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Becoming, Writing Home: The Journey Towards Self for Community in *Under the Udala Trees* and the *Binti* Trilogy

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the process of being and becoming as represented in the novels *Under the Udala Trees* and *Binti* (series). It draws from Igbo and Kemetan notions of self, identity, becoming, and destiny (chi na eke, khepert) to center the protagonists' self-determination considering their oppressive environments. The protagonists, Ijeoma and Binti respectively, contend with who they are and are becoming alongside their neocolonial family and community expectations of its daughters. As a result, they are driven into isolation to determine self on their own terms. This paper argues that while they moved in solitude, this process is ultimately beneficial to their families and communities, offering decolonized methods of healing, and of moving towards one's purpose. Drawing from pre-colonial Igbo cultures and traditions—as the authors are Igbo—the paper positions *Under the Udala Trees* and *Binti* as pieces that offer contemporary solutions to the global erasure or suppression of African and Black cultures and ways of existing.

Keywords: being; becoming; self-determination; Igbo cultural systems; identity; queer literature; Africanfuturism; chi na eke; khepert

1. Introduction

> Did you hear about the rose that grew
> from a crack in the concrete?
> Proving nature's law is wrong it
> learned to walk without having feet.
> Funny it seems, but by keeping its dreams,
> it learned to breathe fresh air.
> Long live the rose that grew from concrete
> when no one else ever cared.
>
> —Tupac Shakur "The Rose That Grew From Concrete"

What does it mean to become oneself? How does one's environment affect that process? What happens when one decides to become themselves, against an oppressive societal approved version of "self", in a hostile environment? Against familial/cultural expectations of self? What does that mean specifically for African women who find themselves at least twice oppressed in any environment for their neocolonial/racial and gendered identity? How do we recognize and celebrate the Black woman who becomes as her spirit determines despite such conditions? This paper is particularly interested in the distance between one's oppression and their blossoming into self, and the flowers that bloom thereafter. It is imagined here as a process of recognizing who one is (truth of self),

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and that being critical to authentically being able to become self. Often, for African women, to become themselves their flower must emerge through the concrete of a hardened society that goes against their cosmology, in order to find sun in order to grow as they are meant to grow. They must arrange themselves according to their cosmological positioning and exist constantly against their environment's demand to conform, repress, and die. That point just before, during, and right after the flower breaks through the cement in the dark to find her light and become herself, is recognized here as a phenomenon normal for African/Black women. Yet, it is a difficult process revealing her resilience, strength, tenacity, and grace. As leaders, healers, mothers, and warriors within their communities, self-determination is always in conversation with their responsibilities and duties to family and community. This paper queries what happens when the African woman's destiny goes against a neocolonial society's expectation of her, while arguing that when she does walk towards her destiny her family and community is left stronger in the end.

This paper examines and celebrates the novels (in this paper *Binti* by Nnedi Okorafor and *Under the Udala Trees* by Chinelo Okparanta) written by Black/African women where they center protagonists who use their (re)discovery of their cultural heritage and identities as the vehicle for this transformation. *Binti* (Okorafor 2015, 2017, 2018) is about a young Himba girl who is the first of her people to leave home, and does so to understand herself and her destiny by leaving earth for university with her cultures in tow. She leaves despite facing social exile and engages in new worlds despite their hostility for her desire not to conform to their cultures by upholding her traditions. She ultimately takes on new identities, new worlds, and finds her way home, grounding herself in ways she could not prepare for the benefit of her people. *Under the Udala Trees* (2016) is the story of Ijeoma, a girl who comes into her sexual identity as a woman who loves women in postcolonial Nigeria in the backdrop of the Nigerian-Biafran war. Her journey is centered in her physical and spiritual journey to discover and honor self, in light of community expectations. In doing so, she is creating safe journeys (ije oma) for future generations to live authentic lives in the face of oppressive societies. The realities and journeys of people like Binti and Ijeoma can challenge notions of upholding, honoring and moving towards one's cultural heritage. They honor and represent their cultures by representing what it means to move with one's chi (spirit) to understand their relationship with the divine/universe, while at the same time navigating how it is done in relation to community's expectations of them in the aftermath of colonialism. Against societies that cannot begin to imagine the shape of their flower, the women protagonists in *Binti* and *Under the Udala Trees* find ways to heal themselves of the confines of their oppressed community expectations by becoming who they are meant to be. Following one's chi—by Igbo cosmology one's guiding spirit that is tasked with their eke (chi na eke) to guide its human to their destiny—allows them alignment with self, to know oneself, in order to heal oneself and move forward as oneself authentically.

