

Call Me by My Rightful Name: A Continuum of Yoruba Ancestral Agency in the African American Experience

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Abstract

In this paper, we examine the watermarks of ancient Yoruba tradition in the plot of Call Me by Rightful Name of Isidore Okpewho. Recalling the complex interplay between forces and beings in the Yoruba cosmogony, It has been noted a harmonious circularity in which human existence is celebrated. The different worlds of the ancestors, of the living and of the unborn which are related by the fourth stage stand as the different points of that circularity. The iconoclastic picture of the self-devouring snake of Idanre is a brilliant expression of the cycle that involves what Wole Soyinka has termed a cosmic totality. Accordingly, that snake in the context of this novel by Isidore Okpewho might be seen as the calling spirit. The sound of its voice is a resonance of the Paratextual stanza uttered in a solemn and captivating tone:

*Hush, hush, somebody's calling my name
Hush, hush, somebody's calling my name
Hush, hush, somebody's calling my name¹*

Keywords: Ancestor, Yoruba, Agency, continuum, experience, African American.

¹Okpewho, Isidore. *Call Me By My Rightful Name*. Asmara: Africa World Press, Inc, 2004, p.1.

Introduction

Isidore Okepewho is one of the most famous figures of oral literature who has participated in reevaluating and promoting African oral genres. His novel, *Call Me by My Rightful Name* is a perfect blending of orature and written literature in which the oral corpus of Ifa divination poetry impacts the lives of characters, as the backbone of the plot. The authority of Yoruba ancestral tradition operates beyond the psychological and social dimension within a community marked more by political and civil rights struggle than by a spiritual return to African descent. In that apparent unbalance and fragmentation of memory will emerge a force aroused by the calling drums of a remote past seeking for redemption from desertion. With the middle passage has occurred a move of the traditional beliefs from the shrine of the deities to a place dominated by modernism. This space-time shift will engender syncretism and later ignorance for the younger generation to which belongs Otis Hampton, the main character.

Few important questions need to be asked at this point: how after centuries of physical, cultural and spiritual metamorphosis, can beliefs of a remote past break through the under streams of the Atlantic and upset a modern community living far from an African homeland? Wasn't the plight of enslavement horrible enough to erase memory? To highlight those enigmas one should not forget to take into account the hybridity and the threatening erosion of identity occasioned by the severe filter of time and space. However, the epiphany of the Ori or head which refers to destiny cannot but upset its matrix and marvel the humans around. Examining the notion of spiritual power, it becomes clear that the action of the gods on humans can only be located beyond time restriction. Under their anger, harmony and balance can only be restored by sacrifice and rebirth through initiation.

Destiny or the power of Ori

There is one important point deriving from the reading of *Call Me by Rightful Name* and that is the analysis of self-identification and mission. The title itself is an invitation to review identity and in the deepest meaning of the term related to inner being and destiny. At a decisive period of his youth when a career is already planned, Otis receives at times, in trance a coded message neither him nor his parents can decode but which throws them all in a mess. This annoying situation has been triggered by African music the character was listening after his birthday party. A series of hysterical crises will follow that decisive moment of his life without any efficient solution despite the recourse to psychoanalysis with doctor Fishbein. Modern medicine seems to be ineffective contrarily to what might come out of the psychology of religion which defines the notion in "terms of feelings, attitude and behavior called forth in man by the mysterious or sacred; questions concerning the meaning of life and what makes life worthwhile; belief in the ability of something super-human to make life what it ought to be, devotion to the welfare of humanity; experience implying the existence of a spiritual realm."² Accordingly, this relates to the belief that "The experience of one's place and

² The Psychology of Religion

identity is a sine qua non for healing³.” Yet the reader knows Otis does not master his origins. The problem he faces is linked with his ancestor’s beliefs and can only be solved through the ritual to the honor of his Ori. The evidence to this assertion is provided in the following fragment of Ifa divination poetry:

If you are wise, your ori has made you so. If you are not wise,
your ori must have made you more stupid than a tuber of yam.
We chose our heads from the place, but our destinies are not the
same. No god blesses man without the consent of his Ori. Make
a sacrifice to your Ori, that you may realize the blessings of the
choice it made on your behalf⁴.

