Nnedi Okorafor's Africanfutures, Sankofa, and the Echoes of Pan-Africanism

Elizabeth Abena Osei
University of Maryland
lisaabeosei@gmail.com

Kwabena Opoku-Agyemang
University of Ghana
kwabena.oa@gmail.com

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Abstract

Nnedi Okorafor's prolific writing embraces African speculative futures by delving into traditional African philosophies, lifestyles, experiences, and modes of being that cut across diverse African identities. We argue that Okorafor consistently imagines Pan-Africanist tropes by appropriating a medley of African cultural motifs into her texts. This is particularly true in her reappropriation of the Akan philosophical concept of Sankofa founded on the necessity to be grounded in the past to better engage with the future. Through the ensuing tradition-modernity dialectic, Okorafor presents modes of progress that imagines an Africa that moves away from Eurocentric notion of the continent. We will, in this essay, focus on Okorafor's novels *Zahrah the Windseeker* (2005), *Binti* (2015), and *Remote Control* (2021), set in Nigeria, Namibia, and Ghana respectively. Using these different spaces, Okorafor's work exudes Pan-Africanism by projecting various African cultures that promote identity in physical, social, and spiritual terms. Equally importantly, the different aspects of African culture that are employed in Okorafor's texts relate with each other in ways that elide and disregard hegemonic representations. This decolonial set of relationships underlines the value of representing African identity in the futuristic imaginations that characterize these purposively selected novels.

The three texts employ a wide selection of African cultural material that not only fuels character concerns, but also enhances thematic engagement with setting and other literary elements. This article examines how Okorafor achieves these literary aims by using Sankofa as her inspiration. Employing the concept of Sankofa to these ends further advances the course of decolonization by reclaiming history, culture, and power to de-center black speculative fiction from the generic conventions of white hegemonic science fiction. This exploration thus becomes a source of innovation for African-futures, thereby fitting directly into Okorafor's coinage of the term Africanfuturism: a breakaway from Afrofuturism.

Keywords

Speculative Fiction, Africanfuturism, Culture, Okorafor, Pan-Africanism, Sankofa

Introduction

In an interview with the *New York Times*, the Nigerian American writer Nnedi Okorafor recalls a time in the early 1990s when she visited Nigeria and asked her granduncle about Nsibidi, a sacred symbolic writing used for centuries by the Efik, Ejagham, Ibibio, and Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria and southwestern Cameroon. Despite the elder relative's strident refusal to discuss Nsibidi, Okorafor learnt about and eventually integrated the script into her creative output. We read this act of recovery as reflective of and foundational to Okorafor's literary craft: she positions historical aspects of African cultures as receptacles from which she draws inspiration, regardless of how controversial or disregarded they are. Incorporating the African past into her futuristic writing is characteristic of the Akan philosophical concept known as Sankofa, which considers history as a source of inspiration and direction. Sankofa is transliterated from Akan into English as return (san), go (kɔ), and take (fa), and is one of several Adinkra symbols that are native to the Akan of Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. The Sankofa bird also stars in oral folklore and is again found in the Akan proverb "sɛ wo wirefi na wo sankɔfa a, yenkyi," which essentially encourages a return to the past to pick ideas and lessons that are worth using for the present and the future.[1] Traditionally, Sankofa connects with examples of oral literature such as proverbs and folklore, even though it translates across other literary texts.[2] Okorafor adapts the tenets of Sankofa to validate the past and thereby present a progressive front that responds to incorrect notions that have framed the continent.

Employing the concept of Sankofa as a framework, we contend that Okorafor consistently imagines Pan-Africanist tropes by appropriating a medley of African cultural motifs that revolve around identity into her texts. This appropriation creates space for us to read Okorafor as embracing African historical particularities while acknowledging the role played by modern technology in ways that traverse the dialectic of a "traditional" Africa and a "modern" West. This contention allows for fresher ways of imagining a Pan-African presence in the global sphere that looks beyond the binary that is informed by a historical presentation of African traditional cultures as primitive and subhuman manifestations of the subliminal white self.

