of both the sponge and the magpie-*sponge* in the sense that his mind is highly absorbent, thus expropriating disparate ideas and beliefs; and *magpie* because the ugly bird as the folk tale goes, once borrowed bright and beautiful feathers from her more favoured counterparts for a beauty contest. So, the argument is that modern man has nourished a penchant for both sartorial and more importantly, spiritual impersonation which, ultimately, result in some form of mongrelism.[4] The contested nature of identity (self-as-other paradox) has for some time now constituted a veritable quarry for academic enquiries across disciplines. Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* is a classic example. But Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* is more suited to our purpose. Isidore Okpewho seems to have suggestively highlighted the epistemological crisis rocking the contemporary world vis-à-vis the political economy of power between the Northern and the Southern Hemisphere as can be gleaned from the novel's

frontispiece: cast in silhouette is the denuded image of a young man of the negroid race, chained neck and hand and foot, looking a picture of stoicism in his apparently enslaved condition. The vague outline of the slave image tends to suggest a distant past which nevertheless still lingers to the present time. But superimposed on the black slave is a more vividly realised, modern-looking Yoruba divination tray. The question is, what is the relationship between the African past of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and Yoruba Ifa divination? Looking at the novel's cover, the connection is not immediately apparent until one reads through the novel to discover that the slave's past is based on Yoruba religion and metaphysic as enunciated and codified in the Ifa corpus, a definitive and foundational bedrock of the Yoruba which Okpewho goes to great lengths to explore for the reader's benefit. In spite of the loss of his metaphysical moorings and his insupportable trails in the land of his captors, the slave's spiritual patrimony stored in the memory is transmitted from generation to generation. What does this tenacity of memory tell us about Ifa itself?

Obviously, Isidore Okpewho has done his research on Ifa very well as can be seen from the way he has written authoritatively about Ifa. Scholars have done extensive work on Ifa for several decades and research is still ongoing on it.[5] In his novel, Okpewho refers to Ifa as the Yoruba Bible. He then goes on to describe its features:

> It's made up of a central body of 256 texts (called *Odu*), and even these consist of subdivisions that expand on the ideas contained in the central texts (181).

The novelist then explains the role of the *babalawo* in all of this: 'This is essentially what the babalawo is supposed to do – solve the problems that trouble people' (181). Thus, we get to understand that the main focus of training to be a *babalawo* is the so-called "Yoruba Bible"; the body of Yoruba traditional knowledge known as Ifa. Ifa provides full proof explanation for the whole gamut of human experience, be it marital problem,

health issues, money-making project, issues of proper conduct, the relationship between man and his creator, myths of origin, race relations, the hereafter, destiny and human fate, among others. It is indeed instructive that Okpewho likens Ifa to the Christian Holy Writ, the Bible – the basis of Western morality and epistemology. But, more interestingly, what seems to be at issue in the novel's underlying thematic scheme is some kind of metaphysico-epistemological contestation between two apparently "warring" worldviews: traditional Yoruba (African) animism and western Judaeo-Christian Cartesian rationalism or the fiercely empiricist materialist scientism.[6] The obvious arena of confrontation in the novel is the charged capsule of a human mind: the mind and soul of Otis, a young man who all his life has only been exposed to western cultural practices and outlook on life. It is important to remind ourselves that his enslaved ancestor of whom he (Otis) is the reincarnation was captured and brought to the U.S. at the age of twenty-one. Otis himself begins to respond to the drum music of his family's violated past at the age of twenty-one. And in spite of the passage of time and, more interestingly, the fact that Otis is not the immediate progeny, but the third on the line, an old scar on his head identifies him as *the* past made present, "a lost progeny" (129), a "native son" (197) come back to his roots.