To regain equilibrium, only one thing can be helpful, reconciliation with the past of the ancestors through sacrifice through a trip to Africa. There is a need in this situation which is allusive to the quest of totality in Yoruba mythology. Like the gods of the Yoruba pantheon after a long period of severance decided to reunite with humans under the aegis of Ogun for completeness, Otis needs to find the path to his homestead for rebirth and to achieve practical action in existence. It is where lays his destiny.

All this could happen because in the Yoruba mythic beliefs the cosmos which is made of different worlds functions in a harmonious cycle. There are no impenetrable barriers but bridges between one sphere to another by means of sacrifices. The world of the livings to which belongs Otis is connected to the world of the ancestors and to the world of the unborn, the older one. Following the reflection within the traditional belief of reincarnation, a better insight may be found in the following analysis that Soyinka has made out of the issue. “The expression the child is a father of the man becomes within the context of this time-structure, not merely a metaphor of development, one that is rooted in a system of representative individuation, but a proverb of human continuity, which is not unidirectional⁵.” As such, the analysis of Otis’ life needs to be located in the wheels of Yoruba continuity and not in foreign civilization or science.

Therefore the mystical reality of reincarnation, a strong belief in Yoruba world, makes the case of Otis less enigmatic as the narrator states, referring to Kehinde and Taiwo the twins “...Otis is their brother reincarnate, their superordinate link with a destiny long interrupted and now reestablished.⁶” Scrutinizing the work of Pierre Fatumbi Verger about the Orishas in the New World, there is no doubt that, while the enslaver believed putting an end in the most drastic way to strong heritage, enslaved Yoruba people had already traveled with their gods and religious practices. There is an explicit triumph of the spiritual agency over the materialistic and physical vision of existence. Enslavement indeed is too weak to break the ancestral covenant. Stephania Capone brings an

³Kone, Vamara. “Traditional Medicine Versus Modern Medecine in L.M. Silko’s ceremony”, *Health and Mental Issues in the Literary Imagination*, Edited by Mamadou Kandji, Dakar, Diaspora Academy Press, 2011. p.84.

⁴Okpewho, Isidore. *Call Me By My Rightful Name*. p.47.

⁵ Soyinka, Wole. *Myth, Literature and The African World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.

⁶Okpewho, Isidore. *Call Me By My Rightful Name*. p.151.

illustrating element to the question in her analysis of the Yoruba soul and more specifically in the Yoruba-*voodoo*⁷. The seventh point of her reflection presents the ancestral soul which stands for the family lineage and from which descend the human being. According to Capone, this soul is closely related to the cult of ancestors.

Taking a look back to what is mentioned above and considering the primacy of soul on the body, one might say that Otis Hampton is intimately connected to the ancestral soul. Neither space nor time or any other subjugation can tame the spirit of the ancestor which defines and gives meaning to existence itself. The presence of Otis is an embodiment of culture and destiny amid a struggle for freedom. Though it is not part of this study, the historical time of the novel is an expressive choice of the writer with regards to African literature and orality that were ignored for a long time due to issues related to cultural identity.

The self-identification of Otis in the most prominent way of spiritual rebirth is at the same time a renaissance for a whole population in a dynamic specific to the Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s. It is important to know why the quest for identity is triggered by the ancestor-spirit in that period. The answer can be found through the concept of Ori which is central to Yoruba *weltanschauung* and religion as well. In the largest view, the Ori refers to a dual characteristic of the Head, both physical and spiritual. Segun Gbadegesin has assessed its value from the significant and vital role it plays in the body as the seat of the brain.