In this vein, a close reading of the novels *Zahrah the Windseeker* (2005), *Binti* (2015), and *Remote Control* (2021) allows us to explore the ways through which Okorafor's protagonists embrace echoes of the African past. This past is an eclectic range, and the ability to cut across space, time, and cultures to encompass the continent, its diaspora, and speculative imaginaries highlights Okorafor's vision of Pan-Africanism, which is situated within an Africanfuturist context. This vision tends to run through her work, as will be demonstrated. Beyond her adoption of various African cultural motifs, the three novels under scrutiny *Zahrah the Windseeker* set Nigeria, *Binti* in Namibia, and *Remote Control* in Ghana, show how Okorafor's body of work is fundamentally Pan-African. The choice to set her work in different African countries is a strong political statement that disregards

1 See Quarcoo, Osei, and Opoku-Agyemang for further context.
2 See Osei's research on film, and Opoku-Agyemang's research on digital literature.

the traditional limitation of the author's identity on ethnic or national lines. The varied settings thus serve as a trigger for the investigation into her vision of Pan-Africanism.

Pan-Africanism and the Potential of Speculative Fiction

Even though there are competing definitions of Pan-Africanism, at the core of each attempt is the desire to illuminate collaboration among African people, nations, and cultures that purposely traverse confines. These three parameters are of importance to this article and set the tone for Okorafor's Pan-African ethos. Okorafor's use of different African countries is also telling in this regard, even though we acknowledge the restrictive implications that stem from using the modern African nation-state as basis for identifying Pan-Africanism. After all, the nation-state is a modern creation of the 1884-5 Berlin conference that violently yoked together disparate kingdoms and states through artificial borders while disintegrating others. In other words, African countries as we know them are largely birthed from the violence of colonial convenience and are highly artificial in nature. Thus, understanding PanAfricanism as simply traversing these countries is limiting. As Obadele Kambon and Roland Mireku Yeboah note in "What Afrikan Names May (or May Not) Tell Us About the State of Pan-Afrikanism," (p. 569) Pan-Africanism revolves around embracing African identities and norms beyond single cultural confines. In other words, Pan-Africanism is able to exist within one set of artificial borders, provided more than one culture or ethnic group is referenced. The broad nature of Pan-Africanism is understood differently in other contexts that do not always acknowledge the connections with speculative fiction.

For example, when the scholar Horace Campbell looked ahead into the 21st century, four years before the turn of the millennium, his concerns about the future of Pan-Africanism were built on its "broad nature" and encompassed social, political, and cultural concerns ("Pan African Renewal in The 21st Century," p. 84-85). This wide scope probably explains why he did not adequately consider the role of creative expression, much less speculative fiction. While other research has toed Campbell's line, there is attention on the creative arts.[3] Research into the larger relationship between creative expression and Pan-Africanism includes work on events such as the Pan-African Theater and Arts Festival (PANAFEST) and the Year of Return held in Ghana and the Pan-African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO) held in Burkina Faso, as well as scholarly investigations into visions of Pan Africanism in modern African writers such as Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah, Ama Ata Aidoo, Sembene Ousmane, and Ngugi wa Thiongo'o. This scholarship has advanced themes in which Pan-African ideals were centered, consistent with research related to modern African literature.[4] Any turn into black speculative fiction is unfortunately inchoate, despite the tendency of such writing to traverse cultures and customs in radical ways. Scholarship associated with speculative fiction writers like Okorafor, for example, is usually shorn of fruitful connections with Pan-Africanism, a lacuna that this research seeks to address. Some research does consider identity in her work in relation to other topics such as the environment and climate change (Death, p. 241), gender (Hashemi et al, p. 85; Lindow, *Nnedi Okorafor*, p. 25; Oku p. 79), morality (Lindow, "Nnedi Okorafor,"

3 See Jaji (2014) for instance.
4 See representative research in Murphy; Fraser; Kumavie; Secovnie; and Orlando; as well as an overview by Temple.

p. 47), queerness (Ncube, p. 72), the body (Eze, p. 76), and imperialism (O'Connell, p. 292). By foregrounding Pan-Africanism and history, we add to this body of knowledge as we examine the importance of tradition in enhancing African unity and collaboration in Okorafor's novels.