Indeed, it is worthy of note that at the height of Otis's paroxysm, the only sensible path to recovery and healing open to his distraught parents is psychiatric treatment. To say that Dr. Fishbein is completely overwhelmed and as clueless as the patient is, is to put it mildly. Hence in a moment of disarming candour, Fishbein reveals. 'I think the solution to your son's problem does not lie in this country' (73). This is a profound statement: on the face of it, the impression we have is that the psychiatrist is simply owning up to his professional limitations. And, perhaps, the few options opened to the American society. However, when we consider more closely the deeper implications of Dr. Fishbein's statement against the backdrop of the much-vaunted American power and influence in the area of science and technology, we begin to come to terms with the pathetically grave inadequacies and intellectual lacunae in

western claims to the knowledge of human sciences and allied areas of intellectual enquiry. Ordinarily, one would have thought that problems of ill-health which have defied cure in other places, especially the "Dark Continent" would summarily be tackled in the U.S. medical establishment, considering the awesome wealth at its disposal and the enormous resources expended on research in the various medical research institutes and specialist hospitals. Otis's situation presents a fissure in the armour of America's unchallenged monologue of power and domination, thus betraying the incomplete nature of all knowledge and the open-endedness of human becoming. Clearly, while Otis is the Effect, his ancestral verses of Ifa, is the Cause. Oblivious of the fact that his life is nothing but a reaction to an external superior influence; that he is a mere puppet in the hands of the African gods (who will not kill him for their sport, though) Otis "sleep walks" through life, blissfully ignorant of the contingencies of his existential odyssey. It is, if anything, instructive that Okpewho punctuates the fabric of his story with Ifa verses which blend and modulate felicitously with the story's main plot, thereby functioning more or less as metacritical subtext to the novel. Knowing the devious yet overarching influence of preternatural forces at work 'behind the scenes' as it were, the reader cannot help but be amused and infuriated at the same time by Dr. Fishbein's blind efforts at plumbing the depths of Otis's crisis. By attempting to confront metaphysical imponderables with verbal tricks of "talking cure", amounts ultimately to papering over the cracks. However credit should still be given to Fishbein – and the American intellectual and epistemological tradition which he represents – for using the conventional procedures of scientific research to trace the spoor of Otis's problem. In a sense, science recognises its own epistemological poverty and consequently acknowledges a higher authority on extrasensory, possibly metaphysical issues. Arguably Otis's crisis goes beyond Freudian theories of the unconscious which are based on sexuality, and also goes beyond Carl Jung's personal or collective unconscious which to all intents and purposes, is an idiosyncratic critique of Freudianism. Although Otis's crisis may be seen from the Jungian prism as "a

peculiar case of racial memory" (98), but the baffling complexities of the Otis phenomenon invite a plurality of interpretations. Apart from the indubitable question of reincarnation, notions of Fate, predestination, collective destiny, historical issues of crime and restitution, reparation and recompense, and much more are at the root of Otis's dilemma. It at once embraces the issues of the geography of history and the economics of power in the unequal dialogue between the West and the rest of the world, especially the African world. To that extent, therefore, Isidore Okpewho is using Otis as a versatile metaphor for a wide range of issues concerning the Blackman's Dilemma in the West and Western hegemonic agenda.

Again, Isidore Okpewho invites us to re-examine the claims of the Christian Bible concerning the question of reincarnation. According to the book of Hebrew Chapter 9 verse 27: "for as it is appointed unto man to die once, then after this the judgement". Clearly, *Call Me By My Rightful Name* explores the themes of reincarnation from the traditional African metaphysical perspective. African folk-wisdom or /and ethno-philosophy affirms the belief in reincarnation. Giving a Fillip to this belief, Okpewho in his novel narrates a very moving, tear-jerking episode in which the aged twins subject Otis to a thorough physical examination in order to confirm their belief that the young African-American is indeed their captured elder brother, sold into slavery three generations ago:

> Running her fingers through the hair just above it, she finds a tender spot indicating another scar. Between them, the sisters recall that when the enslavers tried to catch their brother, he put up an enormous struggle, felling two of them with blows; he was subdued only after one of the white men whacked his head with a gun (128).