Accordingly, in a rather spiritual dimension, the term refers to an entity bearer of destiny which in the creation process follows the privilege of Olodumare the supreme God who gives the Emi or breath. After that step which follows the molding of the body by Obatala⁸, comes the fundamental and complex task of choosing one's Ori before embarking on a mission in the world of the livings. The Choice of Ori is crucial to Yoruba traditional society as it appears in the work *Wande Ambimbola*⁹. To choose an Ori is to choose a destiny that will impact your whole life depending on the type of relationship you have, whether you take care of it through sacrifices or not. The nature of the sacrifices can be unveiled by Ifa Orunmila through divination. From this logic derives the concept of predestination that might highlight the figure of Otis Hampton. Otis is from Yoruba descent and needs to fulfill a mission he apparently did not choose and understand in the New World. But referring to the power of the Ori as destiny, the call he has received is an appeal for the continuity of a mission his Ori has assigned him in a former existence in Africa. In the actantial narrative schema of the prolepsis relating the attack, enslavement is manifested as an opponent that has upset a whole tradition with the consequences everybody may know.

⁷ Capone, Stefania. *Les Yoruba du Nouveau Monde : Religion, ethnicité et nationalisme noir aux Etats-Unis*. Paris: Karthala, 2005, p.181.

⁸ Gbadegesin, Segun, "The Yoruba concept of Person", *The African Philosophy Reader*, edited by Coetzee, Ph and Roux, A.P.J, London, Routledge, 1998, p.235.

⁹ Abimbola, Wande, *Sixteen Great Poems of Ifa*, UNESCO, 1975.

Taiwo goes on to explain to Akinwunmi, for him to translate that their brother had accompanied their father on his last campaign against the invaders; though they had repelled the intruders, their brother had received a cut on his shoulder¹⁰...

After the physical and spiritual environment was harmed by the invaders, one may figure out a need for purgation through sacrifice and re-establishment of ancestral beliefs. The return of the ancestral spirit through the trances of Otis and Ifa verses in the text depicts an absolute necessity. Predestination then no longer becomes synonymous with fatality. It rather manifests unfailing continuity of a mission initiated in a different world of cosmic totality. In line with that view, Badegesin asserts:

the belief in predestination, expressed in the concept of Ori, seems to suggest that the Yoruba have some anxiety about human helplessness in certain situations. However, it also expresses the people's conviction that human existence has meaning. It suggests, for instance, that human beings are not on a purposeless mission in this world, that they have a mission to fulfill, a message to deliver¹¹.

Pursuing the analysis under the light of this assertion, it is undeniable that the main character of Okpe who does not show obedience to the existentialist creed of man as the measure of all things. This vision supported by Protagoras and later by Nietzsche through his character Prophet Zarathustra fades in the interplay between forces, human and/or spiritual. Through Otis is painted among other figures, the image of the autonomous quester of being and fulfillment who never understands that existence is a web of energies until the thirst of his soul knocks him out. Then he starts questing effectively and only at that moment a path becomes possible. This process is sometimes unpredictable given that at its genesis, there is any logic to demonstrate. In the life of Otis Hampton, it all started with some unknown African music.

Musicality and Epiphany

The rules of poetic composition in Ifa poetry seem to be made of musical resources of language and mythic images that are full of emotion and which carry the sacred agency that connects the different worlds. This connection between worlds as aforementioned is in the center of the individual life in the Yoruba community as Abiola Irele said:

For the Yoruba, the balance of human life, the very sense of human existence, consists of the dynamic correlation of human existence, which consists of the dynamic correlation between

¹⁰Okpewho. Isidore, *Call Me By My Rightful Name*, p.129.

¹¹*The African Philosophy Reader*, edited by Coetzee, Ph and Roux, A.P.J, London, Routledge, 1998, p.254.

individual responsibility and pressure of external events and forces¹².