Pan-African Visions in *Zahrah the Windseeker*, *Binti* and *Remote Control*

Zahrah the Windseeker is Okorafor's debut novel. Starring Zahrah, who lives in southwestern Nigeria, fictionalized as the Ooni Kingdom, it is her initial exploration of African elements. Zahrah is a 13-year-old girl born who can fly and whose hair is naturally locked with vines. She is, thus, a dada. In this novel, Zahrah embarks on an adventure to find a cure for her best friend Dari, who is bitten by a poisonous snake. She obtains the antidote - an unfertilized elgort egg – thereby allowing life to resume to normal after she cures Dari. Zahrah's experiences eventually make her a better and more mature windseeker.

Nnedi Okorafor's Binti is a coming-of-age story that presents a young Binti Ekeopara Zuzu Dambu Kaipka of Namib (located along the coast of Namibia), who is poised with intellect and a willingness to explore the potential of her technological prowess. Binti is a first generation Himba, which is an indigenous ethnic group on earth, and has been accepted into the prestigious intergalactic academic institution, Oomza University. As the story unfolds, readers witness Binti embracing new life and actively working to overcome various obstacles. Ultimately, she brokers peace between the Khoush and the Meduse at Oomza University.

The final text that we explore here is Remote Control. It follows the life of a young girl who is born Fatima, but later changes her name to Sankofa, in the town of Wulugu in Northern Ghana. At 4 years old, Fatima's love for nature leads her to merge with an element that was left over from a meteor shower. The plot hinges on her quest to discover her life's purpose while handling the strange power that seeks to control her. This quest carries her from Wulugu through to the south; a journey which ends only after she is able to restore the element to its roots. Remote Control raises thematic issues that center the exploitation of rural communities by political leaders and international corporations, female solidarity, and loss, as well as the grief associated with it.

Each of these three texts belongs to the genre of Black Speculative fiction which centers Afrocentric tropes and themes against the backdrop of technology, fantasy, magical realism, and science fiction. In what follows, the article will examine three ways through which Okorafor uses cultural elements in relation to physical identity, social identity, and spiritual identity to capture and center her vision of Pan-Africanism. In order to express Pan-Africanism as representing the "whole of the historical, cultural, spiritual, artistic, scientific and philosophical heritage of Africans" (Epochi-Olise and Monye), it is important that the three texts are examined as a collection of Okorafor's body of work. The Pan-African sentiment shared in the African Union Echo that: "Africans share not merely a common history, but a common destiny," becomes an avenue where Okorafor who is of Igbo/Nigerian origin recognizes this futuristic destiny of Africans and as such brings together various identities or representations against the backdrop

of shared colonial legacies to imagine it. Admittedly, the breadth of content in the three texts occasions the implicit assumption that we will pick and choose purposively, rather than attempt a comprehensive embrace.

Physical Identity: Hair and Bodies

In all three texts, the author focuses on hair as an identity and cultural marker that recalls resistance to imposed western standards while signalling novel paths forward for Black women. The significance of hair for Africans thus transcends mere beauty and aesthetics. Johnson and Bankhead in "Hair it is: Examining the experiences of black women with Natural Hair" observe that for centuries, hair, for both African women and men, was intricately woven to cultural identity, spirituality, character makeup, and notions of beauty, and included being a part of the unique language and communication system in the lives of Africans (p. 87). Upon encountering European colonizers who knew nothing about African hair (either with regard to its significance or maintenance), new standards for hair were forced upon black people. This imposition continued when slavery forcefully displaced millions through the Middle Passage. This journey to the west often lasted for about three months, and by then African hair had matted and become dense due to the lack of care while onboard these ships. Slave masters then decided to shave off the hair in order to eliminate the burden of hair care and increase productivity.

