

# Cultural Practices and Africanfuturism in Nnedi Okorafor's Binti Trilogy

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## **DIPLOMSKI RAD**

Cultural Practices and Africanfuturism in Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti* Trilogy  
Kulturni običaji i afrički futurizam u *Binti* trilogiji Nnedi Okorafor

Dvopredmetni diplomski studij anglistike, smjer engleska književnost i kultura  
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In loving memory of my beloved Grandfather (Baa),

Alagie Demba Jobe  
1918 – 22 Aug 2008

Thank you for all the support, and for constantly visiting me in my dreams. This is for us!

Forever in my heart,

Abdoulie Jobe

18 Sept 2023

Ime i prezime studenta: Abdoulie Jobe

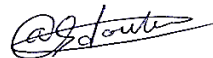
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## Introduction

This thesis will analyse the *Binti* trilogy by Nigerian American author Nnedi Okorafor. As the author of this thesis is of Gambian background, the purpose was to see whether Okorafor's assistance on the difference between Africanfuturism and Afrofuturism is easily detectable in her Trilogy and whether Africanfuturism as an sf genre can convey important topics. Since the trilogy is known primarily to the American sf readers, for the clarity of discussion that ensues, it is useful to start with the summary of the trilogy.

*Binti: The Complete Trilogy* is a series of science fiction novels by Nnedi Okorafor. The series includes the following three parts: *Binti* (2015), *Binti: Home* (2017), and *Binti: The Night Masquerade* (2018).

*Binti* introduces the reader to the protagonist named “Binti Ekeopara Zuzu Dambu Kaipka of Namib“, a sixteen-year-old girl from the Himba tribe in Namibia who gains admission into a prestigious university of Oomza on another planet. Binti, who is gifted mathematically and also inherits her father's ability as a master harmoniser, refuses to inform her family that she is going to study in a faraway galaxy because the Himba tribe does not travel outside their land. Binti faces numerous challenges on her way to Oomza University. Her ship, which is a living thing called Third Fish, gets attacked by the jellyfish-like creatures called the Meduse. The Meduse have a long history of conflict with a human tribe from planet Earth, known as the Khoush. The attack leaves everyone onboard the ship killed except the pilot and Binti, whose life, because of her “edan”—an unknown functionless device which later activates to enable Binti to communicate with the Meduse—gets spared. However, Binti gets stung by the Meduse, which results in her hair changing its original texture, and also further enhances her power to communicate with them without using her edan.

*Binti: Home* reveals Binti's new life and adjustments at the Oomza University. Binti makes friends with a young Meduse girl called Okwu, who is part of the group that attacked the Third Fish on Binti's way to Oomza. She also befriends different species. However, life at Oomza University gets difficult for her because of her traumatic experience in the Third Fish. Binti blames herself for running away from home, and the thought of her Meduse-like hair makes her feel impure. This leads her to plan a trip back home after a year at Oomza University, to perform a traditional rite, i.e. a pilgrimage to purify herself once again. Binti brings along Okwu with her upon the concluded peace

agreement she brokered between the Meduse and the Khoush. They are welcomed by both the Himba tribe and the Khoush. However, not everyone in the Himba tribe is happy with her. During their short stay, Binti encounters the “Night Masquerade”, a mythical creature symbolic to the Himba tradition which is only seen by deserving men in her society. She is taken away against her will by the Enyi Zinariya to their land in the desert. Unbeknownst to Binti, she is part Enyi Zinariya on her father’s side. The Enyi Zinariya are a technologically advanced society gifted with microbes that enable long distance communication by using their mind. With Binti having a part of their gene, they manage to activate these microbes inside her. On her way back home, Binti, accompanied by a young Enyi Zinariya boy Mwinyi, who is also a master harmonizer, receives the news that the Khoush tribe attacks Okwu who waits for Binti’s return to her family home. Binti hurries home to find out the fate of Okwu and her own family.

The third and final book, *Binti: The Night Masquerade*, opens with Binti again brokering a peace agreement between the Meduse and the Khoush and the members of the Himba community. In doing that, she summons the “deep culture” as a master harmonizer. However, the Himba elders decide to betray her by not showing up during the peace deal. Binti’s childhood friend, Dele, who initially refuses to have anything to do with her, shows up to show support and strength by wearing the Night Masquerade costume. After nearly succeeding to strike the deal, someone accidentally shoots, leading to an exchange of fire between the Khoush and the Meduse, and Binti dies during the crossfire. Binti’s family, to everyone’s surprise, survives the attack under the protection of the “Undying Tree” – a tree upon which their home is built. Her family prepares Binti’s dead body to be sent to the rings of Saturn, accompanied by Mwinyi and Okwu, because it was her wish to visit Saturn. Oomza University sends “New Fish”, a recently birthed child of the Third Fish, to transport Binti. On their journey to the far away galaxy, Binti resurrects due to the heavy presence of microbes in New Fish. As a result, she is now genetically connected with New Fish. This means that she cannot travel further than five miles away from New Fish. While Binti waits to inform her family that she is alive, she learns that she is likely to pass on her tentacle hair to her children, and that they might also be connected to New Fish. Ultimately, Binti is no longer just a Himba girl, but also a hybrid of the Meduse, Enyi Zinariya, and New Fish. Her full name is now “Binti Ekeopara Zuzu Dambu Kaipka Meduse Enyi Zinariya New Fish of Namib”.

The thesis will argue that Okorafor’s *Binti* trilogy discusses the topics of science fiction and African/black spaces, gender, race, Afro and Africanfuturism,

postcolonialism, society through the lens of the habitus, social and physical space, ritual and cultural practices, science and spirituality, and post- and transhumanism in a very informative manner, enabling the reader not only to enjoy the expected futuristic framework but also to learn about cultural practices of a given African space. Moreover, the Trilogy makes it clear that the experience of Okorafor's protagonist Binti does draw on African and not African-American experience, which testifies to Okorafor's insistence on Africanfuturism as a working term for African and African diasporic writers whose main focus is on African experience.



## Science Fiction and African/Black Space

Exploring alternate realities, both past, present and future, are common themes in science fiction. The possibilities of exploring the ever-evolving stories and experiences from different cultures and societies create opportunities for imaginations, while exposing readers to societies and correlations. According to the leading sf scholar, Darko Suvin,

sf has started from a pre-scientific or proto-scientific approach of debunking satire and naïve social critique, and moved closer to the increasingly sophisticated natural and human sciences. The natural sciences caught up and surpassed the literary imagination in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the sciences dealing with human relationships might be argued to have caught up with it in their highest theoretical achievements but have certainly not done so in their alienated social practice. (378)

Indeed, in the early or “proto” stages of science fiction, Africa and other non-European places were considered exotic. The way in which they were explored by science fiction writers were deeply rooted in the Eurocentric perspective, accompanied by colonial prospects, and other stereotypes. According to Mark Bould’s introduction of Africa in Science Fiction, “Africa has had a place in science fiction imagination as long as the genre existed” (“Africa Sf: Introduction” 8). Bould mentions several sf works such as Jules Verne’s *Cinq semaines en ballon/Five Weeks in a Balloon*, or, *Journeys and Discoveries in Africa by Three Englishmen* (1863) and *Aventures de trois Russes et de trois Anglais dans l’Afrique australe/The Adventures of Three Russians and Three Englishmen in South Africa* (1872) that feature scientific expeditions across the African continent, which also forms a backdrop for non-science-fictional adventure, as is the case in *Un capitaine de quinze ans/Dick Sand, A Captain at Fifteen* (1878). Majority of these works however, focus on expeditions by European explorers into different parts of Africa. Therefore, visibility of African literary tradition, cultural identities and heritage is non-existent in these early sf works.

Bould (“Africa Sf: Introduction” 9-10) further identifies a series of early science fiction novels written by white settlers in South Africa, who appropriated African imagery to construct futuristic utopian spaces. These writers include clergyman Joseph J. Doke,

printer Archibald Lamont's *South Africa in Mars* (1923), architect and illustrator William M. Timlin's *The Ship that Sailed to Mars* (1923), farmer and occasional journalist Leonard Flemming's *A Crop of Chaff* (1925), and University of Witwatersrand history professor Arthur M. Keppel-Jones's *When Smuts Goes: A History of South Africa from 1952 to 2010* (1947). They explored Africa as a setting of their "lost race" or "lost world" novels.

However, the establishment of sf as a genre during the Golden Age of Science Fiction did not help cancel the stereotypes of Africa and blackness already embedded in those early proto-sf narratives. Mark Bould detects that during the increased popularity of sf in the States in the 1950s-70s, futuristic tales imagined a "colour-blind" future, imagining humanity as belonging to one race and one culture. As Bould argues:

This shared assumption accounts for the relative absence of people of color from such sf: if race was going to prove unimportant, why even bother thinking about it, when energies could instead be devoted to more pressing matters, such as how to colonize the solar system or build a better robot? And so questions of race remained as marginalized as black characters [...]. (Bould, "The Ships Landed Long Ago" 177)

Indeed, even Darko Suvin's famous definition of science fiction as the literature of cognitive estrangement, published in his influential 1972 paper "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre" was completely based on the study of the white male American and European science fiction corpus. Even though the key tropes may still be valid, the genre, as will be shown, had to be bent and moulded to suit the needs of non-mainstream sf writers of African descent.

However, irrespective of early sf's very problematic relationship with race, the 1960s-80s period witnessed a very noticeable rise in indigenous African and diasporic African science fiction writers. Bould ("Africa Sf: Introduction" 10-11) lists some of the most prominent indigenous African sf novels that appeared in this period, such as Algeria's Mohammed Dib's *Who Remembers the Sea* (1962), Congo's Sony Labou Tansi's *Life and a Half* (1977), Senegal's Ousmane Sambene's *The Last of the Empire* (1981), Ghana's Victor Sabah's *An Imaginary Journey to the Moon* (1972), and Ghana's Kojo Laing's *Woman of the Aeroplanes* (1988). Bould's list also includes other

indigenous African sf writers coming from other African countries such as Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Mauritius, South Africa, and Zambia.

What has gradually become visible is that indigenous African and diasporic African sf writers, especially in the recent years

not only develop[...] the long history of apocalyptic sf in particular ways, but also offer a counter-narrative to the futures industry's relentless, opportunistic depictions of Africa as a dystopia, crumbling under the weight of natural and man-made cataclysms, which only Western corporations can save. (Lisa Yaszek qtd. in Bould, "Africa Sf: Introduction" 12)

However, it is obvious that throughout its history sf has had a very uneasy relationship with race and ethnicity. According to Elisabeth Anne Leonard, "[s]cience fiction and the criticism of the genre have so far paid very little attention to the treatment of issues relating to race and ethnicity" (253). One could strongly argue that due to these reasons, black writers decide to come up with different sub-genres in order to better convey their true experiences in a way that contradicts the "official version". As Leonard continues,

since racism often appears different to members of a minority than to members of a majority or dominant culture, what one white writer or reader perceives as a socially progressive work might be seen by a reader of colour as engaging with racist tropes or as an appropriation of the values and concerns of a minority culture. When sf writers, white or not, include racial issues in their fiction, they enter a territory bounded on one side by readers who feel that the work does not go far enough to address the social ills of the culture they write in and on the other by readers who think it goes too far (254).

