Colonial Mimicry and Postcolonial Re-membering in Isidore Okpewho’s *Call Me by My Rightful Name*

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*In Call Me by My Rightful Name* (2004), Isidore Okpewho harnesses the distinctive virtues of the African imagination and worldview to both complement and interrogate Western paradigms of knowledge. Where in his earlier novels *The Victims* (1970), *Last Duty* (1976) and *Tides* (1993) Okpewho conformed to the tradition of European realism, *Call Me by My Rightful Name* appropriates the techniques of magical realism that the novelist locates in African folk imagination. However, with both the techniques of orality and embodied textuality to excavate common bonds of black experience, Okpewho treads the challenging path between transvaluation and reification of colonial myths about Africa.

**Keywords:** Isidore Okpewho / colonialism / postcolonialism / oriki / magical realism

*Call Me by Rightful Name* is an exceptional novel in Isidore Okpewho’s oeuvre. Hitherto an innovative heir of the tradition of social and psychological realism in fiction, Okpewho in *Call Me by My Rightful Name* embraces magical realism as a mode that epitomizes the distinctive virtues of the African imagination. Previously preoccupied with the fictionalization of pivotal historical and contemporary events in national life, Okpewho is here concerned with general black experience. It is a scholar’s novel, grounded in precise and verified information on oral African literature and in the methodologies of such study deriving from the author’s experience. *Call Me by My Rightful Name*, like the canonical work of Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, has a scheme that is ultimately extra-literary. This is a consequence of its epistemological and self-conscious striving to illuminate African systems of belief and general worldview. Okpewho’s crucial claim, anticipated by these earlier African writers, is that the conception of life and death as complementary and interactive phases of existence crystallizes in the concept of reincarnation: life and death are in reality only relocations, and memories of previous incarnations are re-membered. In tracing the
genealogy of an African American family back to its roots in Nigeria, using the oriki—a traditional praise poem—as a trope for collective memory, Okpewho makes the African concept of reincarnation metonymic of a general African worldview. That is, reincarnation is a representative figure incarnating cardinal virtues characteristic of the African vision of life.

In this novel, Okpewho claims magical realism, a mode that abjures the objectivity that defines his earlier realistic novels, and does so not merely as a narrative technique, but even more importantly as a means of incorporating a distinctive (African) view of life as well as showing the possibilities in all human experience. Magical realism, characteristic of the writing of the postcolonial world, is a mode in which “the real and the surreal, reality and hallucination, the quotidian and the extraordinary” (Moudileno 32) mingle, thereby providing a distinctive way of apprehending that world. Thus, the mode of narration is not simply an arbitrary contrivance but is integral to Okpewho’s artistic vision and indicative of the narrator’s experience of life itself. Brenda Cooper underscores this fact when she contends that “magical realism arises out of particular societies—postcolonial, unevenly developed places—where old and new, modern and ancient, the scientific and the magical views of the world co-exist” (216). In *Call Me by My Rightful Name*, Okpewho consciously invokes magical realism and the worldview it epitomizes to measure contrasting rationalist Western modes of thought.¹

Published in 2004 but set in the United States in the 1960’s, *Call Me by My Rightful Name* is primarily concerned with the distinctive heritage of African Americans and their responsibilities to and appropriations of that unique patrimony. The novel foregrounds the traumatic experiences that compel an apathetic young African American, Otis Hampton, into a consciousness of his identity and, moreover, to a commitment to the Civil Rights Movement, then at its historical peak. It takes the reader through the mysteries and complexities of the African world and beliefs. Otis’s pilgrimage to Nigeria, with a knowledgeable diviner as guide, is a generously annotated text that leads through the labyrinth of African culture apparently aimed especially at non-African readers.

The novelist’s compelling exploration of his protagonist’s transformation from Otis Hampton to Akimbowale Otis Hampton traverses varying concepts of literature, music, history, religion, politics, psychoanalysis, philosophy, and education. It aims to affirm both cultural affinities and differences. It privileges naming as a revealing site of cultural distinction, as well as social valuation and contestation and, moreover, as pivotal in the understanding of the concept of “home.” For *Call Me by My Rightful Name* presents the African American’s search for his/her authentic name as inextricably linked with his/her search for a true identity and a true home. Thus, the novel seethes with political, cartographic, clinical, and metaphysical conceptions of home, and how these define one’s identity and ideas about life. Okpewho guides his protagonist through the signal motif of an ancient, interrupted ritual that is insistent on completion to achieve thereby the sobering apprehension of both the imperatives of history, the compulsions of blood, and
the necessary dynamism required in negotiations of cultural and social transition. Thus Otis is led to reappraise “truth” and the varied approaches to it, as well as develop a nuanced conception of home.

In this essay, I examine Okpewho’s inscription of names as central in constructing identity and as integral to the concept of home. Considering the novelist’s foregrounding of naming in the title of his novel a crucial indication of his preoccupation in the work, I investigate both Okpewho’s insights into naming as deriving from a complex metaphysical worldview rooted in an African idea of birth and rebirth and a colonial scheme of negative attribution. Naming, derogatory name-calling, repeated invocations, incantatory oriki panegyric hailing, ululations, branding, and other diverse forms of denoting the self or the Other are presented by Okpewho as ideologically charged social codes that reflect and impinge on complex conceptions of identity, real or imagined. These codes indicate and, even more crucially, determine the caller’s valuation of the self and the Other’s humanity. Thus, two focal, contrasting social codifications are highlighted in the scheme of the novel: African onomastics rooted in self/communal-affirmation and exhortation to social transcendence and racist colonial stereotyping aimed at excluding the European Other from the “human family.”