Truth be told, many people have been born with startling and curious birthmarks to which their Christianised and "enlightened" parents do not give much thought; since to investigate those birthmarks might knock the bottom off their

religious convictions and their sense of security would go up in smoke. In such circumstances, ignorance is preferred to knowledge. Okpewho, in this regard, will have none of it, instead, as demonstrated in his novel, he goes the whole hog unravelling the Ariadne thread of the labyrinth called reincarnation. If we thus take the Biblical standpoint as representative of western epistemological paradigm, then Okpewho has in effect set up his novel with all its implied afrocentrism as a counterdiscourse of decolonisation: in doing this, he seizes upon the master trope of the "middle passage" and uses it as a symbol of emacipation, a more ambitious and far-reaching effort than Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage.*[7] In this regard, Otis's return to Africa is both physical and symbolic, personal and collective: He is Alex Haley's Kunta Kinte come back to his *roots*, in spite of the charge of whimsicality this move might give rise to. All through the novel, Okpewho makes no bones to conceal his project of clash of discourses between the West and his own African continent. And, consistently, he tends to suggest the superiority of African autochthonous ideas to the doctrinaire, superannuated shibboleths and platitudes of the western world. Viewed in the light of the civil rights crusades of the 1960s, Okpewho's afro-optimism is deeply salutary. Otis as the *present* presents himself on behalf of his race as a living sacrifice to expiate, propitiate and remedy the tragically violated past. His remedial rites for self and race partly fulfils the necessary demands of reparation, restitution, recompense and reconciliation. Thus, the burden of history is sloughed off by the muse of memory. Ayi Kwei Armah has once counselled: "There is no need to forget the past. But of each piece of the past that we find in our present, it may be necessary to ask: will it bear me like a stepping stone, or will I have to bear it, a weight around my neck".[8]

Call Me By My Rightful Name demonstrates the recuperative potential of atavism in the sense that, for most blacks in the U.S., the African past with its "long night of savagery" and evil is an albatross which continues to strangulate their collective self-presence and self-plenum. Little wonder, then, that Otis, after performing the all-important funeral rites

with *Iya wa Meji* realises that, "it's quite easy in America to go sleep walking through life and not knowing what you've doing. There's always somebody telling you who you are and where you're supposed to be or go" (212). Even before Otis arrives at this "station of the cross", the crucial *anagnorisis,* his mother, Melba Hampton has given voice to the systematic programme of western denigration of peoples of colour and the demonisation of the African homeland as "Heart of Darkness" *ala* Joseph Conrad. Melba expresses pique over "the horrors that American cinema has inscribed in everyone's mind (73), shortly before Otis is flown to Nigeria to search of his ancestral roots. Edward Said in his book *Culture and Imperialism* has also remarked on the negative role of western media vis-à-vis the image of Third World countries in the eyes of the international community.

Interestingly, Isidore Okpewho appears to have all of this at the back of his mind when he was writing his novel. Adopting the Empire-writes-back-to-the Centre strategy, Okpewho carefully undercuts the very bastion of western cultural and social being namely, Christianity, Science and Technology, Philosophical orientation, among others. He counters these with Yoruba metaphysical practices as codified in Ifa: which he likens in the novel to the Christian Bible, except that he deliberately gives the upper hand to Ifa: "Everything we do has a method to it, said Awo, perfected by people who have done it before" (188). However, it ought to be borne in mind that "the Yoruba have always conceived of their history as Diaspora. The concept and reality of Diaspora, viewed and perceived in certain cultures (Greek, Jewish) as either necessity or lamented accident is rationalised in Yorubaland as the normal or natural order of things historical" (Yai, 1993, 30).