The effect of African hair being maltreated inadvertently led to the oppression of kinky hair, juxtaposing it with the long, silky, straight European hair that was considered beautiful and attractive. This consequently led to the constant need to find ways to "tame" this black hair by various means and make it as European looking as possible. Through education and religion, European standards of beauty continued to further sustain onto the African indigenes. It became and still is in some respects a mark of one's level of 'civilization'.

Accordingly, by wearing their hair in indigenous hairstyles, Okorafor's protagonists reclaim the past in forceful ways as they show how hair is an emotive, symbolic and inseparable part of their identity. All three harness the objectives of the natural hair movement and become signifiers of ancient African beauty standards from Nigeria, Namibia and Ghana in the future. Okorafor's depiction of hair, beyond connecting with similar concerns by contemporary writers such as Chimamanda Adichie, is therefore read as a pushback against current Western beauty standards and the often racist rhetoric around black and African hair types.

The politics of hair is a fundamentally Pan-African engagement that Okorafor employs to mark the physical identity of all three protagonists, to hearken to the past, and to cut across cultures in a decidedly Pan-African manner. While the protagonists in the first two novels have dreadlocks, Sankofa is bald. Both choices relate with the past, where African women across the continent tended to have either hairstyle.[5] They again set the stage for the opposition to embracing the African past, which Okorafor fights against through her protagonists.

Zahrah has a unique identity because, unlike the other children of the Kirki village in the Ooni Kingdom, she was born with Dadalocks which are indicative of special powers and a rebellious spirit. Binti also wears her hair in thick dreadlocks that her auntie calls "ododo" after the wild and dense ododo grass (p. 2). Binti admires her

5 See White and White (49-50).

thick hair and as the most conspicuous element of her identity, she is very particular about its appearance as such she goes through tedious means to ensure it is well moisturized by regularly applying a mixture of red clay and essential oils called otjize to it. Sankofa similarly maintains and protects her scalp with shea butter.

The use of otjize and shea butter are centuries-old practices that are a natural response to the hot desert-like conditions of Northern Namibia and Northern Ghana. Despite the products being from the place and thus suited to their environment, there is the contemporary tendency to privilege foreignness. In both countries, as is the case for many places in Africa, beauty and skincare products from North America, Asia, and Europe flood local markets, rendering African skincare practices archaic, obsolete, and undervalued. Even worse, some of these products are harmful, including skin bleaching creams.[6] In a time when foreign alternatives are steadily becoming mainstream, the decision of Okorafor to privilege these traditional practices serves to promote a return to the past in ways that have the potential to engender economic and cultural development, thus improving national and individual identity. The latter is more explicitly highlighted despite the undervaluing of natural hairstyles.

Zahrah and Binti are ridiculed and shunned due to their hair. The rarity of Zahrah's locks leads to fear from the townspeople, who bully her and call her names like: '"Vine head," "snake lady," "swamp witch," and "freak"' (p. 3). The verbal abuse recalls similar invectives that users of dreadlocks suffer both in Africa and the diaspora.[7] Despite initially believing the vicious nicknames and allowing those words to define her, Zahrah overcomes her submission to society's perception of her and embraces her hair which her mother sees as having positive dada qualities such as forcing her to hold up her head high. Similarly, at the launch station before she boards the spaceship to Oomza University, Binti being the only Himba girl to venture out into space, meets different nationalities such as the Khoush, who observe her through a condescending lens and pass snide comments and even feel entitled to touch her hair. In a conversation, they say her hair smells like "shit because it is shit" and wonder if it is real. They also call her ethnic group filthy dirt bathers (p. 6), recalling racist framings of the continent through a Eurocentric framework that traditionally fails to engage respectfully with African particularities. Despite these insults, Binti keeps her composure and even vouches to go to war if they physically touch her hair (p. 6). The high level of attachment she has with her hair symbolizes a connection to culture and heritage. The treatment of hair is very important to the Himba, as the different hairstyles connect with narrative. The orange-red color of the paste symbolizes the earth and the color of blood, that is, the essence of life. Thus, for the Himba, hair holds deep significant power. Hair is further politicized in *Binti* to throw light on prejudice associated with physical appearance.