The novelist’s exploration of “naming” as subversion and resistance is related to contemporary debates on the concept of “home” in discourses on the African diaspora. Also, as in his exploration of his protagonist’s metamorphosis, Okpewho’s dominant technique both reifies and complicates Homi Bhaba’s insights about the menace of colonial mimicry in its subtle defiant deviation from the mere replication of colonial models and prototypes. In Okpewho’s novel, Bhaba’s formulation of the “reformed recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same but not quite” (86) illuminates the protagonist’s status as representative of colonial ambivalence and slippage. Initially a mimic man in his embodiment of colonial prejudices against Africa and the African, Otis is transformed into a figure of disruption. Experiencing Africa first hand and seeing through the delusions of the colonial stereotypes on which his prejudices had been built, he contests the assumed superiority of the “original” colonial copy and finally affirms his unique in-betweenness, his distinctive double consciousness and dual heritage.

By far the most well-known literary allusions in Nigerian literature to African cultural beliefs in reincarnation are arguably to the myth of “abiku.” The mythic “abiku” (its Yoruba name) or Ogbanje (its Igbo name), is an errant child who torments his/her earthly parents by choosing a destiny of recurring births and premature deaths. This mythic figure is crucial to the conception of Ezimma in Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart, and is the subject of J.P. Clark’s poem, “Abiku,” and Wole Soyinka’s poem, “Abiku.” The abiku has perhaps received its most extended fictionalized treatment in Ben Okri’s The Famished Road trilogy. Writing in 2002, Douglas McCabe counts some thirty works in the corpus of written Nigerian literature in which “abiku” plays a crucial role (45). McCabe’s ideological reading of the “abiku” myth contests its homogenous interpretation
and suggests its differentiation from the “ogbanje” myth by privileging its hegemonic role in Yoruba history and politics. However, his examination of traditional oral Yoruba texts about “abiku”—especially names, salutations, and praise-names—locates the myth in its deeper religious origins and sets in relief the compact between naming and African belief systems. Categorizing “abiku” names as primarily derogatory insults, veiled threats, or plangent supplications, McCabe argues that the appellations are also invoked as incantations aimed at breaking the “abiku” cycle and normalizing the human status of the errant child. The much-used depreciatory “abiku” name, “Aja” (dog), given its pejorative connotations in Yoruba culture, exemplifies name-calling aimed at shaming the “abiku” child into giving up its errancy, as well as dissuading his/her kindred spirits from desiring to reclaim him/her by disguising his/her true value. Examining an oriki salutation of the “abiku” in which the dog is also central, “Aja o maa ja kun, dakun maa lo Aja”, McCabe concludes: “As an oriki, the salutation evokes and affirms the powers of the abiku; as an incantation, it tries to reverse the flow of those powers and bring a new reality into being. The salutation’s central trope—the spatial confinement of an errant subhuman (‘Dog, don’t break your leash’)—is thus a self-conscious instrument of normalization, an attempt to reform a hypermobile delinquent (the abiku) into a stable citizen” (51).

As abuse, subterfuge, camouflage, or incantation, names embody powers that can procure desired palpable physical results because, though they derive from the supernatural, they nonetheless retain the capability to influence the supernatural. These beliefs illuminate the spiritual world of Okpewho’s narrative even when his subject is the much awaited triumphant homecoming of an abducted warrior father, rather than the dreaded return of an “abiku” child. Both the “abiku” torn between the contrasted invocations of his/her human family and spirit consorts and Okpewho’s protagonist seeking his identity through a landscape of emblematic names, share the experience of discovering the signal spiritual economy of names. Okpewho foregrounds this theme in an epigraph, a traditional spiritual whose persona is cast at the moment of his/her agonistic recognition of name-invocation as a vehicle of spirit possession.

The epigraph to the first part of Okpewho’s Call Me by My Rightful Name epitomizes his insight into the invocation of names as an irresistible spiritual solicitation that strikes at the core of the individual’s being, leaving him deeply perturbed and pliable:

Hush, hush, somebody’s calling my name
Hush, hush, somebody’s calling my name
Hush, hush, somebody’s calling my name:
Oh my Lord, oh my Lord, what shall I do?

This traditional spiritual anticipates the deep turmoil of Okpewho’s protagonist. The person invoked through repeated name-calling is in spiritual anguish because his/her name is part of a complex chain of beliefs that endows names with metaphysical value and accounts for the complexity of naming schemes. To
name is often to assume the power to arrogate meaning; but to “name for,” on the other hand, is generally to seek to immortalize. In this latter case, names become emblematic memorials of the dead believed to be reincarnated in the young, and often recur in families. Naming therefore becomes a crucial way that societies remember and seek perpetuity. Thus, names invariably have power, even spiritual power, and are a potent weapon in ritual invocations. The utter helplessness of the person invoked in the traditional spiritual that Okpewho uses as an epigraph is an acknowledgement of a more powerful spiritual antagonist and anticipates his protagonist’s own lot.

In its repetitions, the traditional spiritual also approximates the incantatory invocations that typify the oriki, Okpewho’s pivotal cultural artifact for the archaeological excavations of his protagonist’s background. A ceremonial salutation chanted with the accompaniment of talking drums, the oriki epitomizes naming in its invocational form. It is a lyrical confirmation of an indisputable identity and status as each subject has his/her distinctive praise woven around his/her given, earned, and assumed names as well as accomplishments. It is also a society’s way of constantly revivifying its values by exalting its privileged forms of heroism and excellence. One’s oriki incarnates one’s identity, a self-image canonized by society and thus is the obverse of the colonialist projection of an undifferentiated generic identity of Europe’s Other. Significantly, even in its distorted form, the identity of Otis’s chant recited in the appropriate society is unmistakable. Okpewho uses the scholar-character, Bolaji Alabi, as a surrogate in the novel through whom he offers scholarly annotations on the oriki:

> Among the Yoruba, poetry of this kind, which is called oriki, is used for saluting or describing the main attributes of persons (e.g., rulers, warriors, and hunters) or objects (e.g., wild animals which the hunters meet in the bush). The oriki used for one person or object can hardly be used for another person or object. This is why it would help to be sure whether the person named in this song is Akindiji or Akindeji. However, I should add that if you sang an oriki like this one in the area from which it came, the citizens of that area would be able to tell you the family that owned it even if you got the name slightly wrong. This is because a family’s oriki (or oriki orile, as it is generally called) often carries attributes that belong to that family alone. (72)

The strength and depth of Okpewho’s insights do not derive only from an insider’s intimacy with the cultural institutions of his people: he is also a preeminent scholar of African oral literature.