The connection between Otis and the spirit of ancestors is an expression of the connection of beings which stands as an asset of the Yoruba World. It is within that relationship that music plays its utmost role through ritual. Apart from the secular dimension it bears, its inner meaning has occurred in Ifa divination poetry which stands as a light on existence. Ifa is expected to highlight the relationship between gods and humans and guide the livings in every situation of their quest. The musical expression of that guidance originated in early existence and impacts the life of individuals in explaining the nature of their Oris and the adequate covenant to hold without neglecting sacrifices. Just like questing heroes Afuape, Orileemere, and Oriseeku¹³, Otis Hampton needs to discover the profound Ori within him through divination. The spiritual agency which operates within him is nothing but the manifestation of his Ori. But only one way can lead to the understanding of the whole matter, and that is Ifa divination.

While analyzing the trances of the main character through a medical diagnosis of Fishbein, one may fail to find out the link between the “casually” African music and that state out of it. Yet emphasizing the African origins of Otis and the very significance of rhythm in negro-African aesthetics might be valuable.

A significant point in the experience of Otis is to note how emotion through rhythm and musicality draws the self into the depth of being, where existences are connected. This is expressive of the quality of traditional African poetry which is typically functional at different levels, social, political-religious...Catching the audience for which it is performed and conveying a specific message has always required a whole set of technics centered in emotion, for highly effective and vivid performance. That is why the talented singer or poet is always someone who is at the edges of worlds and melts ideas and feelings as a bridge where a typical stream intended to given horizon flows. Sometimes he is a healer, sometimes a prophet, or simply a protagonist in the interplay of theatre. Referring to Yoruba mythology, he can be compared to Ogun, the god of creativity and a conquering hero who opened the gates of reunification.

Positioning art or music under the aegis of Ogun is at the same time recognizing the influence of that god through those productions. And from that point, we can better understand the attitude of Otis who is being called for reunification with his inner being, his Ori, and with his tradition as well. There is no way escaping such an attraction: “Ifa says: However tall the palm tree, it will yield its juice to the tapper’s knife. However deep the well, it will yield its water to the drawing pail.¹⁴” The voice he hears is a soul

¹²Irele, Abiola. “Tradition and the Yoruba Writers D.O.Fagunwa, Amos Tutuola and Wole Soyinka”. Abuja, Odu: Journal of Yoruba and Related Studies 1975, p. 104, <http://www.africabib.org/rec.php?RID=191049832&DB=p>, Vu le 11/08/2016.

¹³Ba, Amadou Hampaté, *Kaidara*, Dakar : Nouvelles éditions africaines, 1978.

¹⁴Okpewho, Isidore. *Call Me BY My Rightful Name*, p. 52.

snatching force that figures the image of the traditional African poet or musician described through the characteristics of

Olohun-iyó, the voice of flavours...the finest singer and the best drummer. When he drummed smoke rose in the air, and when he sang flames danced out of his mouth; his favourite music was the music of incantations¹⁵

The spiritual power which assails him is so determinant that Otis himself will start chanting a Yoruba poetic genre called Oriki during his trances¹⁶. The oriki is a panegyric of an individual or a lineage in Yoruba land, aimed at recalling the heroic deeds achieved in history. The one he declaims belongs to his ancestor hood in Nigeria, revealing thereby a necessary trip in Africa. The Blending of musical resources enabled by the tonal¹⁷ nature of Yoruba language with spiritual connections offers a scene of traditional African ritual. The emotional and spiritual state of Otis is intensified by the rhythm, which according to Leopold Sédar Senghor, stands as the architecture of being, the internal dynamism...and the pure expression of the vital force¹⁸. Setting a connection between gods and humans through the musical resources of poetry becomes, therefore, a typical and highly effective pedagogy as well as an expression of spiritual force that draws into the depth of essence union, hence the trip of Otis in Africa. Trip in literature is expressive of a quest. It is expected to bring about change and improve an anterior causal situation or context.

Trip and Rebirth

The notion of rebirth should be understood here in a wider angle including the spiritual, and the ideological level. The trip experience of the main character in Africa participates in a revision of the continent realities long presented through stereotypes by the foreign community. The significance of space is undoubtedly linked with the heart of the story that narrates the life of Otis Hampton. We know that the main character belongs to a family settled in the New World as states the narrator in the analepsis of their background:

Otis Jeremiah Hampton was always proud enough of his background to believe he deserved his place in the white man's world. The son of an Augusta sharecropper and grandson of a slave, he learnt in life to know his place but also to believe in his innate worth¹⁹.