Leonard also claims that science fiction writer can use their imaginative possibilities to hypothesize worlds with existing social problems, whether resolved or magnified, and also introduce their own cultures and experiences (252). In addition to these imaginative ways, they also use other forces such as introducing their own cultures and experiences, as well as their publishers' and audience's expectations in a way that distorts or trivialises the realities, cultures and experiences of the societies they write about.

The issue of race is still a crosscutting topic in science fiction, where mainstream, mostly Eurocentric writers, either disregard the issues or carefully use terms that appear as if the racial discourse is an already settled matter. As Leonard goes further,

This may be a conscious model for a future society, or a gesture to ‘political correctness’ by an author whose interests in the story lie elsewhere, but either motive avoids wrestling with the difficult questions of how a non-racist society comes into being and how members of minority cultures or ethnic groups preserve their culture. (254)

To show how mainstream sf writers sweep burning racial and colonial issues under the carpet, Leonard analyses the novel *A Miracle of Rare Design* (1994) by famous multi-award-winning sf writer Mike Resnick, as the novel displaces the tensions between African culture and European culture by focusing on “human” vs “alien” conflict. The story focuses on the explorer Xavier William Lennox, who studies the native “Fireflies” on the far-away world of Medina in order to negotiate the deal with them on behalf of humankind so that humans can get mining rights for Medina’s diamonds. As an ambassador of the Department of Alien Affairs, he will receive complex surgeries to look like a firefly and negotiate the deal. According to Leonard, the novel “evades any meaningful examination of marginalization and postcolonial conflict” (255), and remains silent as to “how the dominant culture is shaped by the minority culture (256). Indeed, the novel reads as history of colonialism. The story is told from the coloniser’s perspective and narrates how aliens (the colonised) and their territories get invaded. Logically, such stories make no mention of aliens’ experiences in a way that the aliens can relate to, as if their existence or history begins from the moment they get “discovered” by humans, and not before that.<sup>1</sup>

It seems that science fiction writers and scholarship still have a long way to go in their futuristic portrayals and discussions that draw on the African continent. In that

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<sup>1</sup> The same problem surrounds blackness in contemporary sf cinema. According to Adilifu Nama in his book *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film* (2008), “In numerous SF films, black people are missing, or if they are present, they are so extremely marginalized and irrelevant to the narrative that they are, for all intents and purposes, invisible. The exclusion, however, of black representation in SF cinema is not unique to the genre” (10). Although the situation has been improving over the years, many sf films featuring black people and black stories are often surrounded by racial prejudice and stereotypes, crime, starvation and wars. Additionally, continents such as Africa, which is rich in heroic stories, cultural diversity, wildlife and nature, are portrayed as merely a crime scene, a war zone and a conquered territory.

regard, the work by Nnedi Okorafor as a Nigerian-American female author plays an important role as the *Binti* Trilogy enacts those issues that have been neglected or simplified by mainstream sf writers, and two of those issues are gender and race.

## Gender and Race in Sf

One of the most notable features of contemporary sf according to Adam Roberts is the ways writers portray the logic of gender. His work investigates different aspects in which gender is defined by the unspoken masculinist assumptions of the proper role for women, as well as the sophisticated approaches to questions of gender connected to the first and second waves of feminist theory from the 1960's to the present day.

Roberts believes that one of the reasons why feminists criticise sf is due to the fact that women are a relatively recent arrival in the genre. He continues to argue that sf as a genre started as almost exclusively male, written and purchased by men, during its so-called Golden Age, which constituted of writers such as Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein and Arthur C. Clarke, through the editorial work of John W. Cambell in his *Astounding Science Fiction* journal. Such early works focused on machines, wars, physical prowess and male heroes. As a result, women who were interested in reading sf did so with a sense of being alienated and as sidelined spectators (Roberts 72). However, it should be noted that since the sf, that appeared in the 1930-50s period, constructed its male protagonists in a very stereotypical way (as strong white heteromales), this consequently also made feminist critique even harsher. Roberts goes on to argue that although sf is often considered a male territory especially in the 1930s and 1940s, women writers were already present, such as C. L. Moore and Leigh Brackett. However, their writings often entailed either male voices or non-gender-specific names; or even women writers who assumed masculine identities and referred to themselves as “female men”, so as to avoid prejudice both on the side of the editors and the readers.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the feminist intervention introduced writers such as Marion Zimmer Bradley, Andre Norton and Ursula Le Guin. These female writers pioneered the successful establishment of popularity of the body of sf written by women and read in large parts by women. For example, Andre Norton wrote a series of fantasy novels including her reworking of a Tolkien style of fantasy epic from a female point of view (Roberts 73). Roberts also mentions various female sf writers including Alice Sheldon who went by the masculine name “James Tiptree”, and Joanna Russ. He argues that one of the ideas behind Joanna Russ's essay “The Image of Women in Science Fiction” is that there are a lot of images of women in science fiction, however, the articulation of speculative innate personality differences between women and men, sex

and gender roles, as well as family structure, does not exist (Roberts 78). He goes further to mention the importance of *Star Trek* TV series as one of the most instrumental works that introduced a large body of female fans to sf. According to him, this success was not based on technology or male-ego strands; rather, it was the way in which the series represented human and other-than-human interactions and social dynamics, as well as its openness to representing difference – that was what mattered. As he maintains,

The encounter with the alien is at the core of *Star Trek* and of most sf; and questions of difference, of alien-ness and otherness, were also powerful and relevant to the female perspective on the old patriarchal world. This is why the show built up, and maintains, so large a female audience. Nor is this female audience merely a body of passive viewers; there is a vigorous and wide-ranging body of fanzines and even fan-authored novels based upon the *Star Trek* universe (Roberts 75).

The way aliens are used to encode female experience, according to the author, is to counter the notion that in a patriarchal society, women are alienated. This society insists that one has to be “male” in order to be “human”. As a result, aliens are used to express female experience (Roberts 79). In that respect, Roberts refers to Jenny Wolmark’s observation that,

The science fiction convention of the alien attempts to present other-ness in unitary terms, so that “humanity” is uncomplicatedly opposed to the “alien”; both [Gwyneth] Jones and [Judith] Butler focus on the way in which the opposition seeks to suppress the others of both gender and race by subsuming them within a common-sense notion of what it is to be human (Wolmark qtd. in Roberts 79).

One could agree with Roberts that aliens do not always represent defiance or aggression but they also embody some sense of awareness towards difference in various ways such as race, culture and gender.

Lisa Tuttle also remarks that until the 1970s and the beginning of feminist sf, women were present in sf, but only as objects or aliens. As she goes further, before this change in the 1970s, “when women do appear they are usually defined by their relationship to the male characters, as objects to be desired or feared, rescued or

destroyed; often, [...] women characters exist only to validate the male protagonist as acceptably masculine". Tuttle also lists the most frequent functions women characters have in sf:

women in sf have been represented most frequently by a very few stereotypes: *the Timorous Virgin* (good for being rescued, and for having things explained to her), *the Amazon Queen* (sexually desirable and terrifying at the same time, usually set up to be "tamed" by the super-masculine hero), *the Frustrated Spinster Scientist* (an object lesson to girl readers that career success equals feminine failure), *the Good Wife* (keeps quietly in the background, loving her man and never making trouble) and *the Tomboy Kid Sister* (who has a semblance of autonomy only until male appreciation of her burgeoning sexuality transforms her into Virgin or Wife).

Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti* trilogy embodies and challenges past and existing gender stereotypes about black African women who traditionally tend to fluctuate between the timorous virgin, the good wife and the tomboy kid sister function. By constructing the strong autodiegetic narrator Binti, who is a young independent African woman, Okorafor does not only challenge and cancel stereotypes from the mainstream sf, but also scrutinises traditional womanhood that stems from the African continent, as will be discussed anon.

Gender in Okorafor's Trilogy is also interlinked with race. Roberts examines the aspects of the representation of blackness in sf. According to him, "various texts have used 'space aliens' or 'robot' as a straightforward coding for blackness" which he refers to as a mere representation of "straightforward demonization" (Roberts 94). The representation of the black body, which is often described as violent, barbaric and monstrous, is the expression of racism by mainstream writers. This has caused black writers to effectively use their positions and experiences as the alienated, to create their own depictions. According to Roberts (95-96), the two most influential black, i.e. African American science fiction authors that became well-known are Samuel Delany in the 1960s and Octavia Butler in the 1980s. Roberts believes that Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy,

Manages to create alien species that are genuine in their otherness without reducing them to the discourse of violent threat, although Butler is very precise



when it comes to delineating the human terror and violence in the face of the radically strange. But there are many other examples of works that detail otherness in a fertile conjunction with blackness, that do so with subtlety and suggestiveness, and in a popular idiom (Roberts 96).

Representing blackness, Roberts continues, is not just a question of representing their characters or black protagonists in science fiction; instead, the purpose is to point out racial identity or blackness from a point of view that is different from a limited white perspective, as well as to reveal the issue of race as a hidden issue that is inadequately talked about. He insists that Moorcock's *The Land of Leviathan* (1974) representation of the charismatic black dictator called Hood, creates awareness "of the centuries of violence against black that constitutes American history, against which Hood is only reacting" (Roberts 97). Roberts agrees with Samuel Delany, who believes that sf novels should not only aim at the political correctness or unspoken decencies regarding race, but complex interactions between cultures and race (98).

Nnedi Okorafor explores similar issues when it comes to oppression of women in African societies. The reader is not only exposed to Binti's individual experiences, but also encounters that of the other human tribes. When Binti first meets her therapist, Saidia Nwanyi, a Khoush at Oomza Uni, they have a long conversation about their respective tribes, and Binti is surprised to learn about the similarities between the

Himba customs, and the rigid expectations placed especially on girls in both Himba and Khoush families. She was so easy to talk to and I learned more about the Khoush that day than I had in my entire life. In some ways, Himba and Khoush were like night and day, but in matters of girlhood and womanhood and control, we were the same (Okorafor, *Binti: Home* 30).

Thus, Okorafor as an African futurist, does not only see the need for an unbiased version of African stories and experience, especially related to women, but also the perspective of those who are directly connected to such experiences. As the following chapter on Afrofuturism and African futurism argues, even though Okorafor initially thought that Afrofuturism seems to be ultimately the genre for explaining these issues, she realised that it deals more with African-American and not African experience, and that it tends to erase or neglect African experience. This is the reason why she coins the term

Africanfuturism, because she believes that this term places emphasis on African experience.

## Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism

It is obvious that science fiction, when voiced by the mainstream authors, will narrate just one side of the story of space colonisation. Non-mainstream sf authors tell the story of how it feels to be on the other side of the invading ships, or alternatively what they can bring to the story of space exploration and futurity. What has also become clear with the development of contemporary sf is that those on the other side of the invading ships may not share the same heritage and experience, which is why the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen the appearance of many types of futurisms coming from different cultural locations. For Okorafor's writing it is important to note that blackness, though frequently used for all non-white writing, may gloss over differences contained in that same blackness. This is the reason why in 2019 she introduced the term Africanfuturism as a genre distinct from the already established Afrofuturism that has been used in relation to African American sf for the past thirty years or so. According to Nnedi Okorafor,

Africanfuturism is similar to "Afrofuturism" in the way that blacks on the continent and in the Black Diaspora are all connected by blood, spirit, history and future. The difference is that Africanfuturism is specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black Diaspora, and it does not privilege or center the West. Africanfuturism is concerned with visions of the future, is interested in technology, leaves the earth, skews optimistic, is centered on and predominantly written by people of African descent (black people) and it is rooted first and foremost in Africa. It's less concerned with "what could have been" and more concerned with "what is and can/will be". It acknowledges, grapples with and carries "what has been". Africanfuturism does not HAVE to extend beyond the continent of Africa, though often it does. Its default is non-western; its default/center is African. This is distinctly different from "Afrofuturism" (The word itself was coined by Mark Dery and his definition positioned African American themes and concerns at the definition's center. Note that in this case, I am defining "African Americans" as those who are direct descendants of the stolen and enslaved Africans of the transatlantic slave trade). (Okorafor, "Africanfuturism Defined")

Okorafor's remark makes a very clear distinction between the terms Afro- and Africanfuturism while also exposing the lack of adequate coverage of the former which is coined by Mark Dery. According to her article "Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future", Lisa Yaszek discusses Afrofuturism as a term generally credited to Mark Dery, the editor of the 1994 collection, *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*. Dery defines the term Afrofuturism as

speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African American concerns in the context of 20<sup>th</sup>-century technoculture – and more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future to explore how people of color negotiate life in a technology intensive world. (qtd in Yaszek 42)

According to Yaszek (41), numerous writers for the past three decades have become increasingly interested in this form of storytelling. As Yaszek's definition suggests, Afrofuturism paves a way for African-American experiences and concerns, most notably slavery and African experience on the territory of the USA, but it does not adequately cover that of the African culture and other related experiences.

However, it is wrong to assume that there were no African futurists before 2000. In "Towards a Planetary History of Afrofuturism", Sofia Samatar traces an alternate way that explores a "Pan-African psychogeography" – a model that refuses to see Africa in science fiction as a latecomer (176). She does so by approaching Afrofuturism not like a development theorist, but like a "data thief", the trope she appropriates from a video essay:

The data thief is the central figure from John Akomfrah and Edward George's 1996 video essay *The Last Angel of History*. A time-traveling trickster, the data thief leaps through cyberspace seeking signs of collective memory. Akomfrah and George explain in their pre-script for the film, published in the South African magazine *Chimurenga*, "S/he knows the nature of his/her quest: surf the closed rooms of the internet, unlock the vault of racial memory, find the black futurologists and their arcana, interpret them, and bring their visions home...". (176)

By relying on this video essay, Samatar raises the issue of the access and freedom of movement of the data thief:

On this future-internet, the space-time continuum has been realigned so that each image holds multiple traces of its past, held forever in a state of suspension”. The suspended, preserved past responds to the data thief’s touch. The recovery of “racial memory”, a painful, at times impossible project in the postcolonial era, becomes almost effortless as the data thief flits through time, gathering sights and sounds from the pyramids of Egypt to the techno-beats of Detroit. (176)

Accordingly, the trope of the data thief enables Samatar to argue that Afrofuturism is an extension of African-American speculative fiction appearing in the 1960s with authors such as Samuel R. Delaney. As a result, Afrofuturism draws together different black futurists:

On the one hand, without regard to their position on the planet aligns with Afrofuturism’s emphasis on blackness rather than nationhood and its orientation toward outer space, in which Earth figures as one star among others rather than a map carved up by borders. On the other, the lack of attention to the diverse streams of Afrofuturism threatens not only to obscure possibilities for rich discussions, but to imply a development narrative that assumes there were no African futurists before 2000. (176)

So, even though Afrofuturism deals with black and/or African-related stories and experiences, the access to and the recovery of memories of a painful past, especially of the colonial era can become effortless from the position of the data thief. The only danger to the data however, according to the author, is “a virus called History” – the reason why the data thief avoids the use of the capital “H” in the word “history”. According to Samatar, “the depiction of History as a virus mounts to a critique of progress, a refusal to accept the dominant narrative of History as a march from primitive savagery to enlightened civilization in which the black people of the world have been left behind” (177). Therefore, Afrofuturism’s emphasis for using the lowercase “histories” is to access new possibilities for the future. It suggests that by uncovering hidden codes in the past through sounds and images, one can discover alternative futures.

However, even though the trope of the data thief is useful to connect African-American speculative fiction appearing from the 1960s with the next generation of writers who explore Afrofuturism, the term does not make (or refuses to make) a distinction between the locations of blackness, i.e. whether it is African-American, African or belonging to African diaspora. Nnedi Okorafor states the following:

The example I always give, because people know this pretty well, is from the “Black Panther” films, which are Afrofuturist. At the end of the first movie, Wakanda builds an outpost, and their first instinct is to build it in Oakland, California, in the United States. If “Black Panther” were an Africanfuturist narrative, a lot of things would be different. Wakanda would build their outpost in a neighboring African country. (Okorafor qtd. in Paulson)

As one of the most prominent African futurist writers, Nigerian-American Nnedi Okorafor asserts that there is a difference between sf texts that explore African experience in the USA, and those that focus on African culture and identity and social justice and tell African stories in ways that contradict colonial narratives, from the perspectives of Africans.

Ramzi Fawaz in “Space, that Bottomless Pit: Planetary Exile and Metaphors of Belonging in American Afrofuturist Cinema” discusses the evolution of Afrofuturism and science fiction films that laid down the foundation for Black Nationalism, among others. According to Fawaz, Afrofuturism is able to offer a unique and very different African-American point of view by combining scientific, cultural, and even economic knowledge to elucidate the very evolving technological future of the human race. According to Fawaz, blackness is more often than not associated with catastrophe, crimes and hunger, and Fawaz argues that Afrofuturism does not only depict diaspora as an act of collective agency, but also as a way to reinterpret the relationship between humanity and the cosmos. He analyses three films: Sun Ra’s *Space is the Place* (1974), John Sayles’ *The Brother from Another Planet* (1984), and David Fincher’s *Alien* (1992). He argues that these three works contemplate the event of planetary exile that becomes a common goal amongst unlikely allies, irrespective of their race, gender, class and sexuality. In the vein of a more embracing Afrofuturism, these films “visualized a cultural stage upon which the drama of Earth’s racial hierarchies is played out in a struggle to define the future of human life beyond the blue planet” (1104).

For Okorafor, futuristic stories relying on African cultures rooted in different societies in Africa reveal prohibited stories or social taboos not frequently found in sf writing whose blackness evolves from experience of blackness displaced from Africa. In this regard, such culturally savvy stories rely on one of the aspects of non-mimetic writing in general, raised by Rosemary Jackson in relation to fantastic literature. According to Jackson,

In this way fantastic literature points to or suggests the basis upon which cultural order rests, for it opens up, for a brief moment, on to disorder, on to illegality, on to that which lies, outside the law, that which is outside dominant value systems. The fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made “absent”. (4)

One such taboo is the concept of womanhood in Africa, which is accompanied by a lot of social expectations such as obedience, submissiveness, fertility and chastity. When these expectations are normalised, they become a rigid barrier for any social change to take place. The hero who will defy the existing and long-lasting gender stereotypes can logically be found mostly in black science fiction. However, as an Africanfuturist, Okorafor feels that such stories are different when they come directly from cultures affected by them. For all these reasons, she rejects the term Afrofuturism as an all-inclusive marker of futuristic blackness, and coins a new term: Africanfuturism. In an interview with Steve Paulson, Nnedi Okorafor explains her reason for coming up with this term:

For a while, I tried to embrace the term of Afrofuturism, and then around 2018, when the “Black Panther” film came out, I began to understand that I was doing something else that didn’t fit. I was writing narratives that were not from the perspective of direct descendants of African slaves, or “stolen” Africans, as I prefer to say. So that’s when I coined the term Africanfuturism. It’s in the same universe as Afrofuturism, but it is more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point of view. (qtd. in Paulson)

To emphasise Okorafor’s above discussion, Afrofuturism has more to do with African-American experiences, and very little to do with that of purely African experience.

According to Okorafor, one does not see Africa much in the definition of Afrofuturism. African science fiction also defies the existing gender and cultural stereotypes that are viewed both within and outside African societies for centuries. Okorafor's *Binti* trilogy shares African experiences from an African viewpoint, thereby retelling and deconstructing the official postcolonial narrative, but also lays bare the so-called Afrofuturism's inability to adequately describe an African culture and experience. Binti as the apparent heiress to her father as the master harmonizer – even though she has older male siblings – destroys not only gender roles, but is also positioned as the voice for her people, and an unconventional image of African black womanhood.

Okorafor's insisting on the distinctiveness of Africanfuturism is also visible in her novels shaped by West African culture. As Joshua Yu Burnett emphasises in relation to Okorafor's writing,

Okorafor's speculative novels are set either in future versions of Africa or in imagined worlds with strong West African cultural influences, and she takes a strongly postcolonial and feminist view within her fiction, at once championing African cultures and critiquing their gender roles and certain other cultural practices. (135)

Okorafor's description of Binti's character, her culture, and that of the other tribes, portrays the strength and longevity of diverse African cultures who have defied colonisation. According to Okorafor, whenever she reads science fiction, she frequently detects the theme of colonialism. She is however quick to add that that perspective does not align with her own beliefs: "When I sat down to write a space opera, as you say, it's the reverse. She's leaving earth. and it's not her trying to dominate this group of people, or these people trying to dominate her. No, she's integrating, and a part of this bigger thing" (Okorafor qtd. in Hawking).

In Okorafor's *Binti* trilogy, Okorafor portrays Binti, the protagonist, as a symbol of the Himba culture, her society, and their way of life. These representations expose the reader to different practices through Binti's character. Binti being a hybrid of many species, tries to integrate and not to dominate as human. Furthermore, the application of "otjize",<sup>2</sup> the reasons for wearing it plus its cultural significance, as well as the feeling of

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<sup>2</sup> a mixture of butterfat and ochre pigment that is worn to protect skin from hot and dry climate – or provide your explanation here because you mention otjize for the first time here



guilt and nakedness that comes with not applying it, the braids on her head and the anklets, traditional rites such as the pilgrimage, and the Night Masquerade, are not some random science fiction tropes, but they symbolise and represent well-preserved cultural rituals that have withstood colonisation. In that regard, Okorafor in the Trilogy visibly enacts the tropes of colonisation of an African space and how that space has managed to preserve its precolonial identity, which is yet another distinctive marker of Africanfuturism, especially in relation to Afrofuturism and its frequently enacted story of African-American slavery. Accordingly, the next chapter will focus on the link between (post)colonialism and Africanfuturism.