The traditional spiritual equally delineates Okpewho’s evaluation of the African ancestry of the African American as indicating a profound link. His protagonist receives the call to attain this defining consciousness as an irresistible spiritual soliciting. The subliminal voice that beckons Otis on to a realization of his African heritage is identified as that of Ifa divination and is graphically represented in the text in italics as disruptions in Otis’s stream of consciousness or as breaks in the narrative voice. Expectedly, Otis’s instinctive response is incomprehension and unease:
Boston, Massachusetts. A voice came one night to Otis Hampton as he slept. It spoke in a strange tongue [...] Otis had not woken suddenly, as from a bad dream. There had been no dream. So he remembered nothing when he woke up in the morning. He had heard none of these words. They had not been spoken into his ears, but implanted into his instincts. From this point, he was conscious only of a burden of duty he could not grasp. (3)

Like the protagonist in Okpewho’s epigraph, Otis is aware of a virtual hypnotic pull that he is helpless to resist, coming from a source he cannot fully understand. By locating this experience between sleep and wakefulness, Okpewho accentuates the liminal space occupied by his representative African American protagonist.

However, in the description of Otis’s compulsive telepathic response to the eventual irruption of that voice in the insistent rhythm of African talking drums, Okpewho dramatizes this apparent mental turbulence as symptomatic of spirit possession: “A strange sensation is creeping over him. Not of cold nor of warmth. Some kind of agitation. First it’s mild, but soon it grows to a throb. His arms and legs begin to shake” (Call 6). The emphasis is not only on his macabre dance, but also on his incomprehensible verbal supplement to the music: “Now his lips are shaking, rattling some incomprehensible sound”; “Otis is ejaculating his strange speech with even greater agitation” (6). His brief moment of respite coincides with the temporary cessation of the music as his frenzy resumes on his further exposure to the “flourish of drum music:” “Again he is driven into a state of frenzy, his whole body shaking, his mouth ejaculating strange, unintelligible words, and his fingers now working free of the wheel as though being steadily pried by an invisible hand” (Call 7). Okpewho highlights the compact between African American experience and the Caribbean with the African in his protagonist’s similar response to Jamaican music,

with a frightful display. His body jerks in powerful movements, somewhere between boogie-woogie and St. Vitus’ dance. For a very tall man the scene is better imagined than witnessed. Now and then he rears in a menacing leap. From his mouth sounds of an unintelligible language issue forth. He has a grin on his face, yet he hardly seems to be enjoying the exertions. (38)

In all these instances, the common denominators of Okpewho’s descriptions of Otis’s speech and dance are apparently the grotesque and maniacal. In spite of himself, Otis is a possessed medium in a state of entrancement, completely overwhelmed by the force whose incarnation he becomes, and whose oracular voice he assumes.

In an early examination of Nigerian playwrights’ theatrical appropriation of trance as manifested in indigenous African ritual and festival, Dapo Adelugba draws attention to the centrality of equestrian metaphor in the discourse of possession. He remarks: “The spirit rides the person and the possessed is synonymous with the spirit for the duration of the possession” (205–206). Adelugba’s insights derive from investigations focused primarily on the Hausas and the Ijaws of
Nigeria. However, Christopher Balme extends the scope of Adelugba’s comments in his remarks on the presiding metaphor of the horse in Elesin’s final, long, pre-trance-dance speech in Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* and its relevance to Elesin’s imminent possession: “Not only is he the king’s horseman, but the notions of horsemanship, riding, and being ‘mounted’ by a spirit are integral to Yoruba spirit possession. Expressions such as ‘make my limbs strike earth like a thoroughbred’ or ‘the stallion will ride in triumph on the back of man’ abound and not only refer to the notion of the possessed person being ‘ridden’ by the spirit, but also reflect aesthetic principles” (217). Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* illuminates Otis’s experience, especially because the dead Alafin in that play also speaks through a medium, the Praise Singer, to his horseman. Okpewho’s novel is not only consciously located in a non-rational African tradition, it also alludes to African literary expressions of cultural beliefs deriving from that tradition and rooted in such concepts as reincarnation, spirit possession, and the manifestation of ancestors to the living through the activity of particular cults. He moreover retains the pivotal role of music and dance in the achievement of entrancement or possession in both the traditional cultural practice and the literary heritage he appropriates.

Thus, Okpewho’s fixation on music has both specific and general explanations. The iterative references to music highlight it as fundamental to Otis’s mysterious malady and thus subtly indicate the novel’s gradual and careful building up of the various particulars that will authenticate the resolution of that mystery. Music is, moreover, linked to the ceremony associated with African naming of which the oriki is the great exemplar. As performed panegyric poetry accompanied by music, the oriki appropriates the celebratory impact of music for the public lionization of the accomplished oriki subject. “Fragmentary quotations from past texts—histories, songs, proverbs, local gossip, and so on—are cobbled together in surprising ways to capture whatever is most noteworthy and distinctive about a subject at the present moment” (McCabe 61). When the context of the oriki performance is a funeral, as it is in *Call Me by My Rightful Name*, the laudatory invocation of enduring human accomplishments remains an integral component of the symbolic valorization of the value of life in spite of death. But while validating the centrality of music in African culture and the roles it plays as a crucial marker of identity, given the distinctiveness of oriki appellations to the subject of its praise, Okpewho also makes his protagonist’s initiation into African music the occasion to explicate its peculiar nature.