As we will see in the novels, the process of becoming is vitally important to the development of the African child and understanding their place within their community. Due to the aftermath of colonialism, slavery, and the rise of Western imperialism, the novels show how the process of becoming may veer one into a life of solitude, a warrior's lonely journey. They must learn to become themselves even when it goes against commonly accepted traditions within a family or community. That is to say that in a neocolonial present African traditions shift without always holding a light to the ways the West has negatively impacted them. In the case of Ijeoma and Binti, it limits these children's agency in defining their own way forward. Focused on the journeys of young women, this paper recognizes the interruptions in her process of becoming as a result of the violent insertion of the European colonial state. It meant the disruption and destabilization of women's power in the balance of African societies.

The roles of women, along with men and other manifestations of gendered identities, help to create a whole healthy society. Slowly yet powerfully like a virus, the imposition of the colonial state—a combination of racist structures and sexist values that European descendent women suffer to this day. European colonialism "reinforced existing systems of social inequality and introduced oppressive forms of social stratification, including racial segregation, through the machinery of the state" (Steady 1996, p. 9). Binti and Ijeoma, like other contemporary women, suffer the separation of ancient systems that understand the power of women and her contribution to society. In both cases they will have to draw on chi na eke in order to enter a new version of woman that is natural to their journey, which contradicts societies' expectation for them to repress rather than grow. This offers a backdrop to the contradictions our African women face, and that its storytellers take time to detail within literature and other cultural productions.

This paper's main goal is to argue that by detailing the African characters' journeys to knowing self and becoming self from African indigenous knowledge systems, African/Black literature of this type can be better understood as cultural artifacts useful to aiding African/Black youth to feel validated and valued in their own processes of self-definition and self-determination. To do this, the "truth of self" section for each book/series goes through the journeys of the characters, focusing on the ways that they learn, acknowledge, accept, love, and reify who they are. This is exemplified especially in relation to their chi na eke, recognizing that they must be in alignment with their chi, their spirit, in order to understand, be in command of and in love with who they are. Each "becoming self" section reveals how that truth of self then transforms them and leads them to finding their purpose and moving towards it, especially considering their process of khepert. While chi na eke and khepert may flow between both sections, what's important is this process that begins with radical knowledge of self which must precede their transformations of self in order to become self as authentically as possible. This then characterizes how they best contribute to society in ways that are unique to their cosmological positioning, which has gone through ancient cultural rituals of becoming in a modern world.

Theory is developed by suggesting that we can use indigenous knowledge systems (chi na eke, khepert) as the method of interpreting African knowledge. For instance, "chi" is a "unifying theme" that is interlinked to the majority of Igbo cultural systems, and is central to what it means to be. The literature is read by interpreting when their chi and how they successfully enact khepert by linking their response to the events in the stories to Igbo and Kemetan moral and ethical beliefs. Their beliefs and philosophies are defined and analyzed through lived experiences, which is a critical tool to bring those epistemologies to the front of our intellectual approaches to research and personal engagements. We learn how others become themselves through our cultures and we in turn know how to become ourselves as humans first, and any other mode of using this content is second. This paper takes on methods of literary analysis and content analysis. For the latter, instances of personal and cultural acknowledgement, self-discovery, and becoming were noted throughout each book and are discussed here through the themes "truth of self" and "becoming self". For the former, the epistemologies are discussed in alignment with their ties to chi na eke and khepert to reinforce the existence of these cultural rituals in contemporary experiences of Africans and African cultural productions.