¹⁵ Soyinka, Wole and Fagunwa, D.O. *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*. London: Thomas Nelson Sons LTD, 1968, p.79.

¹⁶ *Call Me By My Rightful Name*, p.72.

¹⁷ Isidore Okpewho, "African Poetry: The Modern Writer and the Oral Tradition", *African Oral Literature*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1992, p.10.

¹⁸ Senghor, Léopold Sédar, « L'esthétique négro-africaine », in *Liberté I*, p. 211.

¹⁹ *Call Me By My Rightful Name*, p.

Though Otis is described as a young man proud of his family and his blackness, he identified himself not as an African. The land they believe they belong to is, however, a land of deportation, both geographical and spiritual. The chasm created by time and circumstances is far too wide than his parents themselves fail to set a direct link between their son's troubles and their African roots. The private journey of thinking and checking in their pasts the causes of the mess will bear no fruits²⁰. Hence, in the night of loss of their cultural heritage, the ancestors' visit appears to be an upsetting event for a family that cannot see beyond its immediate environment, losing its language, culture, and centeredness.

Beyond their professional and family issues, beyond their projections in the future lays the very meaning of existence on which depends all the rest of their lives. Accordingly, the calling spirit seems to rescue them at different levels that picture Afrocentricity as developed by Molefe Asante. The first dimension of rescue is about location. It answers the question of analyzing from the right angle of vision when dealing with African issues as it appears in this assertion: "Afrocentricity [African-centered] as the placing of African ideals at the center of any analysis that involves African culture and behavior²¹". This definition invalidates the methods used in psychoanalysis to heal Otis. It does not include that the work of Fishbein is not important. But the recourse to that method is itself a deviation from the right path. Hopefully, by analyzing the records, they will find the right location just as Otis found the spot of his capture in his former existence after he arrived in Nigeria. The second and most visible is about spiritual covenant. Only a rebirth-trip in Africa can be effective, which is validated by the cultural immersion of Otis among his sibylline, namely Taiwo and Kehinde. This process starts with ordinary things like learning the Yoruba language and living within that community for a certain period. The influence of both the twins and of Akinwunmi is a determinant pattern of that process.

The cultural rebirth will culminate with the initiation of Otis to the cult of Ogun. By accepting to embrace the Yoruba tenets of cosmic interplay through the guidance of gods, he is fully recognized as part of the community with the prerogatives included. The public performance of his family's Oriki accompanied by drummer Olumide Fabiola an oral poet is a striking expression of integration to the local culture and initiation to African poetry²². Otis not only gets healed through this trip but will also become the perfect figure of the Afro-American amid struggles.

Conclusion

After a brief survey of *Call me By My Rightful Name*, we have found a certain number of results that highlight the effective presence of Yoruba agency both in an aesthetical and spiritual level. The strong correlation between African aesthetics and beliefs appears in the narrative through music and Ifa poetry to offer an Afrocentric approach to

²⁰Idem,p.14.

²¹ Idem, p.7.

²²Okpewho, Isidore. *Call me By My Rightful Name*. pp 206-207.

the life and destiny of Otis Hampton. Without rejecting the hybrid characteristics of his community, his presence in Africa will be a path for reconciliation with past heritage and openness as well.

Through the character of Otis is expressed in the image of the pacific hero that the United States and the world need in a millennium painted by human blood whether innocent or not. To the name Otis the character adds the original name of Akimbowale picturing a symbiosis that condemns radicalism and violence. And only from that perspective he and the black community through his figure will start looking from the right angle and face the challenges of their future in the Civil Rights Movements through unity. In this struggle, Adefunmi stresses the necessity of cultural and religious immersion, a theme which will follow this study

**Asante/revolution
Ekhartolle**

FatouAwou Badiane

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