Deliberately disavowing the inclination to repeat the notes of the human voice, African instrumental music, unlike the Western, instead strives to play corresponding notes. Typically using a surrogate, Okpewho explains through Chip, who guides Otis:

[I]n European music, both voice and instrument generally express themselves in the same notes. The next time the same tune is played, you may be damn well certain they’re going to do exactly the same thing. That’s because the musicians think that,
like scientists, they’ve achieved a system that should be capable of being reproduced again and again. The system has been established in the form of a musical score, with notes carefully written down, so anyone who wants to play the music can follow the notes faithfully. But African music is basically different. It relies on the principle of challenging one set of notes with a corresponding set of notes, without actually changing the structure of the music. (209)

Abjuring scientific objectivity, the procedures of African music, much like those of magical realism, are described as “poetic” (210). The African musician is depicted as adopting a glancing or indirect approach to the melody and as having the basic challenge to create something new yet related to the melody he is given. This approach establishes the kinship between African music and jazz as they both operate on the “basis of chords or a block of notes that can be lifted from one context and transferred to another where it takes on a life of its own [. . .] The challenge is to play the borrowed phrase in another song, like a quotation [. . .] This way, the chord or block of notes becomes a code representing a unit or concept that could be used in a wide range of contexts where they would fit, without disrupting the even flow of sounds in the new context” (209–210). This insight enables Otis to appreciate that given their mobility, the coded phrases invariably become the peculiar texture of drum sounds. He thus approaches an understanding of the impact of drum music on him: “[S]ince 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 moment of his capture, might excite certain sensations in me every time I heard drums play” (211–212).

However, by citing the British scholar, Carrington, and the Ghanaian scholar, Nketia, to dispute colonial imputations of primitivism to African music, Okpewho is also fascinated by African music as a fundamental site of colonial denigration. His depictions of Otis’s frenzy offer deliberate parodies of the dance which are, however, consistent with colonial representations of the African dance as demonic. In Conrad’s influential representation of Africa in *Heart of Darkness*, images abound of Africans without language, except, perhaps, monkey-like chattering, and in wild frenzied gyrations. Conrad’s narrator in the novel describes African speech as a “violent babble of uncouth sounds” (69) and refers to “certain midnight [African] dances ending with unspeakable rites” (118). Typically, the same narrator’s apprehension of a probable African performance with a sense of cultural superiority turns a white man’s ignorance into the Black man’s damnation: “[. . .] a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage [. . .] The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us—who could tell?” (96). The ascription of greater authority to the parodic gaze denies agency to the undifferentiated herd it describes in spite of the suggestion of activity by the iterative use of the gerund. With reverberative
effects, Okpewho’s caricatures mimic the absolutes of colonial writing. He thus extends and deepens his insights with regard to the derogatory naming of Africans and African culture to justify their exclusion from “civilized” Western categories.

Okpewho’s often oblique reinscription of colonial discourse assumes familiar material form when Otis is called “monkey face” (23) in a basketball game by a white player in an opposing team. Okpewho, however, goes beyond name-calling to reveal that the enduring myth of Africa as the primordial jungle with its chattering monkeys constantly mutates and, moreover, is naturalized to account for Africans’ physiognomy. It is not until its implosion that Otis becomes fully cognizant of this guise. He muses: “you could reasonably tell an African. Something about the way they walked. It is said that, while African Americans walked with a cocky swagger, Africans picked their every step because they had trouble adjusting from swinging on branches to walking on paved ground” (41). The policeman who calls Otis “asshole” (9) on the night of his initial frenzy and considers him and his girlfriend, Norma, “Motherfuckers” (10) demonstrates the aim of denigrating name-calling: an apparent justification for denying the Black Other human dignity. Like Otis asserting his self-worth in defiance of racist imputations, Norma refuses to be treated like “animals” (9). The policeman’s conduct in the episode illuminates Norma’s earlier anxiety about two Blacks, she and Otis, being apprehended in the car by the police at night. Her fears are both of unwarranted persecution and negative attribution. The ascription of criminality to Blacks is a component of the complex colonial myth-making that name-calling helps to entrench.

“Monkey,” “asshole,” “black,” “nigger,” and later “slave” and “native” could be designated as attributive “social names” and are not appellations with which we signify kindred humans; they designate instead the Other and constitute part of the ideological baggage meant to justify imperialism, the institution of slavery and its aftermath, especially Jim Crow laws and the lynching and burning of blacks. These evils could not be deemed inhuman if they were not committed against humans. Sartre’s renunciation of European humanism as an ideology of lies aimed at extenuating European aggression is insightful here: “[. . .] the order is given to reduce the inhabitants of the annexed country to the level of superior monkeys in order to justify the settler’s treatment of them as beasts of burden. Violence in the colonies does not only have for its aim the keeping of these enslaved men at arm’s length; it seeks to dehumanize them” (13). Social names are never neutral: they embody powerful and highly consumable mythologies, have currency, and are particularly easy to deploy because they are relatively concise. Okpewho foregrounds corresponding discursive practices in colonial Africa and the civil rights scene in America during the 1960’s.

Okpewho’s reinscription of colonial discourse in Call Me by My Rightful Name is meant in part to draw attention to the rise of American imperialism and its inevitable inheritance of and entrenchment in the old, notorious vices. The privileged location of the American embassy as a site of power is stressed: “The U.S. embassy is at the south end of Broad Street, close to the hub of political
power in Nigeria’s capital city. Looking southwest across Broad Street, one can see the lagoon along the Marina Drive. There stands State House, residence of the country’s president [. . .] the American embassy is situated on prime territory from which it can witness and, when necessary, influence events in Nigeria’s political life” (108). There are also revealing references to riots that arise as a consequence of alleged American intentions to establish a military base in Nigeria, as well as because of imperialistic American designs in Vietnam. Moreover, in his conversion of his African driver into a beast of burden, his contemptuous remarks on Nigerians and the Hamptons’ slave ancestry and his zealous flaunting of American power as in his dealings with the Baale, the American envoy, Bigelow, is a familiar character in African fiction. Ostensibly emancipated from slavery, the African American remained emasculated by institutionalized discrimination that necessitated the Civil Rights Movement, which later attracts Otis’s sympathy and commitment. However, Okpewho’s more important concern is African Americans’ inheritance of colonial prejudices against Africa (which the likes of Bigelow epitomize) and the spiritual trauma that results from accepting that heritage.