Short and bald hairstyles have similarly been a part of African hair beauty culture for centuries. In parts of Northern Ghana, widows and children shave their heads to mourn husbands and parents respectively. Wives of kings and women in royalty in Akan culture also tend to go bald or have very short hair. As an orphan, then, Sankofa uses this hairstyle as a marker of mourning while textually explaining why she roams about without the guidance of her parents.

6 See de Souza.
7 There are numerous reports of such discrimination in Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, USA, and UK, among other places.

Social Identity: Naming and Agency

Names have a strong cultural connection with African identity. Kofi Anyidoho underlines this fact when he connects the names in Ayi Kwei Armah's novels to characterization (p. 36). Anyidoho posits that Armah uses names to simultaneously possess symbolic value and open windows to socio-cultural identities (p. 36). Okorafor similarly relies on African names, and social identity also includes food, language, clothing and social relations within the community. A combination of these factors depict the cultural heritage and national identity of the people in parts of Nigeria, Ghana and Namibia with gestures to African cultures outside of these spaces. By picking names from a medley of African cultures, Okorafor builds parallels between these cultures and emphasizes identity that unites these cultures under a Pan-African umbrella.

Her ability to build these equivalencies among disparate African cultures suggest modern connections to ancient examples such as Sundiata Keita's 13th century Mali Empire (which traversed Cote d'Ivoire to Guinea), and the Asante Kingdom under Opoku Ware I in the 18th century (when his kingdom spanned across Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana), among many other federal-style nation-states. As they united different kingdoms and states, they featured several cultures that influenced each other and hence shared similarities – for Ancient Mali, names among the Bambara translate to Wolof and the Fulani while among the Asante, names of royalty translate to the Gonja.

In *Remote Control*, Okorafor is deliberate in presenting a culture that is moving forward at its own pace while maintaining significant cultural elements such as language, clothing and community. Perhaps her most explicit nod to the African past is in her protagonist's name in *Remote Control*. Beyond the obvious harnessing of the past, the name Sankofa exudes Pan-Africanism because Fatima is from Wulugu, which means she is a Mamprusi; as such, the Akan name Sankofa indicates a crossover from one ethnicity to another. Even though both names are from the same country, it must be re-emphasized that having this crossover from ethnic group to ethnic group is an example of Pan-Africanism. Thus, by assuming the Akan name, Okorafor highlights her interest in cutting across African cultures. This interest is repeated in *Binti*, where Binti's name has Swahili origins even though she is a Himba. Similarly, Zahrah's name is Swahili, and living in Nigeria reinforces the Pan-African thread in terms of naming. While the act of naming allows Okorafor to create a transnational Pan-African culture, historical accounts also strengthen the link that she creates with the past.

It is also important to note that Zahrah and her family belong to the Ooni kingdom which gives credence to the link to Nigeria. The Ooni of Ile-Ife (Ọ̀ọ̀ni of Ilè-Ifẹ̀) is the traditional ruler of Ile-Ife and the spiritual head of the Yoruba. The Ooni dynasty existed before the reign of Oduduwa, which historians believe to have existed between the 7th and 9th centuries A.D. The evident return to the history here is an embrace of the tenets of Sankofa, allowing Okorafor to not only validate this past, but to show how a construction of the past can connect strongly with imaginations of the future in a Pan-African manner that privileges feminism. If feminist perspectives can help rethink understandings of Pan-Africanism, then it is important to not treat the question of women as divisive (Abass and Mama, p. 5).