The reason for this perception of "history as Diaspora" among the Yoruba is not far to seek. Again, Yai tells us that:

Ifa has long ago divided the globe into five regions namely:

a. Ìko Àwúsí (The Americans)
b. Ìdòròmu Àwúsè (Africa)
c. Meréètélú (Europe and Asia)

d. Mesin Àkáárúbà (Araba, the land of the worship of Kaaba) and
e. Iwónran níbi ojúmotíí móó wá (which refers to Australasia)

As far as the Yoruba are concerned, all the above-mentioned parts of the world are all lands of *Ifa*. Thus, when an Ifa priest wakes up in the morning he will salute *Ifa* in all these divisions of the earth (Abimbola, "Contribution" 80, qtd. in Yai, 30-31). Another important aspect of Yoruba social life which Okpewho ingeniously weaves into the tapestry of his narrative is the Oriki.[9] To be sure, *Call Me By My Rightful Name* revolves around the ramrod of an *oriki*. (Cf: *Praise Song For The Widow* by Paule Marshall). According to Karin Barber, "*Oriki* are a genre of Yoruba oral poetry that could be described as attributions or appellations: Collections of epithets, pithy or elaborated, which we addressed to a subject" (1). Throwing more light on this very popular poetic sub-genre among the Yoruba, Barber continues, "the decoding of *oriki* – as of other Yoruba oral texts – relies on etymology, aetiology, personal memory, and something like riddling" (4). Barber then goes on to provide a perceptive analysis of the various functions of oriki:

> *Oriki* commemorate personalities, events and actions that people consider important. They provide a way of thinking about social relationships within and between families, and a way of promoting and expressing the rivalry of ambitious individuals. They are the living link through which relationships with the *orisas*, the 'gods', are conducted. And it is in *oriki* that the past is encapsulated and brought into the present, where it exercises a continual pull. *Oriki,* then, are one of the principal discursive mediums through which people apprehend history, society, and the spiritual world (4).

Need we say more? We can see that Otis's jigaboo or gyrations and garbled chants are, in essence, a performer's drama of self-retrieval and spiritual homecoming. In this subliminal theatre of the inner landscapes, the mysteries of genetic coding or heredity swamp the factitious claims of environmental conditioning.

In the language of the Bible, our fathers had eaten wild grapes, and our teeth are set on edge. Ifa, the superintending Intelligence sees to it, Otis like an arrow shot, must home in on the very spot where his forebear was captured. Ifa also furnishes the blueprint for Otis's "reconstituted destiny" (229), just as the gods see to it that the aged twins are "kept alive well beyond the natural course of things" (244). In a sense similar to Walt Whitman's "A Song of Myself", Otis enthuses that, in line with Ifa philosophy on the creative union between the gods and man, he is embarking on the "re-creation of myself" (212). This psychic retooling of Otis is a result of a most viscerally transformative spirituo-cultural re-education conducted in the very hinterland of his ancestral patrimony. And it is all thanks to a miraculous resurgence of "buried sensations", or read correctly, ancestral cultural memory retrieved from his personal unconscious in the form of the oral traditional art of laudatory apostrophising: that is, the Yoruba popular praise poetry, the *oriki*. The mysterious manifestation of this genre of oral art which functions as the propulsive linchpin of the thematic development of *Call Me By My Rightful Name* will definitely afford scores of scholars in the humanities and beyond a cornucopia of exciting research interests. What clearly bears reiterating is the heuristic as well as the hermeneutic imperatives of the *oriki* in the conceptual context of the narrative. It is not for nothing that Isidore Okpewho does not anchor the redemptive idea on the fads and fashion of African-Americans, nor does he signify emacipatory potentiality in the black man's obsessive interest in Africanisms in the mundane or material terms, and, more significantly, he does not seem to completely rely on activism of the sloganeering type with all the egregious small-minded self-exhibitionism of few norm entrepreneurs and "leaders of thought". The black man's salvation does not inhabit

the evanescent heroics of the soapbox or even the freedom fighter's ringing denunciatory polemics. For Okpewho, the oral scholar, the black man in Diaspora, perhaps needs to take a hard introspective look into his own troubled soul, and the journey towards disalienation and spiritual wholeness might begin there: in other words, African-Americans must be prepared to stare in the face the horrendous indignities of the past and allow their questing minds confront, to cite Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, "the horror, the horror" of man's darkest and vilest action: the Chattelisation of man. For Otis, the clue to his personal as well as the racial trauma is right in the inner sanctum of his unsuspecting soul expressed in the form of oral lore. This amply exemplifies the role of storytelling as dramatised by the old man in Achebe's political fable *Anthills of the Savannah*:

> So why do I say that the story is chief among his fellows? The same reason I think our people sometimes will give the name Nkolika to their daughters – Recalling-Is-Greatest. Why? Because it is only the story can continue beyond the war and the warrior. It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story, not the others, that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spike of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind (114).

Achebe uses a telling metaphor to describe a people bereft of the gift of storytelling or those who lack the memorial temper, to access the emacipatory potential of the historical past. He uses the phrase "blind beggars" to designate this unfortunate group of people, a designation that appears conterminously with Otis's characterisation of his fellow African-Americans as "sleepwalking through life and not know what you're doing" (22).

In other words, most African-Americans in the novel can be said to be "blind beggars", unaware of their proud ancestry

(which should encourage in them fierce racial pride and self dignity) and as such live on the scrounge. Okpewho seems to be interested in portraying the various layers of contradiction between the *latent* existential actualities of African-Americans and their *manifest* (we might add, meretricious) social existence. To this extent, the black community in the New World is by implication portrayed as "sheepish", as a people seemingly sworn to willed amnesia of a kind, owing to the unsettling consequences of deliberate recall of an ugly past which still appears to hold the present hostage. But, as T. S. Eliot argues in "Tradition and the Individual Talent", the past is *all* that we know. It is thus foolish and, indeed, foolhardy, to seek to consign the past to the River Lethe. Perhaps the point Isidore Okpewho seems to be making in *Call Me By My Rightful Name* is that African-Americans must avoid the mistake of jettisoning or forgetting their African past in hopes of losing the indignities of that past in the much more comfortable present social environment to which they have habituated themselves. There is a subtle pillorying of the recrudescence of the American Dream leitmotif manifested as it is through social doctrines of "achievement", social visibility, accumulation of wealth and crass materialism without a corresponding spiritual or metaphysical wholeness in a society wracked and rendered fractious by pathologies of racism and kindred schisms. Otis's traumatic experience is auto-suggestive of this unwholesome scenario.

As earlier noted, Otis is a model of success in the light of the basic assumptions of the American Dream. But his chanting spells effectively shatter that illusion, thus transforming the hitherto salubrious Dream into a nightmare. However, the commonality of this "American Nightmare" is a major shaping force in African-American cultural production: music, film, literature and so forth. The same argument can be made for black experience in the Caribbean and the western world generally. Many scholars through the years had written about the continuing predicament of being black in white world, scholars like W. E. B. Dubios, Marcus Garvey, C. L. R. James (*The Black Jacobins),* Paul Gilroy (*The Black Atlantic*), Henry Louis Gates

Jr., among others. Moreover, creative writers and artists continue to examine and investigate the nexus between the past and the present as part of the struggle for acculturation and integration into the mainstream American Society.