Adetayo Alabi has appropriately located *Call Me by My Rightful Name* in the crucial context of Back-to-Africa Movement, which was part of the Civil Rights Movement, and in the context of African spirituality (146). Alabi pays some attention to Otis’s great-grandfather, a slave whose African name was corrupted to “Daley” and who was given his master’s surname, “Hampton,” as well as to Otis’s aunt, Ella Pearl. Alabi stresses the fact that the former is described in the novel as “a good man. Stubborn Af’can. Didn’t let no man give him no horse shit” (18), while the latter is the president of a group called “Daughters of Africa,” whose mission is to redeem the “[. . .] ‘true’ facts of Africa’s history and culture from the ‘tarnishment’ of white prejudice, giving firm support to the call by Marcus Garvey and the UNIA for a return of Negroes to Africa” (18). The critic then moves to the rather inaccurate conclusion: “The stubbornness of Otis’s great grandfather, Daley Hampton, shown in his use of ‘silence as a discreet strategy of self-preservation’ (18), and Ella pearl’s [sic] involvement with ‘Daughters of Africa’ suggest that Otis is born into a long line of people conscious of the ‘realities of race’ and who resist it in various ways. Looking up to Africa in the context of the time becomes, of course, a crucial way of challenging their racialized society” (146–147). The critic’s assumption in reality becomes a revelation that the novel’s protagonists attain only through their disquieting experiences.

Okpewho is painstaking in highlighting the complete estrangement of Otis and his parents from Africa, despite the exemplary allegiances of Otis’s great grandfather and his aunt. In a relentless existential flight from his humble past, Otis’s father, Hampton, regards Africa not as a spiritual resource to exploit, but as a traumatic memory to exorcize. This is because he considers an acknowledgement of his African patrimony detrimental to his new social status acquired at too high a cost:
Prior to his son’s problems, he had never given much thought to Africa. As a member of the growing cadre of middle-class blacks in Boston, he was satisfied with the privileges his position conferred on him. The increasingly charged climate of political activity among blacks should have qualified such feelings of security. But he did not feel compelled to participate in the growth of black awareness whether on a personal or communal level. Whenever he was invited to contribute money to a black cause, he did so, but asked that neither he nor his contribution be publicized. He has worked too hard and come too far to be drawn back by anything that might link him to his past. (59)

Hampton seeks in his rising social prominence a sense of belonging and a redefinition of his identity that will root him firmly in the space he is driven to claim as home. The urgency of this drive conditions even his artistic tastes and aesthetic appreciation. He is estranged from jazz because he is aware of its kinship with African music: “he belonged to that sector of the black middle-class who associated jazz with black low life and so kept their distance from it. For his son to be driven to spasms by such music was therefore a double tragedy” (60).

Hampton’s horrified apprehension of African art replicates the earlier demonization by overzealous European missionaries:

Running his eyes across the compass of the office, he finds so many artifacts placed here and there that he feels somewhat beleaguered by them. He tries to imagine his son Otis sitting in the midst of such devilry. His eyes are particularly fixed on a huge black mask hanging over the door. It has large, red-ringed holes where the eyes and mouth should be. Underneath the eye-holes are patterns of scarification, etched in white. There is a circle of white dots round each eye. Long leafy frills overhang the sides of the mask from the top of the head. Sweet Jesus! . . . He knows Africans do all kinds of crazy, superstitious stuff, but this is the first time he’s come into full gaze of their primitive artifacts. (60–61)

The irony of Hampton’s uncritical equation of African art with alleged African superstitious beliefs is the revelation of his own latent superstition. The artifacts assume only the life that he projects unto them. However, his habit of mind that significantly precedes even an initial contact with African art is, of course, conditioned by his naïve acquiescence to colonial myth-making.

In her blunt characterization of Africa as hell, Otis’s mother, Melba, lays no claim to the freshness of original inspiration. She draws instead on a well-known, long tradition of colonial myths, except that her mimicry lacks the colonist’s inward awareness of the fictionality of his/her narratives and thus becomes a veritable article of faith: “[. . . ] suppose this trouble [Otis] is having is the work of some evil spirit that’s come into him from Heaven knows where. What sense does it make to send him out there into pagan country [Nigeria/Africa] where the devil himself lives with all his angels?” (80). Melba invokes the imaginative geography of the mythical Dark Continent whose frontiers logically extend to hell. As Patrick Brantlinger has convincingly demonstrated, Africa was darkened
by the light of Victorian explorers, missionaries and scientists because that light was refracted through an imperialist ideology and discourse of which the myth of the Dark Continent was only a representative example (185). Melba implicitly measures moral security in terms of distance from Africa and envisages a return to Africa as holding the risk of a possible regression. Her husband’s frustration indeed arises from his recognition of the African American’s apparently inerasable link with Africa. This does not only negate his deepest longing for sovereignty, but also tends to interrogate his own mother’s confident declaration of their Americaness: “We done lef’ Af’ca too long to know the way back. You bes’ leave Af’ca be. We Amer’cans now” (19). Otis’s ordeal compels Hampton to recognize as a delusion his belief that he had resolved for himself and his family traditional African American anxieties about home and legitimacy.

Otis himself is hardly emotionally drawn to Africa, in spite of the fervent social and scholarly engagement of Norma, his Jamaican-born girlfriend, with her African-Caribbean heritage. Their relationship and Norma’s engagement with her African ancestry, however, bring to the fore Otis’s special need of a meta/physical encounter with the continent. Otis’s first experience of entrancement is indeed a direct consequence of his disavowal of Norma’s black consciousness. He describes her as “Smart. Pretty. Great company. Radcliffe radical. Black nationalist. Always talking about the great kingdoms of Africa, and that we’re all proud princes and princesses. That’s cool. . . . And who cares about all that Africa stuff, anyway?” (5).