Accordingly, another strong example of social identity that dominates the novels is the choice of young girls as protagonists. We read Okorafor's choice of young girls as

main characters as having two major implications – both in temporal senses. First and in a contemporary sense, Okorafor models her characterization along feminist lines by attributing high levels of agency to the girls, as she implicitly acknowledges the role that women played during the evolution of Pan-Africanism. From market women through journalists to activists and politicians, women were key to the fight for black independence across and beyond the continent; unfortunately, their roles are usually elided or repressed. Even though research is gradually revealing these hidden figures, more can be done.[8] Okorafor thus connects her heroines with these forebears. Alexander (2003) posits that as a movement, Pan-Africanism significantly emphasizes that solidarity and all-African alliance will empower self-reliance, especially allowing Africa's potential to prosper, empower, and fulfill the destiny of all African peoples globally, irrespective of their sex. Looking at the activities of women such as Amy Ashwood Garvey, Muthoni wa Kirima, Shirley DuBois, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Florence Matomela, Ardua Ankrah, Marie Koré, and Mabel Dove among others, the history of Pan- Africanism cannot be said to be complete (Azikiwe, 2016). Regardless of this, there is scanty information about their various contributions to the movement. Okorafor's inclusion of girls in her narratives furthers the conversation by questioning their absence.

Secondly, the emphasis on female protagonists who rely on the past is a creative way of highlighting the agency of women in pre-colonial Africa. Even though African women are typically framed as being subservient and reactive, in reality, prior to the contact with European values and ideals, African women had autonomy. Okorafor's strong characterization that runs through the novels thus emphasizes their agency in the past, allowing for a rethink of how girls behaved in such times. This is especially since *Zahrah the Windseeker* for example is set in pre-colonial Africa. Characterizing Zahrah as spunky and feisty helps to reimagine social relations by giving life to (a mostly lost) history.

Spiritual Identity: Africanjujuism and the Reclamation of African Mysticism

This forgotten history is reclaimed again through a return to a traditional African spiritual identity, intended to validate the past and by so doing, remind the reader of the importance of moving forward with cultural aspects of history that are not always regarded as helpfu. All three novels underscore an essence of African mysticism, which Okorafor employs to especially project what she terms as Africanjujuism. She does this in response to the spillover from imperial historiography and Eurocentric accounts that positioned Africa as a dark continent, and manages to relate to the world in African terms with African labels. She boldly returns to certain ancient or abandoned practices which could risk perpetuating racist stereotypes. Like her quest for Nsibidi, Okorafor's novels venture into this aspect of the African past and portray African magic, rituals, and customs without apology.

In *Zahrah the Windseeker*, despite the setting of a Yoruba kingdom, Okorafor relies on Igbo mysticism by using the evil forest as a leitmotif. She calls it the Forbidden Greeny Jungle, which serves as a site for mysterious elements, creatures and wonders. It is characterized as a forbidden space whose only parts are its outskirts.

8 See Parpart (2019) and Falola and Amponsah (2012).

As the narrator states: “Once one went a few miles in, everything grew ragingly wild. And anyone who ventured in was not likely to come out” (p. 108). Similar to how Okorafor disregarded the admonishing of her elder relative, Zahrah and Dari are curious to understand the Jungle (p. 106).

The Forbidden Greeny Jungle is a nod to Chinua Achebe’s treatment of the evil forest in his seminal *Things Fall Apart* where the people of Umuofia bury the evil and cursed.[9] Recalling Achebe allows Okorafor to entrench her work even deeper in Pan-Africansim, not least due to the tenets that guided Achebe’s work. In *Things Fall Apart*, the evil forest is stylistically juxtaposed with the vibrant market - it is thus believed to be inhabited by evil spirits and is a no-go area. This notion is disregarded by the European colonizers who build a church there. When the church survives in the evil forest, it becomes a point of reference for challenging the long held traditions of the people of Umuofia. What is implicit in this shift in cultural codes is the subsequent inability of such edicts to provide caution to the people, as the punitive sanctions lost their potency. As a result, the environment for instance has consistently been destroyed across the continent due to this lack of punishment when sacred spaces are desecrated. By placing the antidote for Dari in the Forbidden Greeny Jungle, Okorafor enhances the positive role that such mysticism plays. Through Zahrah’s eventual return, Okorafor reimagines the evil forest as a site for recuperation and not a trigger for loss. This turn is important because, whereas there is the tendency of mainstream educators to view the introduction of Christianity as bringing positive effects in Africa, the Forbidden Greeny Jungle decenters and devalues European involvement in challenging African spiritual traditions.[10] The turn of events is made by the Africans themselves after gaining experiential knowledge.