Perhaps what distinguishes Isidore Okpewho's effort at interrogating the same black diasporic experience is the uniqueness of his choice of discursive procedure as well as his idiosyncratic manipulation of the oral and the written modes of artistic refraction. Okpewho for the first time in his career as a novelist avails himself the aesthetic and, more importantly, the epistemological paradigms of oral tradition to give chirographic currency to his thematic preoccupations in *Call Me By My Rightful Name*. Thus, the scribal solidity afforded the amorphous and fluid "return of the repressed" (that is, Otio's praise chant) exemplifies in the main Walter J. Ong's thesis in *Orality and Literacy: Technologizing the Word.*[10] However, beyond the deployment of the conditions of orality in the novel, we realise that the use of ancestral memory by Okpewho as source of contemporary fortunes has implications for morality, social behaviour and, more directly, for identity. Derek Walcott writes in one of his poems: "You want to hear my history? Ask the sea" (Walcott, 1992, 282). The Atlantic has proved a veritable grave yard for black people sold into slavery. Apart from many of the slaves drowned in the seas, others who died aboard the slave ships were offloaded into the Atlantic Ocean, their hopes and dreams and their talents perishing forever. Also, the sea as trope is both literally and figuratively the medium of historical discontinuity and psycho-cultural truncation of the lives of black peoples in Diaspora. Thus, the sea, in some senses, especially Biblical and traditional African, symbolic of humanity, in the context of the African-American/Caribbean experience, evokes profound disquiet, ontologic unease and pain in the hearts and minds of peoples of colour in the Americas. The sea continues to serve as an effective barrier between them and their ancestral origins. Although they can fly over the sundering sea by air travel to return to the African homeland, but that exercise will amount ultimately to a little more than a touristic gambolling,

due mainly to the fact that time has obliterated all the signposts of ethnic or tribal identification.

In *Call Me By My Rightful Name*, Isidore Okpewho boldly confronts this disenfranchising nature of time, not by denying time its due but by bearing witness to the unkillable clarion of memory's gong, the ramifications of the psychodynamics of memory as dramatised in Okpewho's novel are beyond the limited scope of this paper. This novel's thematic amplitude is quite multidisciplinary in its claims so much so that the narrative technique of the present tense form adopted by the writer in large measure furnishes a number of interpretive perspectives for the novel: firstly, it affords the novel a vital sense of historical immediacy, which in turn fosters an atmospheric of narrativity as living drama. Secondly, Okpewho tries to achieve verisimilitude in his quasi-cinematic mirroring of social life, and, more significantly, to highlight the metahistorical imperative of the narrative. It is also important to stress that *Call Me By My Rightful Name* appears a brilliant blend of the narrative modes of the detective novel, romance, sociological and well as historical fiction, among others. Mythopoeia as well as mythography is properly utilised in the novel. In this connection, the role played by the *babalawo* Akinwunmi, and *Iya wa meji* cannot be overemphasised. Also, the central *oriki* on which the novel's discursive scheme turns, like a flying carpet, ferries us back and forth through time, shedding much-needed light on the blind spots and dark alleys of history. Moreover, the lacunae and the textual silences and apparent aporias of the world it represents (the *hors texte*) are felicitously filled in and straightened out, thus establishing the interconnectedness of things. Okpewho who at the start of the novel presents us with some kind of jigsaw-puzzle, gradually furnishes all the missing links and pieces of information until, finally, a clear picture of the causal connection of human life and experience emerges. Yet, the novel's adoption of the historic present tense form seems to harmonise with the *oriki*'*s* patently incomplete nature. According to Olabiyi Babalola Yai, "an *oriki* is an unfinished and generative art enterprise, as emphatically

stated in the following meta-*oriki* (i.e., an *oriki* which is a discourse on an oriki:

> Oríkì
> Àkìikítán
> (Oriki, the one whose praises are endless). (30)

Accordingly, Otis, the novel's protagonist, goes right ahead of the civil rights struggle immediately he returns to the United States. He has inherited the stubbornness, and the fierce pride of Akinbowale, his enslaved ancestor whose reincarnation he is. He consequently incarnates the heroic attributions of his praise – poem and dramatises them in the live theatre of the agonistic American social universe. By implication, Otis represents what Paul Gilroy calls "unfinished identities" (1) both at the personal and the collective level. The forging of identity in the smithy of the soul is an existential continuum which does not terminate even at death, but rather transforms in the true spirit of the *oriki's* generative temper, into varied forms of personal self-identification. And this is made possible by the agency of memory and tradition.