This denunciation is immediately followed by the unsettling insinuation of the voice of Ifa divination into his subconscious. The voice’s pronouncement is significantly on the veneration of one’s ancestry as indispensable for a prosperous life. It is then followed by the ponderous silence in which the “pounding beats” of the African drum erupt. Otis experiences another dramatic moment of possession while listening to Jamaican music when he goes with Norma to meet the Jamaican, Mr. Barrett/“Guinea Man,” whom Norma consulted for a research project on Maroon culture—an endeavor aimed at enhancing her black consciousness. Through Otis’s instinctive response to the music and his vague awareness of an uncertain relationship with Guinea Man who “hails from the heartland of Jamaica, where Maroons waged a stubborn redoubt against the British in the past and still keep their traditions alive” (32), Okpewho foregrounds a crucial area of supra-rational cognition to account for certain enigmatic human experiences. Otis “is simply conscious of a power emanating from Guinea Man that pulls at his instincts, however much he tries to resist. On his part, Guinea Man has become increasingly conscious of an empathy between them. A gut feeling, not of blood ties, but of vaguely cognized paths of convergence” (39). Guinea Man’s doubts of the reality of blood ties with Otis notwithstanding, only the claims of a common Black ancestry can validate his intuitive awareness of their convergent paths. In the novel, Okpewho deals with the imperatives of roots and the creation of homes; he is fascinated by humans’ instinctive gravitation towards enduring truths as well as to blood ties in spite of the dictates of rational consciousness.
The anguished and often futile search for a “home” that is typical of the human lot is the leitmotif of *Call Me by Rightful Name*. Okpewho layers in his protagonist’s family history in order to further explore and develop the theme from various perspectives, from the metaphysical to the political. Otis’s African forebear, Akindiji, whose funeral obsequies were disrupted by the slave raiders, like the dead Alafin in Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*, wanders in the abyss and cannot reach home. His specter, however, ranges even beyond the pale of Otis’s psychologist, Dr. Fishbein’s most uncanny inferences. The doctor daringly probes Hampton’s slave ancestry: “Any dark deeds hidden in the collective amnesia of ancient plantation folk? How often in the past, as he built his way up the professional ladder, did Hampton crave to kill a white boss or set his place on fire?” (52). Fishbein finally dredges from the murkiness of his patient’s unconscious a hallucinatory recollection of the source of his ominous music, which establishes that disrupted ritual as emblematic of an epistemological rupture. The recollections, however, remain incomprehensible to both doctor and patient:

There’s a man, or maybe a woman. Saying things. A man, yes, a man. But I haven’t a clue who he is. Yes, he’s dancing, and there’s music. Many people. It’s very confusing, I can’t make out their faces. Men and women. But I can’t figure out any of them. God, they look so weird. And they’re all in a strange place . . . You’ve never been there before? . . . No, never. Never been here before . . . Think, Otis, you could have been there sometime but forgotten? . . . No — yes — no — no — no — No! (55)

Otis’s induced recollections are configurations of both temporal and spatial distances. The creatures he apprehends are “weird” and “strange” because he is both human and American. Okpewho depicts human memory as characteristically deficient and presents recollections—especially of previous existences—as necessarily vague. The images in the pivotal dancing episode are thus indistinct like Otis’s earlier recollection, under Fishbein’s promptings also, of his experience of virtual death by drowning and loss of consciousness in a pool: “I had started going down, when luckily, someone saw me and came to my rescue. Man, I thought it was all over with me! My mind was spinning, seemed like I was seeing things, like I was in another place. . . . Did you see anything familiar to you, in this other place? Not really, but all kinds of figures were just . . .” (54). Refracted through the prism of time and space, however, Otis’s memory of his previous incarnation can only function in context as an imperfect retrieval of lived experience. It becomes a symbolic authentication of the narrative of his forebears’ ageless daughters, the twins, Kehinde and Taiwo, who had been witnesses of the epochal events that culminate in his forebear’s abduction into slavery. But his recollections of the episode are also American, given his initial uncritical mimicry of prejudices that regulate Western perceptions of Africa and the African. The weird creatures cannot possibly be kindred of the fully Westernized African American. The iterative denials of the final line of the quoted passage (culminating in virtual hysteria) denote a deep anxiety to disclaim kinship. Okpewho’s two
complementary primary forms of excavations are Western and African, the former characterized by scientific procedures and sophisticated equipment, the other by a distinctive African embodied and oral archive of knowledge that both interrogates and complements the Western paradigm.

Okpewho’s exploration of the slave raid in which Akindijiji was a victim is meant to highlight the mode of oral transmission of history. His subtle location of the raid at the virtual end of the transatlantic slave trade is meant to account for the possible survival of the twins as witnesses of the events. Yet the novel’s mode of presenting the twins, especially at the outset, is certainly not in the realistic mode. Rather, they are presented as located in the timelessness of myth, a move typical of magical realism. They are Earth mothers, at the core of the community’s lore and embodiments of its collective memory: “They are so old, these women, they can quite literally see time pacing about the house. So tender they have learnt to welcome the cruel art it continually works on their bodies. So resigned to fate they no longer feel thankful to be alive nor desirous to die . . . so old the village sees no need of any history beyond them . . . these living monuments” (1). Participants in the disrupted ritual and survivors of the raid, the twins apparently cannot go “home” either. They are oracular in their expectation of the return of their brother, Akinbowale, carried off to slavery in the process of chanting their father’s oriki, to complete the ritual that will set them free.