## (Post)colonialism and Africanfuturism

Discussing the relationship between science fiction and postcolonialism, Dustin Crowley states that numerous experts recognise that the most effective interaction between science fiction and postcolonialism is their common inclination towards possibilities of exploration. He goes on to acknowledge that Nnedi Okorafor's science fiction is crafted in a way that embodies "a postcolonial revision of speculative fiction and a speculative revision of postcolonialism" (269).

The most influential definition of postcolonialism comes from Bill Ashcroft et al. who assert that it "deals with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies" (168-169). Their work points to the fact that the term has been more concerned with the processes and effects, as well as reactions to the European colonialism right from the sixteenth century up to the present. The authors argue that postcolonialism is being used in various ways that often involve the glorification of the European colonial legacies and conquests, coupled with the natives' resistance. The term was initially used by historians after the Second World War in various ways such as "post-colonial state". However, from the late 1970s, literary critics use the term in relation to different ongoing cultural effects of colonialization.

In *Futuristic Worlds in Australian Aboriginal Fiction* (2017), Polak asserts that the term "postcolonial" is used by the international academia to unmask the discursive operations of colonial empires, the legacy of these operations and responses to them. Polak is also quick to add that not all scholars relate to the term postcolonial in the same way. She uses the Australian Aboriginals' reason as an example. As she states, "This comes from the fact that they are not simply theorising postcolonialism, but are voicing their experience of colonialism and postcolonialism. Hence, from their cultural location, postcolonialism as a concept trivialises the very condition it is supposed to illuminate" (Polak 71-72).

Complications surrounding the term postcolonialism cannot be overstressed and Polak (78) asserts that science fiction and fantasy are acultural and belong to genre fiction. Moreover, this genre fiction in its early stages tended to revive the ideology behind European colonisation, which cannot be further removed from postcolonial literatures the purpose of which is to introduce distinctive cultural experiences of both the present and the past. As a result, when Indigenous Australian authors appropriate genre fiction such as science fiction, they not only appropriate it to include culture-distinctive topics, but

also to challenge the very concept of postcolonialism since they continuously expose present ideologies of colonisation.

Accordingly, Okorafor's ability to merge African culture and religion with science and technology does not only target stereotypes, but also, as Crowley puts it, "demonstrate[s] a propensity to focus on the sf genre's use of temporality to disrupt hegemonic narratives that compromise black histories and threaten to erase black futures" (270), and one hegemonic narrative is that of colonisation and its legacy on the African continent. This is why Crowley argues that the African continent is usually portrayed with the absence of future and ignorance of time, as well as a place with existing traditions that determine the present while compromising the future (268). Okorafor, thus, creates alternative narratives obstructing colonial mega-stories that happened on African soil, and introduces a difference between Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism. For example, when Binti arrives at the launch port to board the shuttle to Oomza, she has to allow the invasive control officers' access to her private life and family history. Moreover, she experiences the lack of freedom of movement and is suspiciously scrutinised right from the beginning of her journey:

The travel security officer scanned my astrolabe, a full deep scan. Dizzy with shock, I shut my eyes and breathed through my mouth to steady myself. Just to leave the planet, I had to give them access to my entire life—me, my family, and all forecasts of my future. I stood there, frozen, hearing my mother's voice in my head. "There is a reason why our people do not go to that university. Oomza Uni wants you for its own gain, Binti. You go to that school and you become its slave" (Okorafor, *Binti: Home* 13-14)

One could agree that Binti's mother's opinion about Oomza University is a result of the colonial experiences and the objectification of African women. This means that even though Okorafor is well-crafted in her imagining the future, she still has to bring up that interaction between Binti and her mother to remind the reader of the past. It is additionally important to speculate that in case humans decide or try to colonise the outer space and its inhabitants, gifted people like Binti can be at risk of being used or enslaved.

Needless to say, the earlier enacted problem of race also constitutes one of the master-narratives of colonisation. Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti* trilogy gives an alternate approach to racism, although Binti, the protagonist, has her fair share of it while

journeying to Oomza University. As she boards the shuttle, she does not only experience unwelcomed stares, but also experiences comments and inappropriate touches: “A woman leaned away from me as I passed, her face pinched as if she smelled something foul. “Sorry”, I whispered, watching my feet and trying to avoid the stares of almost everyone in the shuttle” (*Binti: Home* 11). However, in the outer space that consists of different species, it is possible to coexist respectfully without any form of hierarchy based on race, gender and sexuality, and Binti notices that

The way people on Oomza Uni were so diverse and everyone handled that as if it were normal continued to surprise me. It was so unlike Earth, where wars were fought over and because of differences and most couldn't relate to anyone unless they were similar (*Binti: The Night Masquerade* 102).

As Fawaz argues in relation to Afrofuturism, “the blackness of space itself is reread as an affinity to both racially coded blackness and a more general openness to the polyvalency of cultural meanings that might attach to bodies read as abject or undesirable on Earth” (1104). In other words, both Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism tend to find free space which embraces blackness, as well as queer identities and women, the latter especially in the context of Africanfuturism, in the “blackness” of space.

There is another important feature of Africanfuturist works that Crowley raises in the article “Cosmos and Polis: Space and Place in Nnedi Okarafor's SF”, and that is challenging the framing of the African continent in general as a place full of similar failings, plagues and catastrophes, which testifies to the continued “othering” of the African continent introduced by the legacy of historical colonisation. According to Crowley,

Such roundly negative portrayals of the continent have become commonly referred to as Afropessimism, and they remain abundant. But recent years have seen a significant push against the single story of African wretchedness, with authors adopting Afropolitanism and science fiction as instances of agency and hope in their literature. These modes espouse the continent's active engagement with globalization and its possible futures, positioning Africans in urban centers of technology, communication, commerce, and travel that link the continent to the globe and vice versa. As the portmanteau “Afropolitanism” suggests, Africa in

such narratives is not a place of isolation or exploitation by the rest of the world but a cosmopolitan hub vital to global interaction, with the particularity of the continent adding to, rather than suffering from, such participation. (268)

Hence, Africanfuturism tends to debunk Afropessimism by placing cultures and localities of Africa in the centre of narratives, “with hope itself always aimed at a productive future” (Crowley 269). This productive future, especially from Binti’s perspective can be achieved only through the realisation of the self in society and society out of self, or what is known as the concept of the habitus.

## The Concept of the Habitus and Identity

One of the concepts that is highly relevant for Okorafor's three novels is the realisation of self in and of society. In *A Sociological Approach to Self and Identity* (2003), Jan Stets and Peter Burke maintain that,

The symbolic interactionist perspective in sociological social psychology sees the self as emerging out of the mind, the mind as arising and developing out of social interaction, and patterned social interaction as forming the basis of social structure (Mead, 1934). The mind is the thinking part of the self. It is covert action in which the organism points out meanings to itself and to others. The ability to point out meanings and to indicate them to others and to itself is made possible by language, which encapsulates meanings in the form of symbols. When one's self is encapsulated as a set of symbols to which one may respond to itself as an object, as it responds to any other symbol, the self has emerged. (4)

According to the authors, individual roles and actions are both influenced by the self and the others. The self is shaped by expected roles, whether based on gender or cultural knowledge, which one is expected to follow, and the reactions from others through interactions regulating these roles and actions. In other words, the authors presume that the self and society are in a reciprocal relationship. The self (individual) influences society through individual agency while society influences the self through its shared language that enables the individual to take the role of the other. Stets and Burke are of the view that, "the responses of the self as an object to itself come from the point of view of others to whom one interacts" (4). Hence, the self comes into being in society and mirrors society.

Another approach worth mentioning in this regard is the concept of the habitus, coined by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in *Social Space and Symbolic Power* (1989). He highlights the duality in both the system and the perception. According to Bourdieu,

Habitus is both a system of schemes of production of practices and a system of perception and appreciation of practices. And, in both of these dimensions, its operation expresses the social position in which it was elaborated. Consequently,

habitus produces practices and representations which are available for classification, which are objectively differentiated; however, they are immediately perceived as such only by those agents who possess the code, the classificatory schemes necessary to understand their social meaning. Habitus thus implies a “sense of one’s place” but also a “sense of the place of others”. (19)

According to the above definition, individuals from distinct social or cultural backgrounds have habitus that defines them as much as it defines the space they inhabit and society they create. As cultural practices may vary in different societies, habitus serves as the basis for the system of perception and appreciation of practices of people/agents who share the same habitus (i.e. who possess the same code) and those who do not (i.e. whose code is different).

The concept of the habitus plays an important role in shaping Binti’s social and cultural role. Whilst she tries to reconcile with her identity as a Himba girl, she struggles to embrace her multiple identities at Oomza University. Himba society is deeply traditional and strictly prides itself with the sacredness of their land. Thus, the application of the “otjize” clay on their skin and hair does not only protect the skin, but also symbolises their distinct identity. Therefore, Himba society embraces their cultural identity through various rituals and appearances. In other words, the habitus of Himba society is marked by a series of rituals and practices that have been internalised by its members to ensure the preservation of past experiences in the present.

In addition to Bourdieu’s definition of the habitus, Nicos Mouzelis in *Sociological Theory: What Went Wrong?* (1995) states the following:

The habitus, a product of history, produces individual and collective practices—more history—in accordance with the schemes generated by history. It ensures the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the “correctness” of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms. (98)

Mouzelis however adds that the concept of the habitus differs from earlier evoked roles of social position and interactive situation. He discusses Parsonian perspective on normative expectations of social roles as a way to address the effects of social order and

disorder. He however argues that the reason why Parson has been frequently criticised is due to the way he portrays human beings as mere puppets. According to Mouzelis,

Another way of putting this is to argue that Parsonian sociology implicitly assumes that there is no friction between social positions, dispositions and interactive situations, so that knowledge of the role/positional dimension is more or less sufficient for understanding the actual game played. This becomes clear if one looks at how Parsons deals with the issue of social order and disorder. Whereas he for his part tries to account for social disorder by such notions as failure of social controls, ineffective socialization or tensions and strains between roles, conflict theorists from [John] Rex to [Lewis] Coser and [Ralf] Dahrendorf dismiss that position as trivial, and try to account for social disorder in terms of power inequalities and the ensuing interest differences between groups. (102)

The world of Okorafor's Trilogy goes beyond the typical science fiction conventions and imparts the significance of cultural identities and the challenges that accompany an individual within and outside their socio-cultural environment. Societies thus reflect power inequalities because they tend to other cultures. The lack of social order between the three human tribes – Himba, Enyi Zinariya and Khoush – symbolizes the absence of better interaction and ineffective socialization. The Himba sees Enyi Zinariya as uncivilised due to their manner of non-verbal communication through gestures, which they do not understand. Also, the Khoush see the Himba tribe as “dirt bathers” because they apply otjize clay on their skin. This lack of understanding in their respective practices lead to their misconceptions about each other. Binti seems to be aware of such cultural presumptions. She reminisces about her brother's prejudice towards the Khoush:

I was born only three years after him yet we'd never been very close. He was angry and always speaking out about the way my people were maltreated by the Khoush majority despite the fact that they needed us and our astrolabes to survive. He was always calling them evil, though he'd never traveled to a Khoush country or known a Khoush. His anger was rightful, but all that he said was from what he didn't truly know. (*Binti* 54)

Binti also realises the misconceptions her society has towards the Meduse:



The Meduse. The Meduse are not what we humans think. They are truth. They are clarity. They are decisive. There are sharp lines and edges. They understand honor and dishonor. I had to earn their honor and the only way to do that was by dying a second time. (*Binti* 66)

Binti's different roles and representations are part of her identity enabling her to perform the role as the master harmoniser and to broker a truce between different tribes, involving leaders in those societies. Moreover, one could argue that Binti goes beyond the concept of the habitus because she understands other cultures and gradually climbs up the social ladder in order to have an effect on society, so that her "self" can change and reconstitute society.