As mentioned, a major focus is to represent self-definition and self-determination through frameworks from ancient African epistemologies that understand and honor unique nature of being and becoming self for the betterment of family and community (primarily "chi na eke" from the Igbos, and to a lesser extent "khepert" from the Kemetans). As daughters of Igbo families, Okparanta and Okorafor write the main characters Ijeoma (*Under the Udala Trees*) and Binti (*Binti*) as women who recognize their responsibility to

their families yet understand their duty to themselves are just as important. Where the two cannot exist at once, I argue, is due to the remnants of Western imperialism which invokes a "do as I say" type oppression that works to negate a more African centered "who is this child meant to be by way of their spiritual aligning" mentality. As a result, some find themselves distanced from their family, sacrificing self to move towards family, or realizing self despite family in order to protect that very family. Family is understood in the paper as both those one is born into, and those the one(s) one chooses along their life's path navigating these realities and building upon who one is and is meant to be. The characters go through periods of solitude critical to their process of becoming, but find their way back to family in ways that do not compromise who they are. As a result, they "write" themselves "home". They are revising what it means to be, and exemplifying it for others.

Nnedi Okorafor and Chinelo Okparanta, as Igbo authors, "write home" through their depiction of characters such as Binti (*Binti*) and Ijeoma (*Under the Udala Trees),* and by doing so create reimagined notions of what it means to be Igbo, African, woman, human in the world. Okorafor and Okparanta, Igbo women based in the United States, draw heavily from Igbo cultural systems to develop their books while creating storylines that give agency to how the protagonists understand their environment, their duty to self and community, and ultimately how that impacts how they see themselves (truth of self) and who they become. While this paper does not focus on diasporization, it is important to recognize these stories both exist as a result of it. *Under the Udala Trees* could not be written and marketed easily in Nigeria, a homophobic country on a continent with many laws sanctioning violence and imprisonment for openly queer peoples (Chukwumezie and Onogwu 2023). Okparanta writes a story honoring women like her grandmother who was married to a woman (Obi-Young 2018). "Writing home" comes from scholar Carole Boyce Davies who writes that Black women effectively 'write home' as a process of self-definition when they find ways to locate home through memory, thought, experience, negotiation of identity, and especially when she is able to write it into existence. Whether it is a result of physical migration, or even the separation between one's mind and their environment, writing home is a migratory experience where Black women write their epistemologies and their narratives into existence. They are able to reconstruct home from their purview. She argues that the writing home is a form of resistance that happens through "conversation, letters to family, telephone conversations, stories passed on to children as family history or to friends as reminiscences" and thus becomes critical in how they articulate their identity (Davies 2003). Davies centers the notion of the Black female migratory subject as a way to exemplify how her writing home—writing from a desire of home as a result of migration or exile—allows her to rewrite it, as one who constantly moves across borders whether physically, emotionally, or spiritually. She writes across boundaries, across borders, redefining them as a result, as a means of communicating with home. This paper emphasizes the authors' participation in the Black female subject's rewriting of home, thus defining, writing, and becoming woman. Their characters exemplify the expansions of societal reality to include the African women's epistemology, as a response to strive to see, be, and feel home. By the end of each novel, what it means to exist in the world gains a new perspective, experience, told as narrative for the consumption, critique and representation of the authors' communities.