Intimations of Otis’s presence in Africa as a return home are recurrent in the narrative, and his earliest experience of the continent foregrounds the idea of kinship:

Wow, so this is Africa! He’s never seen trees like these in his life. He remembers the story about Africans living on trees; he actually looks to see if he will find anything of the kind. He doesn’t. Instead, he sees people walking around, talking, laughing heartily. Just like blacks in America, but with an unconstrained abandon he’s never quite seen. In America, the idea that his ancestors came from Africa was little more than a romantic conceit. Here at the airport, if someone told him that any of the blacks he sees walking around was a distant relative, he would hardly dispute the idea. Wow, this is Africa? (105)

Okpewho clearly takes consummate delight in exploding colonial myths about Africa. By enhancing Otis’s sense of his African ancestry through his experience of the reality of the continent, the novelist suggests that African Americans’ inheritance of colonial attitudes to Africa often accounts for their bleached and inadequate conception of “home,” one that does not take the “Dark Continent” into consideration. Typically, it requires an experience as traumatic as Otis’s to undergo a fundamental transformation. The shattering of the Hamptons’ symbolic den of delusions releases them for a Lear-like search for identity and truth. Like Lear, Otis also experiences false epiphanies and is ultimately compelled to reassess initial impressions. He develops a sober concept of “home” even in Africa, a new awareness that incorporates antagonism and illuminates the historical circumstances that occasionally facilitated the slave raids. However, his sense of
home-coming is constantly set in relief in the narrative. By far the most fascinat-
ing indication is Okpewho’s dramatization of the compulsion that drives Otis to
the spot later confirmed as that of the disrupted ritual:

Otis moves briskly through the thick growth as though he knows the terrain. Pant-
ing and sweating, he is like one anxious to keep a tryst, totally oblivious of those
trailing behind him. At last he stops, looks this way and that, then dashes furiously
to a spot beside a massive iroko. He falls to his knees, uproots some of the growth,
and falls flat on his stomach, clutching the earth with both hands. He yells, rests his
head on the ground, and heaves a deep sigh . . . “It’s here.” (119–120)

Okpewho’s interest does not lie merely in the vehement compulsions of the
unconscious nor does it really lie in the demonstration of the virtues of magical
realism as a “narrative technique”; he wants to validate a supra-rational code
of cognition distinctive from Western science. This intention is clearly fore-
grounded in the novelist’s citation of a kindred experience from history as the
initial epigraph to the novel:

We may digress and ponder how a son of the descendants of Obi Ezechi ran all the
way from Ejime to Igbuzo, a distance of about 25 kilometres. It is said that he did
not know Igbuzo before. He was only told that his great grandparents migrated from
that town. He was a farmer and it is said that on occasions an animal called atu would
go to eat all the yams in his farm, even though his farm was in the middle of other
people’s farms. Nobody could understand why it was so until one day he left on a
race—nonstop—through the 25 kilometres between Ejime and Igbuzo and after
staying in the sacred bosom of Mother Oboshi, for several days, he came out of the
stream carrying huge stones and shouting that Mother Oboshi had crowned him.
After parading himself with the stones on his head, he went straight to Umuogwo
and to the spot where Obi Ezechi lived when he was alive, and deposited the stones
there. (n.p.)

The descendant of Obi Ezechi in Okpewho’s epigraph, much like Otis, acts
under the compulsion of powers beyond even his comprehension; like Otis also,
his intriguing ritual of redemption nonetheless reaffirms ascertainable historical
facts. The accumulation of uncanny experiences in the narrative—Otis’s recurrent
preternatural sensation of being familiar with his African environment; his tele-
pathic recognition of Akinwumi, the diviner; the traditional mystical annotations
of the scars on Otis’s body hitherto assumed to be mere birthmarks; his arrival at
the same age in which Akimbowale (whose reincarnation it is believed he is) had
been abducted into slavery—establishes Otis’s identity and his rightful name:
Akimbowale, meaning valor has returned home. Ironically, the crucial consequence
of Otis’s discovery of his African heritage is a clarification of his American des-
tiny: “However sentimental our attachment to the concept of Africa, we blacks
from this part of the world must learn to accept that the Africa of today is not
exactly the same as the Africa of our ancestors” (251). Otis’s acceptance of his
African American heritage enhances his grasp of the implications of his complex
patrimony by revealing the intellectual roots of his anxieties: “I recently came across an essay by W.E.B. DuBois where he talks about the double consciousness of black people in America. If I’m truly on the horns of a dilemma, let’s just say that my predicament has a respectable ancestry, at least in his thought!” (253).

Writing on magical realism, Moudileno is concerned that the unproblematic imposition of the rubric on the African/postcolonial writer in utter disregard of the actual, diverse, demonstrable narrative modes used in works of African fiction is ultimately an insistence that reveals “a sustained fascination with Africa inasmuch as it incarnates everything that is morbid, pathologically ill, and mysterious” (39). She further cites Liam Connell to denounce “the critical gesture by which magical realism is anchored in an indigenous specificity that stands in opposition to modernity,” aligning the postcolonial with magical realism entails a “hierarchical polarization between science and magic and the reiteration of the opposition between the West and the rest” (39).

Okpewho challenges the alleged superiority of science in comprehending the mysteries and marvels of the human spirit. He chooses psychiatry as a representative scientific Western discipline for the sophistication of its contemporary practice and apparatus. He equally demonstrates, however, the incompleteness of that discipline and how it can be complemented by oral African institutions. In her discussion of Helen Oyeyemi’s psychological portrait of the protagonist of *Icarus Girl*, Madelaine Hron notes Oyeyemi’s allusion “to the precarious emotional state and mental anguish experienced by many immigrants” and cites psychiatric studies to confirm that “Afro-Caribbean immigrants and second-generation blacks in the UK have much higher rates of schizophrenia than the rest of the general population” (38–39). Contending that Oyeyemi “deploys the child figure to represent the sociocultural and psychological alienation of the immigrant individual within the hybrid, magical space of childhood,” Hron identifies *Call Me by My Rightful Name* among the many third-wave Nigerian texts featuring immigrant characters that take up similar themes (39). Okpewho’s audacious insight is that African spiritist discourse is uniquely qualified to illuminate certain cases of black mental trauma that baffle classical European clinical diagnosis. By resolving the inconclusive diagnosis of a Western psychiatric clinic in oral African narratives, Okpewho validates the complementarity of various approaches to truth. He also demonstrates through the unique heritage of the African American a particular need of that complementarity, and privileges magical realism as the narrative mode par excellence for expressing a supra-rational worldview.