African mysticism in *Binti* is displayed through traditional belief systems, customs and rituals as well as possession of talismans of protection. Within this portrayal lies the reclamation and use of African mysticism, cosmologies, and ritual culture. In the futurist space of *Binti* for instance, the Himba do not worship colonial deities such as the Christian Jesus or the Muslim Allah. Instead, in this setting, the Himba people pray to and give praise to the Seven. It is unclear who or what these seven are - the Himba worship the deity Mukuru in actual fact - but according to Binti, one of the Seven willed life from rich red clay soaked in rain. “That clay was Mother, otjize. I was clay now.” (p. 199) While the story told here is obviously not the Himba origin story, Okorafor’s narrative resonates with creation stories all over Africa, which usually position natural material in their environment as crucial to the making of the world. The Fulani for instance use milk, true to their nomadic lifestyle; among the Akan, the fufu pestle is prominent in one origin story; the Fon and Ewe feature the serpent, which is native to their areas; the Zulu have their creator emerge from reeds, which are a feature of their landscape; and the Kono use mud liberally in their story.[11] The polytheistic nature of Okorafor’s origin story is again emblematic of most African origin stories.

Aside from these customs and rituals, Binti possesses an important element of the African past—a talisman. This talisman comes in the form of an ancient indigenous technological device called the edan, which not only protects her from evil and external fatal attacks, but also helps her communicate

9 See Edoro-Glines, A. (2018) and Njoku et al (2017).
10 In Ghana for instance, basic school students learn about the positive effects of colonialism.
11 Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu and Ejikemeuwa J. O. Ndubisi (2021) explain further."

directly with the Meduse. It functions purely through magic and is poisonous to Meduse. It saves her from an attack on a ship and explains why her friend Okwu watches her sessions with Okpala (p. 102). In a Facebook post dedicated to the book, she explains that the edan was inspired by the idea of a Yoruba talisman; as such, Okorafor incorporates it to function as a magical GPS. She concludes: "my mind took his story and ran with it."[12] Talismans are a significant part of African culture and historically, have been used for protection from evil spirits or evil 'eyes" even though they are sometimes figured as demonic and backward.[13]

African mysticism in *Remote Control* is not as prominently gestured to as the first two novels, as Okorafor creates an overlap between magic and technology. Because Sankofa gets her powers after her encounter with the meteorite, it is difficult to determine where technology ends and when spirituality begins. This melding and merging allows Okorafor to experiment with definitions of magic and technology, thus making magic and science appear to start and end in each other. It could be that Okorafor is underlining the quotidian engagement with the two forms by showing that perspective determines what is magical and what is technological. Okorafor moves the idea of Pan-Africanism away from possible teleology

All in all, the deployment of African mysticism by Okorafor, serves to "envision a future that overturns preconceived notions of Africa" (Moore, p. 9). She harnesses and rewrites them in a way that exudes pride without being condescending. Okorafor does not base technological advancements on science as we know it, but based on mysticism and the inexplicable supernatural or what is known to Africans especially West Africans as "juju" (black magic). Her use of mysticism in the futurist African space is crucial, especially in debates concerning the significance of sacred beliefs of colonized or marginalized people. While the sacred elements of the marginalized has so often been relegated to primitivism and the archaic, other Western forms of the sacred have often been perceived, transformed and appropriated as a means of local empowerment (Ashcroft et al, p. 212). Through her positive rendering of these aspects of African culture, Okorafor is loud in her praise of history, tradition, and identity.