As part of the novelist's project of chiselling out a respectable image for the African-American in contemporary times, Okpewho vehemently queries the non-inclusion of major African works in the American literary canon. He believes like other African, African-American and Afircanist scholars do that much ground will be covered in the struggle for black integration in the U.S. and a better collective identity achieved if the West (or its citadels of production of knowledge) accords Black arts their deserved intellectual respect. Third Worldism, centre/margin politics and the counter-discourses of the post-colonial world have engaged the minds of many writers and scholars such as Edward Said, Henry Gates Jr. Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi, Salman Rushdie, Abiola Irele, and Biodun Jeyifo. They all tend to argue in essence that the West always seems to mistake *difference* for inferiority. Commenting on Achebe's achievement, Irele writes:

> Achebe's imaginative and ideological challenge of Western representations of Africa in his own work clarifies admirably the mental process that has attended the emergence of African literature in modern times. African responses to the pressures of colonial domination have found a privileged mode of expression in imaginative literature, which has not only registered the epochal significance of the encounter with Europe and its objective implications for African societies and cultures, but even more important, the complex relation of African experience to the norms and precepts commonly associated with the modern West, and ultimately their determination of the directions of African thought and expression (ix).

Having highlighted the "epochal significance" of the emergence of African literature on the global literary scene, Irele goes on to inveigh against the minor status accorded it in the West. In his words; "Even then, African literature has hardly been accorded more than a very minor status in the curriculum of most western institutions. In American universities, the subject can be found distributed among various departments, according to the circumstances that have attended its introduction into each institution. This has created a somewhat ambiguous situation for African literature in the American academy" (xiii).

Wole Soyinka's misadventure at Cambridge[12] and Ngugi's combative nativism[13] amply corroborate Irele's Afrocentrism. And, if the Black Diaspora wishes to slough off centuries-old mind-forged manacles as well as the palpable traumas and ruptures with which it is afflicted, then, there is urgent need to embrace the oppositional cultural politics as evinced in *Call Me By My Rightful Name*. Without attempting to set up any form of binarism which might give rise to charges of essentialism or provincialism, the Blackman must cultivate a strong sense of history and seek always to cherish his distinctive ancestral heritage in the face of our multicultural, multi-

religious, multiracial neoliberal globalised world. It is in the light of the foregoing argument that we can meaningfully interpret the purport of the novel's title.[14] According to Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *Call Me By My Rightful Name* has "skill, narrative interest, tension, context, characterisation, hope, detail, and point", all of which the author uses as well as insights on post-colonial creolisation to tell the Blackman's story. (see Blurb). On his part, Niyi Osundare remarks that the novel "is an astonishing story about the tenacity of memory and its power to wound and heal, a saga of departure and return, of the loss and recovery of the personal and racial self" (see Blurb). With its ostensibly testamental bent, *Call Me By My Rightful Name* charts a long and winding course from the hinterlands of African myth and antiquity through the antinomies and anxieties of history to the maelstrom of a multi-civilisational future. *Call Me By My Rightful Name* is at once an epic tale of African (or African-American) adversity and a paean of afro-optimism. And, as such, the novel proudly deserves its place in the post colonial counter canon comprising among other classics such works as Alex Haley's *Roots*, Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage,* and Braithwaite's *Masks*.

Endnotes

1. *Ebony* is a popular soft-sell African-American-based magazine which celebrates the triumphs, successes and landmark achievements of black people in the U.S. The usual fare served in the magazine are black achievement in sports, academics, the professions, the armed forces, science and technology, and, sometimes, historical accounts and tributes, among others.
2. Wole Soyinka's Independence play *A Dance of the Forests* utilises the symbolism of the "Half-child" to dramatise the Janusfacedness, the interfusion of the ignoble past and the bleak present in the composition of the curious character of the "Half-Child", denoting the future. This *Abiku*-like, promiscuous syncretism is at the heart of our post-modern epoch marked as it is by the criss-crossing of cultural

impurities which, ultimately gives rise to moral relativism and epistemic indeterminacy.