## Social and Physical Space

According to Pierre Bourdieu, there is a distinction between social and physical space. He refers to space as “a set of distinct and coexisting positions which are exterior to one another and which are defined in relation to one another through relations of proximity, vicinity, or distance, as well as through order relations” (Bourdieu, “Physical space, social space and habitus” 11). Bourdieu further argues that both physical and social space have very much in common but that physical space is defined by the mutual externality of parts, whereas social space is defined by the mutual exclusion or distinction of positions (12).

Nnedi Okorafor explores both the social and physical spaces of different societies in the Trilogy. Doreen Massey gives a foundational view about space, which seems to relate to Okorafor’s portrayal of space in the *Binti* trilogy:

We recognise space as the product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny.... [W]e understand space as the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality.... Precisely because space on this reading is a product of relations-between, relations which are necessarily embedded material practices which have to be carried out, it is always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed. Perhaps we could imagine space as a simultaneity of stories-so-far. (Massey qtd. in Crowley 271)

The Himba society is one of the societies that holds a greater significance to their space and their relationships with one another. Besides staying true to their various centuries-old traditional practices, they also prefer to stay “inward” in order to protect their space and capital. As Binti explains, “We [the Himba] go inward. We protect what is ours by embracing it,” I said. “Even when one’s bloodline is ... dead” (*Binti: The Night Masquerade* 80).

Discussing the construction of social space, Bourdieu believes that

Social space is constructed in such a way that agents or groups are distributed in it according to their position in the statistical distribution based on the two

differentiation principles which, in the most advanced societies, such as the United States, Japan, or France, are undoubtedly the most efficient: economic capital and cultural capital. (Bourdieu, “Physical space, social space and habitus” 13)

Applying the above concept to the *Binti* trilogy, the Himba tribe serves as the makers of technologically advanced astrolabes. It is a sophisticated device that stores information about the individuals, and also enables them to communicate distances apart, and ultimately represents the source of their economic capital. According to Binti,

Astrolabes were the only object that also carried the full record of your entire life on it—you, your family, and all forecasts of your future. The chip in it had to be transferred if the astrolabe broke, which they rarely ever did if they were made by my father or me. My family’s fortune and identity were based on the importance of astrolabes to the world and beyond and the superiority of the ones we made (*Binti: The Night Masquerade* 42).

Additionally, their distinct way of cultural practices and ways of life, i.e. their cultural capital, makes their identity specific.

Other tribes also structure their space according to economic and cultural capital, such as the Khoush and Enyi Zinariya. However, the less these tribes have in common, the more separated or distant they become, and the more similarities they share, the closer they are. The Khoush are merchants and produce weapons, who consider themselves superior to other races and tribes. One may agree that the reason they send their brilliant students to Oomza Uni to study weaponry is due to their interest in conflict. When Binti boards the ship to Oomza Uni, she remembers what her father tells her about the Khoush: “My father told me that when he was around Khoush merchants when they came to our city to buy astrolabes, he tried to make himself as small as possible” (*Binti* 16).

On the other hand, Enyi Zinariya produces the Zinariya technology – a gift from aliens. According to Binti’s paternal grandmother, “The Zinariya came to us in the desert. They were a golden people, who glinted in the sun. They were solar and had landed in Earth’s desert to rest and refuel on their way to Oomza Uni” (*Binti: Home* 128).

## Ritual and Cultural Practices

Roles and practices play an important role in shaping societies, as well as influencing collective and individual identities. Although Okorafor's *Binti* trilogy forecasts future possibilities of an African society, she also uses the work to discuss real life African experiences by putting emphasis on traditions, cultures and gender roles, thus using Africanfuturism to explain these experiences. This chapter focuses on some of the rituals and cultural practices found in the Trilogy. Besides the Himba tradition of applying the *otjize* clay on their skin and hair for protection, the traditional rites of initiations such as pilgrimage, the role of elders in the society, religious beliefs and taboos, and the significance of masquerades are among the practices from the Trilogy that will be discussed further in this chapter. Acknowledging the fact that a lot has changed in a modern African society, some of these practices are among those that have been preserved in modern Africa and have a symbolic meaning. Indigenous customs are still prevalent in many African societies, and have been observed even before the coming of Islam and Christianity, which are the two predominant religions across the continent.

One of the common beliefs in Africa, regardless of an ethnic group, are masquerades. Although they may carry different meanings, they are often tied to or serve as conduits between the society and the spirit of its ancestors. According to Raphael Chijioke Njoku, in a precolonial African society without a developed and widely shared written culture, "masquerade celebrations were constituted and observed in due times and seasons as living histories" (21). However, Njoku continues that there are conflicting stories about where or when the masquerade culture began. There is a suggestion that connects the origin to Italy, Europe, in the thirteenth century, from where it gains expansion to France around 1393, and then subsequently to other European countries. The author also reveals that the fundamental themes of European masks were connected to cosmological beliefs, and vegetation cycle. However, it has over the centuries shifted in nature, thus assuming a more secular nature, where participants indulge in fun such as erotic dance, drinking, noisemaking, wastefulness, etc. Njoku argues that there is no need to dismiss the European influences on masquerade, but that, according to John Picton,

the term *masquerade* entered into the European lexicon from the Arabic verb *sakhira* meaning "to laugh, scoff, jeer, ridicule, mock, deride, and make fun". This means that the Arab masking practices may have predated the European genre;

while Caribbean or Latin American antecedents may have provided factual social milieus in which the African players would rediscover their rich repertoire of inherited masquerade dances, the fact of the matter is that masking is as old as human civilization, which started in Africa. Murals and other paintings by artists of ancient Egypt reveal that masks and their imageries were present in the social and political traditions of ancient people. As early as the 3000 BCE, Egyptians produced masks and invoked them in their religious observances as “death masks” and “ritual masks”. (27)

Furthermore, masquerades embody the spirit of African culture and customs that carry different meanings to their history. Whether conveyed through masks, songs, dances and other performances, masquerade defines “the fluid structures of power and authority, patterns of civil society networks, and the people’s social consciousness” (Njoku 1).

Relating the significance of masquerade to the Himba culture, it equally carries a symbolic meaning just like in many other African societies. According to Binti,

Only men were supposed to see the Night Masquerade and it was believed its appearance signified the approach of a big change; whether it brought change with its presence or change came afterward was never clear. The Night Masquerade was the personification of revolution. Its presence marked heroism. (*Binti: The Night Masquerade* 56)

Binti having an encounter with the Night Masquerade, as well as summoning the “deep culture”, the term that will be explained anon, to end the conflict between the Khoush and the Meduse, is completely against the norms of the Himba society. These are uncommon due to the fact that she is a woman, which further echoes the social positioning of women in that society. In one instance, Binti’s childhood friend, Dele, confronts her after she reveals her encounter with the masquerade: “The Night Masquerade has shown itself to you, a girl, twice! And the second time, it couldn’t even wait for the night! You need to stop! You bring chaos,” he said. “I shouldn’t... s—” He looked away” (*Binti: The Night Masquerade* 84). Binti understands exactly what Dele means with his remarks – her position as a woman in the Himba society comes with restrictions that she has always defied. Therefore, she responds: “I knew what he’d meant to say, “I shouldn’t even be speaking to you.” I should have been dead to him already, for traditionally a woman who

ran away from home was useless. And one who saw the Night Masquerade no longer existed. I was a ghost to him, a spirit” (*Binti: The Night Masquerade* 84).

According to the Himba culture, the meaning of “deep culture” goes beyond the concept of culture: “Deep culture goes deeper than what it is, it goes deeper than culture, it crosses over” (82). Binti’s role as a master harmonizer accords her roles only she can perform. She intends to summon the “deep culture”, even though the Himba council of elders’ perception towards her as a woman, disallows her to do so. Binti confirms and understands that, deep culture “communes with the mathematics that dwell within all things and only the collective of Himba Councils could evoke it” (*Binti: The Night Masquerade*, 82). However, Binti claims,

“And none ... none of them believed they could really evoke deep culture. They didn’t believe in... they had no hope. The chief said the Khoush would never listen to the Himba because they don’t respect us.” He squeezed his eyes shut at this as if in physical pain.

“But they respected Binti,” Mwinyi said. “The Khoush and Meduse. Then they forgot about her”. (127)

In spite of the fear that summoning the deep culture by the council may not be honoured by the Khoush, Binti knows she has to do it, because she is gifted mathematically. Binti seems to know the code and procedures, although traditionally, she has no rights to do it; however, she believes that she represents society and therefore that she must act on behalf of and for the benefit of community (116). Additionally, Crowley concurs that Binti’s “multiple subjectivity enables a transformed relationship with place, most notably regarding the “deep culture” of the Himba” (286). Consequently, during the conflict between the Khoush and the Meduse, Binti incites the deep culture:

“I incite the deep culture of the Himba.” I looked intensely at both King Goldie and the Meduse chief. “Neither of you know of it and that is okay. The Himba Council members were to do this, but I think they’re afraid. I think they’re hiding. I’m not. And I’m a collective within myself, so I can. (*Binti: The Night Masquerade* 116)

Nicos Mouzelis argues “that constant tensions and incongruities between the logic of social positions, dispositions and situations is the rule rather than the exception” (102). Given Binti’s position as a master harmoniser, coupled with her unique hybrid nature, it is only logical that she is the only exceptional individual, the one experiencing and aware of incongruities between the logic of social positions and dispositions: she is in a better position to effectively perform these tasks. Binti’s hybrid nature also testifies to earlier mentioned Stets and Burke’s claim that the self and society are in a reciprocal relationship. In the case of Binti, herself gets constituted in a society that she helps transform.