Binti and *Under the Udala Trees* "write home" in ways that tie Binti and Ijeoma to their land, while imagining new futures that transform traditional expectations of their identities. They leave home (family, land, culture, religion) only to return to rewrite home by way of who they have become along the way. For instance, where Ijeoma leaves her societal norms to develop her sexuality while at home, Binti physically leaves home to expand her knowledge base. For their strivings, they must return home and face family in order to

complete this journey. The *Binti* series is part of the genre Africanfuturism that Okorafor has coined, which "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" (Okorafor 2019). She argues that Africanfuturism is most focused on what can/will be versus what was, which situates the notion of becoming self well in how she writes her characters. *Binti*'s protagonist is Himba and many names and cultural practices in the books can be linked to it as well as Igbo cultural systems, especially related to family's expectations for its daughters. Binti must leave home and engage a universe of peoples, becoming part of some of them, but ultimately home offers the catalyst that can help her unite and balance who she has become. In *Under the Udala Trees* Ijeoma must leave her mother's interpretation of their religion and culture to explore who she is as a woman who loves women, becoming herself on her own terms, before finding a way to come back home in a way that doesn't abandon family nor her identity.

One story set primarily on an Earth in the midst of visitable planets (*Binti)* and the other set in the middle of the Biafran war (*Under the Udala Trees)*, the protagonists Binti and Ijeoma, respectively, come to a point in their life where they find themselves at odds with what their family and community ask of them. They are both dutiful daughters, but eventually something within them—their chi—calls them to move differently than their family asks. They are then burdened with how to reconcile going against family traditions and towards a destiny unfolding before them—for Binti to be the first to leave her planet in a community that never leaves, and for Ijeoma to love another woman in a homophobic Nigeria. This paper shares the unfolding of their stories in this way, challenging that the community that they are up against is held captive under an oppressive version of itself. Culture is a blend of ancient traditions and colonial impressions. Binti and Ijeoma use their chi, moving towards their purpose, as a tool to navigate between the two. These novels are very different in topic, yet align in their focus on family and community. They have families that love them, but are at times unable to support them on their journeys when they seemingly go against cultural expectations. There is a hard line between elders' interpretation of culture, and the youths' budding, limitless understanding of it alongside how they understand themselves and the world around them. As daughters who do value their culture, their home, and their people, their fight to the light to grow as they are can be seen as an example of self-determination for both self and communities in ways that honors heritage while fighting oppression.

2. Notions of Being and Becoming

This section contributes notions of being and becoming by adding framing of chi na eke and khepert that can be useful towards their definition as well as making connections across epistemologies and exposing their complementary nature. Lastly, bodeme, or the "gatekeepers" coming from Dagara people of Burkina Faso is also described to consider an African epistemology in the analysis of the lives and experiences of non-heterosexual peoples (i.e., Ijeoma in *Under the Udala Trees*). It is aimed to show its alignment with the other epistemological methods which are all designed for the human to understand themselves and then move towards that self and its purpose.

2.1. Chi na Eke

"Chi na eke" encapsulates the Igbo person's being and process of becoming, by way of their relationship to the spiritual world (Achebe 1975; Chukwukere 1983; Onyibor 2019). It is "the divine particle in the man" (qtd. in Onyibor 2019, p. 90) as one relates to Chukwu (God) to develop one's individual identity, guided by family and community

systems to actualize one's destiny (Onyibor 2019, p. 95). Like most global African cultures, the Igbos believe that one's existence means nothing without community since African communalism is a defining characteristic of Igbo traditions and meaning of life (Ugwu 2021). "We are because others are, and our being finds meaning and expression in the being of others" (Ugwu 2021, p. 6). As a result, chi na eke is a critical framework to examine texts about Igbo communities, and a model to strongly consider in examining texts about other African/Black communities which often overlap in moral and ethical positions. It sends a message that the major strivings of a community should be considered when interpreting its people, culture, and ways of being. Moving towards chi na eke is to move toward one's destiny, moving away from one's chi na eke goes against existence and the eternal. To follow one's chi is quintessential to one's physical, emotional, and spiritual health and well being. It is from here that one can know who they are, who they truly are, and work towards becoming who they are meant to be. The Igbo believe Ife kwulu, ife akwudebe ya, or wherever something exists, something else exists (Onyibor 2019, p. 91). Achebe brings chi/chi na eke to this proverb by describing that the chi is one's representative in the spiritual realm as the individual is the earthy representation (Achebe 1975). He suggests diunital relationships between human and one's divine self (a person and their chi), and as shown in the next section the relationship between one's existence (chi/noun) and driving force towards their destiny (eke/verb). Igbo contribute to the world the notion that one is never alone, as your chi guides you, stands beside you at all times and guides you to your purpose through self-actualization.