Conclusion: Pan-Africanism and Africanfuturism

In this article, we demonstrate how the concept of the return enhances a reading of these three novels. Okorafor acts as the Sankofa bird who retrieves African cultural notions of identity from the past and productively engages with it in this viable future where Zahrah, Binti and Sankofa reside. Okorafor's return to indigenous African cultural norms recalls a long history of African creative writers who contend with Eurocentric discourse that attacks African identities.

The concept of return which is analogous with the Sankofa theory allows Okorafor to build a catalogue that privileges Pan-African ideals as a philosophy that represents the whole of the historical, cultural, spiritual, artistic, scientific and philosophical heritage of Africans in all ages. Her selection from a wide panoply of African culture presents a united front for Africa in the futures she creates. The

12 https://www.facebook.com/BintiNovella/photos/the-edan-the-idea-for-the-edan-in-binti-came-to-me-when-a-close-friend-who-is-yo/1628971407360987/

13 See Agboada (2021).

notion of return as imagined by Okarafor should not imply the absence of progress in the dichotomy between tradition and modernity. Okorafor is interested in showing how African society can evolve in ways that ensure development.

The adoption of Sankofa is not intended to idealize the past through a nostalgic lens; rather, the past is understood as containing a medley of cultural motifs that cut across African cultures and have positive or negative potential, depending on how they are viewed and used. In other words, the return to the past requires thorough sifting to choose what is helpful and avoid what is harmful. Nevertheless, this simultaneous act of suppressing and selecting can risk creating hierarchies where certain aspects of the selected past are privileged over other parts. And yet, this is not the case with Okorafor, who relies on African tradition in ways that suggest a uniform level of respect and regard for what she chooses to influence her work.

Whilst Okorafor's work tends to be subsumed under Afrofuturism, a term coined by Mark Dery in an attempt to define black science fiction, Okorafor is specific in categorizing her work as what she terms as Africanfuturism.[14] We tie this act to her Afropolitan background: as a Nigerian born in America, she is particular about maintaining her African identity especially in a "foreign" space. This desire connects with her categorical refusal to have her work identified under the broad collective Afrofuturism: according to her, this term lacks the required nuance to cater for works outside of African-American signification, with the attendant limiting implications for African speculative writers.[15] She finds Afrofuturism to be rooted within American culture, therefore militating against its ability to accommodate the tenets of African speculative writing tenets. She thus problematizes and delineates the reasons for the need for a unique term for African speculative writing for purposes of specificity, interpretation, and control.

On the surface, this opinion appears to have the potential to undercut her gestures to Pan-Africanism. After all, it could appear that Africanfuturism is a fracturing of Afrofuturism. We however opine that by refusing to be subsumed under the umbrella of Afrofuturism, Okorafor does not necessarily problematize the definition of Afrofuturism but proffers a solution to broad categorizations. This term allows Okorafor to gain control of and make room for African speculative writing: she sheds insight into ways in which types of writing require specific labels to cater for their complex identities. Additionally, Okorafor provides subcategories such as Africanjujuism which she states is a subcategory of fantasy that respectfully acknowledges the seamless blend of true existing African spiritualities and cosmologies with the imaginative. This quest of hers mirrors with her consistent reminder to her non-African audience (non-African) that Africa is not a country but is a diverse continent.

By privileging Africanfuturism, Okorafor, centers Africa in a way that heightens a Pan-African vision where African works are not subsumed under diaspora, but rather achieve a two-fold aim: stand on their own on the one hand; and expand notions of black speculative fiction on the other hand. By having its own subgenre of science fiction, narratives such as hers can engage more intimately with African spaces and promote works that center the continent while being respectful of its diaspora.

14 See Lavender and Yaszek.
15 Okorafor occasionally makes this argument on twitter.

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