3. The Yoruba (African) talking drum has for a long time been a subject of extensive research. (See J. H. K. Nketia, 1958, 1960, 1963; Ruth Finnegan, 1970, Olatunji, 1984, etc).
4. For a more detailed investigation and authoritative analysis of the subject, see Bill Ashcroft *et al* (1989, 33-38).
5. For an authoritative and definitive introduction to the subject of *opon ifa*, see 'Wande Abimbola (1968), Olatunji, 1984, 109-136
6. Isidore Okpewho in his project of valorising African autochthonous systems of belief seems to implicitly invoke Senghorian Negritude and, conversely, betray a pained scepticism about the epistemic adequacy of Western "soulless technological efficiency", *ala* Chinua Achebe.
7. Charles Johnson's novel entitled *Middle Passage* (1990) narrates the story of Rutherford Calhoun, a newly-freed slave, who stows away on board *The Republic* to avoid marriage and the fruits of his crime. Only to find that his vessel is a slave ship bound for Africa, its crew a gallery of misfits and degenerates. *Call Me By My Rightful Name* sets for itself a far more conceptually ambitious task, enveloping within its covers a baffling kaleidoscope of issues bordering an race relations, international politics, cultural politics, history, the political economy of the metropole / margin relationship, aesthetics of orality in the context of the typographic culture and, more importantly, epistemological and metaphysical enquiries.
8. See the prefatory epigraphs to Niyi Osundare's *Horse of Memory* (1998, I).
9. For detailed explorations of the subject of the Yoruba *oriki*, see S. A. Babalola (1966), Olusegun Adekoya's paper entitled "Towards A Classification of Yoruba oral poetry" (Ogundele and Adeoti (eds.), 2003, 187-199, Olatunji (1984, 67-101).
10. In his important book *Orality and Literacy: Technologizing the Word* (1982) Walter J. Ong argues the tenaciousness of the oral being even in a technologically advanced modern

world, thus emphasising the pragmatic primacy of orality in human communicative activities and other varied forms of cultural production.

11. The trope of the sea as both boon and bane is given eloquent expression in contemporary African poetry, and, particularly, in the poetry of Niyi Osundare. Also much of African-American letters equally enacts the drama of the sea, often, in rueful hue.
12. Wole Soyinka himself tells of how the authorities in the Department of English, at Cambridge University, U.K., denied him the opportunity to teach African literature there but instead referred him to the Anthropology Department, since they dismissed his native art as "mythical beast" (see *Myth, Literature and the African World*, 1976, vii).
13. For details, see Ngugi's *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) and *Moving the Centre* (1983).
14. The issue of name or naming is a major one both in African and African-American (and Caribbean) literature. Perhaps this also recalls the place of naming in the Bible and in traditional societies of the world. We can very easily remember the Biblical account of Jacob's encounter with an angel in which his former name, Jacob was changed to Israel (Genesis 32:24-32); the Saul-Paul conversion (Acts 9:1-29) and even the story of Abraham (Genesis 17:5). Haley's *Roots* also highlights the significance of naming just as James Baldwin's essay "Nobody Knows My Name" exemplifies this point. Niyi Osundare captures the essence of naming beautifully well when he remarks.

> The name opens the door to the house of being; it is the readiest, most direct channel to a person's *ori* and all it stands for in the liturgy of existence. The Yoruba believe that to endow something with a name is to give it *life* beyond subsistence. This world did not exist until a word existed in which its name was found. The world itself was evoked into being by the proclamation of the name. To live is to have a

name; to have a name is, to live (Osundare, 1997, 2).

15. Okpewho thus uses the ontologic imperatives of naming to examine his novel's central character's personal as well as racial selfhood against the backdrop of the larger socio-historical trajectory of race relations in the United States.

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