Usually referred to as "chi" alone, misinterpretations often focus only on the importance of an Igbo person's relationship to their spiritual guide, their personal god, rather than understanding the complementary nature of "eke" as one's driving force, creative force, towards their destiny. The Igbo believe onye kwe, chi ya kwe. If one affirms, their chi affirms. This proverb offers that if a person affirms, agrees with, or moves toward something, it is also that their chi should have also affirmed, agreed with or moved towards something. One's chi protects them from anything that would harm them, and moves them towards that which is meant for them. It is a moral and ethical compass, determined by the divine as the chi exists in the spiritual realm where the human exists in the physical. What is commonly left out of contemporary Igbo discourse is "eke", the driving force that works with one's chi to guide them to their purpose on earth as determined by Chukwu (the supreme god) (Amanambu 2020). Achebe suggests "... the chi and eke are side by side. Eke seems to be more of the action of the noun Chi" and that "chi and eke are very closely related deities, perhaps the same god in a twofold manifestation, such as male or female" (Achebe 1975, p. 101). They come together to mean something like "chi that creates"; and work "like two stones that must be struck together in order to produce a spark" (Chukwukere 1983, pp. 530–31). Chukwukere also emphasizes that chi na eke should be understood as the process of "creation" versus "imagination" which is important to arguing that it is a process of tangible self-actualization. British missionaries' maligned this important reality in an attempt to translate "God" to help their religious colonial mission. Chi na eke, one's chi and one's eke, became Chineke—a new term to call a supreme God which is now often attributed to the Christian God (Onyibor 2019). This helped to destabilize chi na eke from directly being linked to the way contemporary Igbo children are raised and encouraged to self-actualize. That is to say it may happen, but not always under the framing of a *named* epistemology from within the culture, which robs its people from aspects of collective self-definition if not retrieved. Chi na eke as a process of self-actualization is critical to the "progression of different accomplishments of self-realization from the family and kindred levels to the village and community levels" (Onyibor 2019, p. 95). This is important to note as this paper recognizes both and reads

Igbo literature that focuses on one's fight to determine one's own existence. It is critical to help reveal the power within the Igbo individual to move towards their destiny, and exemplifies their movement with their chi, whether they understand it in a neocolonial present or not.

2.2. Khepert

Another important ontological positioning of being and becoming human, becoming African, exists within the Maatian notion of identity. The process of becoming is called khepert, for one realizes their destiny and moves towards. Relatedly, the god Khepra (also Kephri, Khepera) represents the process of becoming and creating one's existence. Khepra a manifestation of the sun-god of Kemet, and its physical representative is the scarab or beetle. Khepra is imagined this way because the people recognized how beetles are steadfast in their task to "roll balls of dirt across the ground and [Kemetans] translated this method of propulsion into an explanation of the sun's circuit" (Hart 2005, p. 84). This parallels Khepra who "rolled the global of the sun across the sky" (Budge 1904, p. 380), who brings the world from the sun's absence to presence, from night to day. The scarab was Khepra and Khepra is creator of the world and responsible for resurrection. Khepra represents change, transformation, evolution, and promises its continuous nature in being—we are always becoming, never static. Khepra is a creator of himself "who createth every evolution of "his existence, except whom at the beginning none other existed" and as a result has given way for human existence (Budge 1904, p. 14). He is the one "who is coming into being', i.e., self-created of his own accord. . ." (Hart 2005, p. 84), and thus becomes the model for humans' effort to make themself anew again and again. Humans are responsible for their actions and for their own spiritual evolutions (Waldron 2008), and one is judged by their earthly effort to become themself. Khepra is a god of creation, change, evolution, becoming and oversees all as the guardian of transformations across Earth and the universe (Scully and Wolf 2007), and as a result becomes a guide and representation of that process for each individual.