Another significant cultural practice observed in the Himba society is the pilgrimage. This is a rite of passage journey that marks the point of transition for young girls into adulthood. According to Nwadiokwu et al., most African people have different rites and ceremonies to mark different changes. The rite of birth and childhood serve as an introductory step for an individual. Although there is a huge shift in performing these rites in the modern era – except for circumcision rites, which are still performed in many African societies, “initiation rites have many symbolic meanings” (45). As Nwadiokwu et al. maintain,

The youth are ritually introduced to the art of communal living. The significance of the rites is to introduce the candidates to adult life. In the community they are allowed to share in the full privileges and duties. They enter into the state of responsibility, they inherit new rights and new obligations are expected of them by society. The initiation rites also prepare young people in matters of sexual life, marriage, procreation and family responsibilities. (45)

There are many types of initiation rituals in many African societies that mark either the beginning or ending of different stages in an individual’s life. Whether it is birth, adulthood, parenthood or even death, they all carry a symbolic meaning, and many of these initiation ceremonies are carried out elaborately, marked by prayers and sacrifices.

According to Solon T. Kimball, “the analysis of ceremonies accompanying an individual’s ‘life crises’” is called “rites of passage (fr. *rites de passage*). Van Gennep points out that “the activities associated with such ceremonies were examined in terms of their order and content, it was possible to distinguish three major phases: separation (*séparation*), transition (*marge*), and incorporation (*agrégation*)” (van Gennep qtd. in

Kimball vii-viii). While the rites of *separation* symbolise funerals, *transition* marks an important event such as betrothal, pregnancy, and initiation, and rites of *incorporation* mark marriage.

In the Trilogy, Binti considers the pilgrimage as a way to cleanse herself both emotionally and spiritually. In a brief conversation with her Meduse friend Okwu, Binti explains how she feels about herself: “I’m unclean because I left home, I thought. If I go home and complete my pilgrimage, I will be cleansed. The Seven will forgive me and I’ll be free of this toxic anger” (*Binti: Home* 20). Although Binti is not able to perform this ritual, she still sees it as an important element of her culture and of the Himba womanhood: “I didn’t go on my pilgrimage when I went home. That was supposed to complete me as a woman in my village” (*Binti: The Night Masquerade* 65).

Referring to the work on one of the leading interpreters of religious experiences, Mircea Eliade’s *Rites and Symbols of Initiations*, Michale Meade argues that initiation means the discovery of one’s true self. According to Meade who wrote a foreword to the new edition of Eliade’s seminal study, “It includes the opening up of the inner life of the spirit and releasing the potentials and possibilities within the individual. Beyond that, the initiations of youth always imply an opportunity for the cleansing and restoration of the life force of the community and the society” (Meade 7). According to Eliade, “it does not fall to us to determine to what extent traditional initiations fulfilled their promises. The important fact is that they proclaimed their intention and professed to possess the means of transmuting human life” (Eliade 12).

Eliade’s above statement suggests that the importance of initiations is not based on the outcome; instead, it is based on the intentions behind them and the fulfilment of their symbolic power upon the individual. In other words, the sense of purpose and reaching a significant transition stage in one’s life, carry an important psychological meaning or significance.

Although Binti is not able to perform the pilgrimage that is supposed to cleanse her, the Enyi Zinariya succeed in initiating her into becoming one of them: “The old woman looked toward the village then at me. “You have just been initiated,” she said” (Okorafor: *Home*, 158).

Victor Turner who conducted a study of religion and rituals in East and West Africa, specifically amongst the Ndembu people of north-western Zambia, claims that “religious beliefs and practices are something more than ‘grotesque’ reflections or expressions of



economic, political, and social relationships; rather are they coming to be seen as decisive keys to the understanding of how people think and feel about those relationships, and about the natural and social environments in which they operate” (6). Turner (7) is also quick to add that there is a big difference between observing people performing their rituals, and reaching an understanding of what their movements, gestures and singings mean to them, especially from an outsider’s perspective.

In observing rituals or traditions as a non-native, it is crucial to not just merely observe, if the observer’s aim is to achieve a credible and meaningful comprehension and conclusion behind rituals, practices and symbols. In order to achieve this goal, Turner embarks on a two and a half years’ field work in the Ndembu society and asserts that

Such symbols exhibit the properties of *condensation, unification of disparate referents, and polarization of meaning*. A single symbol, in fact, represents many things at the same time: it is multivocal, not univocal. Its referents are not all of the same logical order but are drawn from many domains of social experience and ethical evaluation. Finally, its referents tend to cluster around opposite semantic poles. At one pole the referents are to social and moral facts, at the other, to physiological facts. (52)

One could agree with Turner’s notion that ritual symbols, no matter how complex they seem, all relate meanings and explanations in a compact and unified way to convey a large amount of information and ideas under a customary meaning. It is also important to mention that rituals can be observed based on a phase, and on a state. An example of the former is status elevation in the form of initiation rituals, whilst the latter can be a calendrical ritual, which Turner describes as “a collective kind”, which occurs “at certain culturally defined points in the seasonal cycle” (167).

The topic of inheritance is also a critical issue in many African societies. Since most African societies are patriarchal, entitlements to inheritance are patrilineal. This creates the exclusion of women in transfer of property or even knowledge of family tradition. However, Okorafor portrays the Himba society as somewhat matrilineal. Binti inherits the role of the master harmoniser from her father’s side, while her home, the “Root”, is inherited through the matrilineal line, by Binti’s mother from Binti’s grandmother:

My family's house has been called "the Root" for over a hundred and fifty years. It's been in our family for longer than the existence of its name. One of the first homes built in the Himba village of Osemba, the Root was made entirely of stone. Even the bioluminescent plants growing on the outside walls and the roof were generations old. The house was passed down through the women, and my mother—being the oldest daughter in her family and the only one born with the gift of mathematical sight—had been the clear inheritor of it when her mother passed. (*Binti: Home* 61)

Okorafor also portrays the matriarchal societies of Africa through the Enyi Zinariya tribe, which represent both the past and the future version of Africa. This is introduced early into the story, during Binti's interaction with her grandmother in the first part of the Trilogy: "'Hmm. You're still ashamed of what you are.' 'No,' I said. 'I'm Himba and proud of that.' She raised her eyebrows. 'Not your grandmother. She is Enyi Zinariya. And we are a matriarchal clan, so your father is, too'" (*Binti: Home* 147).

Furthermore, aside from the cultural and gender representation, and practices such as funeral rites, initiations into womanhood, and tribal conflicts based on stereotypes, Okorafor also acknowledges the traditional form of disseminating information. Oral, instrumental, and visual communications were and still are present in many traditional African societies, whether it is the sound of a drumbeat, a smoke or passing of an object from one person or family to another. With regard to the Himba's method of communication, Binti says that

The Council Elders use the same method of communication that Himba women use to spread the word about the date of the pilgrimage: a large leaf is cut from a palm tree and passed from member to member. The Himba people are the creators and makers of astrolabes, devices of communication. However, the Himba people have been communicating important meeting announcements in this old, old way for centuries and we will continue to do so. (*Binti: The Night Masquerade* 66-67)

Okorafor combines advanced modes of technology, such as astrolabe, Zinariya, edan etc, while at the same time she preserves traditional methods of communication which are representative of precolonial African societies. The portrayal of the Himba tribe in

Namibia and Binti's identity reflect many cultural practices and customs that are still alive in many African societies, especially in West Africa.

Hence, as a writer of an African heritage, Okorafor exposes her readers, who may not be aware of the richness and diversity of African societies, to African experiences, rituals and customs, which is why her writing is embedded in Africanfuturism and not Afrofuturism. As the next chapter will show, Okorafor also uses specific numeric symbolism to connect African worldviews with major religions that were introduced into Africa, in order to construct a culturally inclusive space.

## Transcultural Spirituality of Numbers

Religion plays an important role in many African societies, whether it is traditional African beliefs or Islam or Christianity. Although the Binti trilogy focuses more on identity, culture and technology, it also explores diverse belief systems in a traditional African society. Nnedi Okorafor portrays religion and spirituality in the Trilogy in such an interesting fashion by portraying Binti as a bridge between cultures, as well as religions.

Michael B. McCormack's article "Your God is a Racist, Sexist, Homophobic, and a Misogynist ... Our God is Change", explores the distinctive ways through which Afrofuturistic writers use religion as a lens through which to analyse issues of difference, domination and deliverance. According to him, the two most prominent writers, Ishmael Reed and Octavia Butler "imagine radically different futures, present distinctive strategies of intervention, and imagine differing roles for Black religion in their respective futures" (9).

Nnedi Okorafor delves in the themes of religion, culture and spirituality with the projection of tolerance and empathy, which is seen through Binti's character. Above all, she introduces different belief systems that many of the readers from diverse religious backgrounds can easily relate to at a personal level.

One may not be able to successfully tell African experiences without the influence of religion or traditional beliefs. The three most common belief systems present in many African societies are Islam, Christianity, and traditional beliefs. Okorafor as an African, once again, projects a future Africa where both religious tolerance, and coexistence between different belief systems are possible. She creates a way to connect them to different tribes in the Binti Trilogy. By using maths and numbers, Okorafor, through Binti, creates a representation of both Islam and Christianity whilst also considering the traditional beliefs.

Binti prays to the *seven* in the Trilogy, which presumably represents Himba gods. Although it is not clear what affiliation that belief is, Binti refers to it as "The Principle Artists of All Things" (*Binti: The Night Masquerade* 153), which appears to refer to polytheistic deities – something very common in many traditional religions in Africa, symbolising the existence of traditional African religions long before the coming of Abrahamic faith. According to Binti,

In the stories of the Seven, life originated from the rich red clay that had soaked up rains. Microorganisms were called into active being when one of the Seven willed it and the others became interested in what would happen. That clay was Mother, otjize. I was clay now. (*Binti: Home* 154 -155)

Okorafor clearly plays with the number seven as a frequent numeric symbol found in Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions. The opening book of the Old Testament – Genesis, introduces the tale of the beginning of God’s creation:

And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made: and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done. And he blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made. (Genesis 2: 2-3)

Similarly, *The Holy Quran* has 114 chapters. Each chapter is divided into verses and the very first chapter of *The Holy Quran* has exactly seven verses. Additionally, Hajj in the Holy city of Mecca is the fifth pillar of the Islamic faith. During this pilgrimage, the pilgrims are obliged to walk around the Holy *Kaaba* seven times, as well as throw seven pebbles at the tree pillars – a reenactment of the story of Ibrahim or Abraham, to cast away the Satan and the resistance of temptation.

The above remark by Binti also mentions clay used for creation, which again relies on Judeo-Christian and Islamic tradition. In the former, the motif of clay reappears in the Old and New Testament with God being the “divine potter”, while in the latter, *The Holy Quran* states that “We created man out of dried clay formed from dark mud...” (15:26). In the Binti trilogy, the Enyi Zinariya seem to be connected to the Islamic faith. When Binti experiences flashbacks of the past history after the zinariya – which means “gold” and is described as “alien Internet” by Enyi Zinariya (*Binti: Night Masquerade*, 19) – activates her memory, she sees the first contact between the aliens and the desert people, and one of the elders in the community called Takeagoodposition, comments “The Koran says to be kind and open to strangers. Let us welcome them. The girl will introduce us and we will take over” (*Binti: Night Masquerade* 19).