Okpewho’s citations of Stevenson’s 1961 award-winning essay, *The Evidence for Survival from Claimed Memories of Former Incarnations*, and his replication of Stevenson’s insights and position in the psychiatrist, Fishbein, clearly underscore Stevenson’s and his extra-literary scheme in *Call Me by My Rightful Name*. Dr. Fishbein’s disposition to modify his categories in the light of the revelations in Otis’s experience replicates Stevenson’s and is valorized as the novel’s ideal. Initially inclined to regard “specters of ancestral and other memory—previous lives, their later reincarnations, memories passed on from one existence to the next—as irrational
myths, encouraged by pseudoscientific forays into primitive religion, that have no place in the more serious science of neurological medicine,” Dr. Fishbein is eventually compelled to interrogate the universality of “Western rationalist paradigms” (133). He specifically refers to Stevenson’s work as representative of recent works on the subject of previous incarnations and recalls that like colleagues, he had read it with qualified faith: “Now, Stevenson’s argument makes more sense to him than it once did. He still needs to apply tests of ‘paranormal cognition’ to establish Otis’s previous life in this [Otis’s African] community. But, he now thinks, there may well be more to human life than ‘science’ has prepared him for” (133).

Okpewho’s allusion to Stevenson equally has scholarly precision when, confronted with the difficulty of transcribing Otis’s chant, Fishbein has recourse to an insight in current psychoanalytic scholarship: “Fishbein and his team were familiar with what in the profession went by the term of ‘xenoglossy’ — or, in the case of Otis’s chant, what a more recent scholar had called ‘recitative xenoglossy’” (58). Ascribing the term “xenoglossy” to Richet, Stevenson considers it a profitable mode of investigating “instances of apparent memories of former incarnations in which the rememberer speaks a foreign language quite unfamiliar in his ordinary state” (42). However, Stevenson makes a distinction between “recitative xenoglossy” — which aptly describes Otis’s experience of merely babbling words of a language he does not understand nor converse in — and “responsive xenoglossy,” in which the subject is capable of conversation in a foreign language (42). Advocating painstaking caution in examining or verifying apparent memories of former incarnations, Stevenson speculates that cases of responsive xenoglossy are particularly important. Since the subject could not have acquired knowledge of the foreign language by any normal means, the best explanatory hypotheses are possession and reincarnation. Stevenson’s conclusion is not a declaration of reincarnation as an irrefragable fact of life; he affirms instead sufficient justification for

a much more extensive and more sympathetic study of this hypothesis than it has hitherto received in the West [. . .] [W]e may in the end obtain more convincing evidence of human survival of physical death than from other kinds of evidence. In mediumistic communications we have the problem of proving that someone clearly dead still lives. In evaluating apparent memories of former incarnations, the problem consists in judging whether someone clearly living once died. This may prove the easier task and, if pursued with sufficient zeal and success, may contribute decisively to the question of survival. (43)

In his gripping tale of survival patterns, Okpewho illuminates the background that nurtures the belief and furnishes the compelling circumstances that interrogate the skepticism of both the Western scientist and the prejudiced African American. In the process, Okpewho articulates a seminal poetics of oral and embodied African archaeology that correlates to the spiritist discourse he expounds. He equally foregrounds how oral societies re-member, with regard to both mnemonic apparatuses and kinship re-integration patterns.
Paradoxically, however, in contesting the alleged universality of Western rationalist paradigms, Okpewho’s mimicry of colonial discourse on Africa occasionally reads like a replication of that discourse. His implication of African spiritist discourse in the overtly instinctual level of apprehension tends to perpetuate colonial portrayals of the African as primitive or as a child dependent on whims, incapable of conscious rational action—a portrait that became the ideological justification for the slave trade and colonialism. The novelist remarks on Otis’s initial subliminal apprehension of the voice of Ifa: “He heard none of those words. They had not been spoken into his ears, but implanted into his instincts” (3; emphasis added). In groping towards an understanding of the impact of Jamaican music and Guinea Man on him and their link with the mysterious powers that African music and speech had to torment him, Otis is led to value the instinct above reason: “Although the conventional wisdom of the growing black nationalism saw Africa as the common denominator to all black culture, those like Otis who hadn’t embraced the revolution saw this African essence as little more than a pious myth. At this point, however, Otis could no longer take anything that happened for granted. Instinct was steadily getting the better of reason” (40; emphasis added).

Okpewho’s transvaluation of the mysterious promptings of the instinct by associating them with the state of mystic revelation clearly establishes the counter-discursive goal of his novel. This notwithstanding, however, the valorization of instinct as a divine principle and as the distinctive African faculty, on occasion, reads like a reification of the colonial discourse he interrogates.

Notes

1. Harry Garuba notes that the popularity of the term “magical realism” to denote the representational practice it embodies (despite the existence of several other related terms) is due to the phenomenal success of Latin American practitioners of the mode. Arguing that “many of the literary techniques of the artists who have been labeled magical realist writers derive their warrant from traditional animist cultures” (275), he suggests “animist realism” as a broader and more appropriate term. In a similar vein, in his recently published memoir, There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra, Achebe identifies the works of the early Nigerian novelist, Amos Tutuola, as a “fantastical expression” of a form of indigenous African magical realism and reiterates that Tutuola’s work preceded Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s magnificent oeuvre by decades (113).

2. McCabe’s intriguing speculation that the slave trade was possibly “the material cause of abiku” (68) sets the limits of historicizing a myth that aims to comprehend and exorcize the horror of human transience in its most dreadful form of mysterious infant mortality. He considers the assumption that the West African “Slave Coast” marks the frontiers of the belief in “abiku” as substantial evidence that his theory is valid, but ignores the much older notoriety of the sub-region for the scourge of mosquito infestation and the endemicity of sickle cell anemia from which, as Obumselu suggests, the myth objectively evidently sought to provide a refuge (26).
Works Cited