Binti also meditates or calms herself through “treeing” which is a complex meditation through numbers, which when it finishes, feels like one “fell out of the tree”

(*Binti: Home* 10). During “treeing”, events connected to her existence seem to be connected with specific numbers. Binti uses number “five” to stay focused:

I automatically called the simple equation that always focused my mind,  $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$ . Then over and over, I spoke the number that relaxed me, “Five, five, five, five, five, five, five.” I let my mind follow the zipping dancing fives and with each triangular motion, I steadied. (*Binti: The Night Masquerade* 56)

Whenever she finds herself in distress, Binti dives into both simple and complex mathematical equations to clear her mind, as well as having flashbacks of past events.

Another example is the number ‘three’. The shuttle she boards to Oomza Uni is called “Third Fish”, and when Binti gets shot and killed accidentally during the Khoush-Meduse conflict, she gets resurrected on the “third day” after her death by the heavy presence of microbes in the New Fish. Apart from the visible reference to the resurrection of Jesus Christ on the third day pursuant to Judeo-Christian tradition, which is not in line with the Islamic tradition, before her death, Binti’s wish is to visit the planet Saturn, which becomes fulfilled when her family and friends decide to send her there as her final destination or resting place. Saturn is three planets away from Binti’s planet, Earth, and it takes three days to get there: “Nevertheless, when the equivalent of three days had passed and the New Fish excitedly told Mwinyi that they were approaching Saturn’s ring in an hour, it was time to face reality” (*Binti: The Night Masquerade* 145). So, it seems that Okorafor combines the “triad” from Judeo-Christian tradition with astronomical facts that Earth is the third planet from Saturn, and tops it off with a “creative fact” that it takes three days to finish Binti’s journey to Saturn following which she will be miraculously revived. Okorafor, thus creates a world that unifies religions and technological marvels wherein Binti bridges and connects epistemologically different worlds unproblematically, thus championing religious and cultural inclusivity. As Joseph E. Lenow maintains:

It is Okorafor’s future imaginary, however, that enables a methodological shift from the question: “What are the proper boundaries of human nature?” to “What are the community-specific practices by which we are recognized and affirmed as humans created in the image of God?” Put differently: “What are the Christian analogues of wearing otjize?” We cannot presume a Christian monoculture in answering this question; as Okorafor’s novels showed us, attention to these

practices must be complemented by an account of the power relations within a society. We should thus extend the point to ask “What are the community-specific practices by which the humanity of many created in the image of God is overlooked and rejected?” In either formulation, I believe that the answers may offer us important resources for thinking through questions of human enhancement and transhumanism (Lenow, 345).

Okorafor is aware that in order to explore an African culture, it is necessary to incorporate traditional belief systems, spirituality as well as religions that were introduced into Africa as they are equally part of an African identity. Okorafor’s imaginary futuristic African space, thus becomes a level playing field of various worldviews voiced through Binti who benefits from her ability to absorb different cultures and ultimately becomes emblematic of posthumanism, as the next chapter will argue.

## Transhumanism and Posthumanism

According to Robert Ranisch and Stefan Lorenz Sorgner, the advancements in science and technology question the principal dogma about the human condition, and trans- and posthumanism are the leading indicators related to this phenomenon. Both Ranisch and Sorgner admit that

Transhumanism and posthumanism are among the most recent and prominent manifestations of this phenomenon. Debates on trans- and posthumanism have not only gained a considerable amount of academic and popular attention recently, but have also created a widespread conceptual confusion. This is no surprise, considering their recent dates of origin, their conceptual similarities, and their engagements with similar questions, topics, and motifs. Furthermore, trans- as well as posthumanism frequently question their relationship to humanism and reconsider what it means to be human. In this regard both movements are streaming beyond humanism. (7)

While transhumanism advocates for the enhancement of humans through technology, whose results lead to a posthuman condition, posthumanism challenges the concept of human supremacy by placing humans at the same level as other species. Although both concepts are related to what it means to be human, they carry alternative approaches and important differences. One could argue that transhumanism places humans as a central focus, while posthumanism considers the possible implications the advancement of technology could have on human relationship with other humans, and with the environment.

In her article “Levelling the Posthuman Playing Field, Theology and Science” Francesca Ferrando claims that transhumanism and posthumanism both fall under the same umbrella term “posthuman”. Similar to Ranisch and Sorgner’s explanation, Ferrando also notes that although both concepts have “human” at the centre of attention, they deal with it in completely different ways. As Ferrando maintains,

The main goal of Transhumanism is human enhancement. For transhumanists, we are not posthuman yet, but in the near future some human beings may eventually transform themselves so radically as to become “posthuman”, by merging more



significantly with technology and by embracing the extensive possibilities of scientific discoveries. (Ferrando, “Leveling” 2)

To briefly elaborate on the above definition, the advancement of science and technology will enhance human’s abilities to perform intellectually, will alter human physiology, in ways that go beyond current human experience. Ranisch and Sorgner thoroughly elaborate on the inter-relationship between trans- and posthumanism, and maintain that

In order to make sense of these two approaches and to investigate their inter-relationship, a clarification of these concepts is necessary. As a first approximation, transhumanism can be seen as a stance that affirms the radical transformation of human’s biological capacities and social conditions by means of technologies. These transformations are widely perceived as human enhancement or augmentation which might be so fundamental that they bring about life forms with significantly different characteristics as to be perceived as other than human (7-8). In this regard, transhumanism can be understood as a *transhuman-ism*. By the same token, transhumanism, according to its self-understanding, is a contemporary renewal of humanism. It embraces and eventually amplifies central aspects of secular and Enlightenment humanist thought, such as belief in reason, individualism, science, progress, as well as self-perfection or cultivation. (8)

Ferrando (“Leveling” 27) goes on to argue that the coexistent “libertarian” and “democratic” transhumanism approaches view transhumanism in a different way. While the former advocates for free market as the best guarantee of the right to enhancement, the latter calls for an equal access. Both approaches are problematic in the sense that access to technological enhancements could be limited based on class, race and even economic status.

It is obvious that there are many different interpretations of posthumanism, and that there is also a distinctive way in which transhumanists look at posthumanism because transhumanists believe that any future development will be beneficial for mankind. Marcus Rockoff’s argues that transhumanism is seen as a project to alter and enhance human nature, and that “transhumanists see themselves as successors to humanism and aim for redesigning human nature so far that it becomes posthuman” (252). He goes on

to claim that while “the most important transhumanist organization is Humanity+”, they also project that the changes that the human biology can radically go through would only make the world a better place. As Rockoff goes further, “the concept of posthumanity in transhumanism describes a future stage of history where human beings will have taken evolution into their own hands and improve themselves so radically as to be ‘more than human’, i.e. posthuman” (252). To discuss a specific naivete of transhumanists, Rockoff refers to the famous American political scientist and economist, Francis Fukuyama who is known for his critique of unproblematic development often evoked by proponents of transhumanism:

In contrast to transhumanism, the “posthuman” in Fukuyama’s work is used in a pejorative sense. It is a symbol of bioconservative critique and points to some consequences of false belief in emerging technologies to alter human nature. New means of genetics, information technologies, cybernetics as well as neuroscience, which may eventually alter human nature and thereby transform human beings into posthumans, are not only perceived as an attack on our common nature but also pose threats to liberal western democracy. (252)

This is very obvious in the *Binti* trilogy, considering the relationship between the Khoush and the Himba tribe, as well as between the Himba and the Enyi Zinariya. Each of these tribes are endowed technologically in their own ways, endowments they acquired either genetically or through inventions. The Enyi Zinariya or the Desert people are “old old Africans” who live in caves in a faraway desert and are a technologically advanced society who even use mobile phones before anyone else. They named their tribe after the elephant-like aliens that gift them the “Zinariya technology”, with which they are able to communicate with the mere use of their hands, and also with different animals. The Zinariya technology is tailored with their DNA which means that parents pass it on to their offspring.

In a conversation with Binti about why the Enyi Zinariya consider themselves “old old African”, Binti’s grandmother boasts:

You’re an interesting people who have been on those lands for generations. But you’re a young people. The Enyi Zinariya are old old Africans. “And contrary to what you all believe, we have technology that puts yours to shame and we’ve had

it for centuries.” She paused, letting this news sink in. It wasn’t sinking into me easily. All that she’d said was so contrary to all that I had been taught that I’d begun to feel a little dizzy. (*Binti: Home* 127-128)

One of the reasons why they keep the story of their technology to themselves is that “the people here preferred to venture inward rather than out. Because what was within was already a million times more advanced, more modern, than anything on the planet. And what was inside had come from outer space” (*Binti: The Night Masquerade* 39).

Binti inherits gifts from both her parents – her mathematical abilities from her mother who uses it only when she needs to protect her family. She succeeds her father, a master harmonizer who produces and sells the finest astrolabes. According to Binti,

Astrolabes were the only object that also carried the full record of your entire life on it—you, your family, and all forecasts of your future. The chip in it had to be transferred if the astrolabe broke, which they rarely ever did if they were made by my father or me. My family’s fortune and identity were based on the importance of astrolabes to the world and beyond and the superiority of the ones we made. (*Binti: The Night Masquerade* 42)

In addition to these, Binti’s father is Enyi Zinariya which makes Binti a hybrid. Binti’s body as a hybrid comes with multiple representations, as well as complications which make her the “other”. Firstly, she is not only a woman and black, but she is also transformed beyond the norms of her society. According to Ferrando, “the body itself is constantly reshaping and defining its boundaries” (“The Body” 214). Okorafor’s posthuman portrayal of Binti deconstructs the human figure as the dominating one, by connecting her to non-human species to reveal both the human relation and interconnectedness with nature, as well as defying social conditioning of a black/African woman. In the same vein, Iuliia Ibragimova agrees that

Nnedi Okorafor’s Binti novella series (2015-2019) presents a compelling, if utopian, model of establishing relations between the interconnected human and non-human agents in a post-disaster world. These relations are based on listening and responding to various others, becoming a part of the flow of shifting matter

entailing mental, spiritual, and even physical changes and acting with respect and compassion to all human and non-human persons. (210)

Binti acknowledges and embraces herself and all these connections. Very early on into the story, she proudly states:

I come from a family of *Bitolus*; my father is a master harmonizer and I was to be his successor. We *Bitolus* know true deep mathematics and we can control their current, we know systems. We are few and we are happy and uninterested in weapons and war, but we can protect ourselves. (*Binti* 29-30)

Binti's family's gift of maths and their ability to harmonize shows that there are many ways to protect themselves without the use of violence. One could say these are some of the reasons why they decide to venture inwards – to protect themselves, their valuable resources and land. However, conflicts based on tribalism and racial stereotypes exist between them as well. Binti experiences tribal prejudice several times while boarding the shuttle to Oomza University.

The woman who'd tugged my plait was looking at her fingers and rubbing them together, frowning. Her fingertips were orange red with my otjize. She sniffed them. "It smells like jasmine flowers," she said to the woman on her left, surprised. "Not shit?" one woman said. "I hear it smells like shit because it is shit." "No, definitely jasmine flowers. It is thick like shit, though." "Is her hair even real?" another woman asked the woman rubbing her fingers. "I don't know." "These 'dirt bathers' are a filthy people," the first woman muttered. (*Binti* 169)

While technology at Oomza University rejects division between the non-human and human, this presents problems on planet Earth between tribes. Okorafor however tries to minimize these conflicts in such a way to contradict the hierarchical presumptions on race, class, gender and sexuality, while at the same time exposing the colonial rhetoric about Africa. For example, tribal conflicts and stereotyping are eminent in the Trilogy between different Earth-tribes, but Okorafor expands the nature of troubling issues upon separated worlds trying to invade each other. This creates a specific allegory of colonial invasions. This motif is also detected by Joshua Yu Burnett in his analysis of Nnedi

Okorafor's *The Shadow Speaker* (2007) and *Who Fears Death* (2010), which can easily apply to the *Binti* Trilogy:

Okorafor takes on the project of conducting a postcolonial revision of speculative fiction and a speculative revision of postcolonialism. Thus, Okorafor plays both the critic and the trickster, taking the often white supremacist past (and sometimes present) of mainstream/white speculative fiction and, in true trickster fashion, transforming it into something new and counterhegemonic. In both novels, Okorafor utilizes the trickster trope of "signifying" as a way of complicating simplistic postcolonial narratives of good/colonized and bad/colonizer while still maintaining a strong critique of colonialism, and she deploys the speculative trope of the post-apocalyptic landscape to articulate a way forward beyond our current neocolonial reality (133-134).

In the Trilogy, Okorafor's trickster trope complicates colonisation as those tribes on Earth who battle against each other are equally those tribes who have a problem seeing beyond the human as the measuring rod of the world. However, Oomza University is a place that spreads posthumanism as it has moved beyond the traditional understanding of the human and non-human, by acknowledging and respecting the existence of non-human species. In other words, instead of deconstructing colonisation, Okorafor's Trilogy, especially through its protagonist Binti, goes a step further to propose a thesis that maybe the problem does not lie in one tribe fighting against another, but in their acceptance or refusal of the non-human, or alternatively in their epistemological makeup of the human.

Ferrando also positions the problem of defining the human in the centre of colonisation and other societal ailments, while posthumanism seems to constitute a possible solution. As she argues,

Posthumanism can be approached as a post-humanism, a post-anthropocentrism and a post-dualism. [...] The deconstruction of the human acknowledges that, historically, numerous human beings have not been fully recognized as "humans," as proved by the history of racism, sexism and colonialism, among many other frames. Post-anthropocentrism enriches this ethical discussion by adding speciesism, thus suggesting that the recognition of human diversity should not stand on human supremacy, and that non-human persons (such as non-human

animals and plants, as well as inorganic entities like robots) should also be granted the condition for a dignified existence (“Posthumanism” 2).

What seems to constitute the core of the problem is the centuries-old debate between nature and culture that tends to separate the two in the Western epistemology instead of drawing them together. As Martin G. Weiss reminds,

The term “nature”, deriving from the Latin *nasci* – meaning “becoming”, “be born” –which for its part is derived from the Greek verb *phyein* having the same meaning, had from its first appearance in pre-Socratic writings two different, but intertwined, meanings: a) the phenomena of the physical world opposed to humans and human creations (*techne*), and b) the inherent characteristic feature of something, its essence (*ousia*). (185).

Hence, Weiss maintains that the notion of nature is crucial to both transhumanism and posthumanism because they both challenge the meanings of nature. The author asserts that while transhumanism views nature in a more naturalistic way (the two concepts that are wider apart), posthumanism on the other hand, tends towards culturalism (the two concepts that are drawn closer together) (185).

Binti bypasses this Western culture/nature divide through her ability to adapt to changes in unfamiliar settings. Her deep connection to Himbaland, plants, the desert and even the stars, coupled with her indiscriminately accepting the changes that happen to her as a result of her interaction with other species, contribute to her posthuman nature. Okorafor uses different styles in addressing the importance of nature and how all beings are co-dependent in order to survive, from the use of species-like transportations, to attributing human qualities to species.

Okorafor destroys the traditional notion of humans as more intelligent and supreme than other species. Her portrayal of different species and their roles at Oomza University does not only show the power of diversity and communication, but also cancels human supremacy. Each of the non-human species has a dignified role and existence without being defined by racist and sexist stereotypes. This shows how interdependency based on peaceful coexistence between human and non-human creates a peaceful environment.

At the center of Okorafor's posthumanist project is Binti who functions as a bridge between cultures and species. Binti as master harmonizer uses mathematics as a symbol to harmonize and create social unity in the midst of conflict. Although her abilities do not always completely succeed in maintaining stability, her role as a woman combined with her remarkable transformation and her different identities as a result of her altered genes, are significant part of who Binti is. She is able to respectfully and indiscriminately talk with other species. For example, when Binti first sees a ship which looks alien, she reacts as follows:

The ship was packed with outward-looking people who loved mathematics, experimenting, learning, reading, inventing, studying, obsessing, revealing. The people on the ship weren't Himba, but I soon understood that they were still my people. I stood out as a Himba, but the commonalities shined brighter. (*Binti* 21-22)

Even though the reader is initially introduced to her character as "Binti Ekeopara Zuzu Dambu Kaipka of Namib" (Okorafor, *Binti* 31), i.e. a character with a specific cultural affiliation, Binti will experience a series of transformations unlike any other character in the Trilogy. While she still maintains her Himba identity of origin, her interaction with other cultures and species will gradually turn her into a hybrid. Her contact with the Medusa in the second novel will change her into a Medusa hybrid and in the third novel she will be resurrected due to the heavy presence of microbes inside the New Fish, which will transform her additionally into a New Fish hybrid. More importantly, her human part will never override her Medusa and New Fish part, which makes her a model posthuman character.

Ultimately, Binti becomes known as "Binti Ekeopara Zuzu Dambu Kaipka Meduse Enyi Zinariya New Fish of Namib". She starts off as a Himba girl and gradually embraces other cultures and species that enrich her original identity enabling her to understand and appreciate other human and non-human cultures. In that regard, Binti as a futuristic character rooted in the African continent, becomes the symbol of the future strong transcultural African woman.

## Conclusion

Okorafor's *Binti* trilogy explores important themes such as gender, race, cultural practices, habitus, social and physical space, post- and transhumanism in the genre of Africanfuturism the author herself introduced in 2019. These themes provide the readers with a detailed and thought-provoking narrative that goes beyond the common sf tropes, especially when they are about Africa, blackness and women.

The Trilogy also explores different ways through existing effects of colonialism since initially Binti is marginalised and struggles for recognition because of her appearance. Through Binti's character, the readers gain an insightful access to African tradition, practices, and rituals that take place in an African space.

In conclusion, Okorafor's Africanfuturist narrative opens an important platform by providing an alternative way of exploring African stories and experiences, which further paves the way to enriching the understanding of not just the challenges and the undesirable portrayal of Africa and African experiences, but also African cultural diversity, which Afrofuturism (due to its focus on African-American experience in the USA) and mainstream science fiction (due to its exoticized representations of Africa) cannot provide.



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## Abstract

In order to counter the colonialist narratives, representation of black/women in sf, the MA thesis discusses a distinctive science fiction genre titled Africanfuturism that enables African writers to take ownership of themselves, the past, present and future, and their imaginaries so as to establish relations with the rest of the world. The thesis discusses *Binti: The Complete Trilogy* (2015-2018) by award-winning Nigerian-American author Nnedi Okorafor through the lens of Africanfuturism, the theoretical term Okorafor coined herself in 2019.

The thesis discusses the topics Afro- and Africanfuturism in the wider field of science fiction, African/black spaces, gender, race, postcolonialism, habitus, social and physical space, ritual and cultural practices, science and spirituality, and post- and transhumanism. Provided analysis shows that the Trilogy does not only enable the reader to enjoy the expected futuristic framework but also to learn about cultural practices of a given African space. Moreover, the Trilogy makes it clear that the experience of Okorafor's protagonist Binti does draw on (West) African and not African-American experience, which testifies to Okorafor's insistence on Africanfuturism as a working term for African and African diasporic writers whose main focus is on African experience. It becomes apparent that Afrofuturism (due to its insistence on Afro-American experience) and mainstream science fiction (due to its exoticized representation of African space) cannot adequately map diverse futuristic spaces of (West) Africa.

**Key Words:** Africanfuturism vs Afrofuturism vs science fiction, Nnedi Okorafor, the *Binti* Trilogy, habitus, posthumanism, transhumanism

## Sažetak

Rad analizira niz kulturnih praksi kroz vizuru takozvanog „afričkog futurizma“ (*Africanfuturism*) u trilogiji *Binti: The Complete Trilogy* (2015-2018), slavne nigerijsko-američke spisateljice Nnedi Okorafor.

Kolonijalna perspektiva i afrofuturizam (*Afrofuturism*) ne uspijevaju adekvatno raspravljati o autentičnim kulturnim iskustvima Afrike u znanstvenoj fantastici, stoga je novi teorijski okvir „afrički futurizam“, kojeg 2019. uvodi Nnedi Okorafor, nužan za analizu znanstveno fantastičkih djela koja dolaze iz pera bilo afričkih pisaca ili pisaca afričke dijaspor, a ne bave se afro-američkim povijesnim iskustvom (počesto kolonijalnim ropstvom) u SAD-u. Stoga, rad analizira način na koji Okorafor prenosi crnačko odnosno afričko iskustvo kroz pitanja rôda, rase, društvenog prostora, kulturnih praksi, duhovnosti i kolonijalizma. Teorijski, rad se također oslanja na temeljne postavke postkolonijalne teorije, transhumanizma, posthumanizma, i sociološke teorije habitusa te društvenog i fizičkog prostora.

Naposljetku se zaključuje da trilogija kroz protagonistkinju Binti iscrpno dočarava društveno-povijesno iskustvo, ali i budućnost prostora (Zapadne) Afrike što ne polazi za rukom afrofuturizmu (zbog njegova inzistiranja na iskustvu Afroamerikanaca) i tradicionalnoj znanstvenoj fantastici (zbog njezina egzotičnog prikazivanja Afrike).

**Ključne riječi:** Afrički futurizam (*Africanfuturism*) vs. afrofuturizam (*Afrofuturism*) vs. znanstvena fantastika, Nnedi Okorafor, *Binti* trilogija, habitus, posthumanizam, transhumanizam