In the *Book of Coming Forth By Day: The Ethics of the Declarations of Innocence*, Maluana Karenga helps to translate this powerful term khepert related to how one becomes more human towards the advancement of humanity:

> . . . the Maatian conception of the human person posits the perfectibility of humans. This is not in the sense of finished moral product, but in the sense of progressive development; perpetual becoming and the possibility of assimilation with God as expressed in the *Book of Coming Forth by Day* and other books of rising like Ra. Thus Hotep teaches, "Strive for excellence in all you do so that no fault can be found in your character". Furthermore, he directs his teachings to those who "wish [their] conduct to be perfect", thereby expressing an assumption of human perfectibility. The concept of khepert or "becoming" in Kemetic anthropology is essential, for it reveals a conception of and commitment to the progressive perfection of humans. (Karenga 1990, pp. 27–28)

Khepert is used in this paper to locate the specific effort of the human spirit to constantly align itself with the way it is meant to grow, learn, and act in time. The perfectibility of self is indicative of a process that lasts as long as life, and guided by a moral compass and set of ethical teachings that come through the journey of life and into the afterlife. Each character must strive to be themselves in all matters of speaking, and also in the case of Ijeoma and Binti especially, they make an effort to do this alongside societal expectations of self. However, it comes down to their chi in the end, their eke, and overall process of khepert, that helps them understand which ways are of their development, and which are not. The stakes are higher than societal expectations as when Karenga translates Hotep's

teaching "strive for excellence in all you do so that no fault can be found in your character"; this is both for the realm of the living, and the afterlife. One must and is responsible to move as they are meant to on a spiritual level, on a physical level, for the present and future of oneself and one's people, and for the continuation beyond life. Both the Kemetans and ancient Igbos believe that one is held accountable to their actions on earth and after death, and the continuation of their spirit is dependent on their success in living a moral and ethical life, and in being true to their process of becoming (Karenga 1990; Ebo 2021; Shelton 1968).

Becoming is a self-determined and revolutionary process. Once I spoke to a friend about what it meant to cultivate our natural talents. He, a Black man with strong roots in the American south, proudly yet in a frustrated manner stated that if the two of us were back in a more historically distant Africa, our community would acknowledge our strengths as they emerged, and encourage us to be trained in these areas. Our destiny was to be determined by who we were, and supported by those around us. The Kemetans honored the process one took to become themselves. Khepert was the process, and duty, of one to achieve their life's purpose and to become who they are meant to be in this world (Karenga 1990). They did not believe in perfect beings, but in the capacity of one to develop a sense of perfectibility, grounded in notions of morality, culture, ethics, and combined with the notion of khepert, determined by their own cosmological positioning. Returning to chi na eke amongst the Igbo, one's destiny is aligned with their spirit, their ability to understand themselves both in physical and celestial existence and bringing them together to walk as one. Perfectibility demands a constant and steadfast effort towards this goal, and in doing so even in death one can achieve humanly fulfillment of loyalty to self.

2.3. Bodeme

People who are bodeme occupy an identity critical to contributing particular resources to human existence, that only those who embody multiple identities on the spectrum of gender and sexuality can understand. Malidoma Somé explains that those who are bodeme serve as gatekeepers between the realms of the living and spiritual, and thus communicate across realms for their communities to better understand their collective destiny (Hoff 1993). Again, this paper takes cosmological positioning as a framework to examine the experiences of African literary characters, by recognizing Ijeoma as bodeme, and thus in search of her purpose. To support this Afrocentric Decolonizing Kweer Theory (ADKT) is used as a theoretical framing to understand African kweer (queer) identities, which goes beyond sexual identity and desire, and includes a set of responsibilities given to the individual to achieve their destiny which is grounded in service to the community. As an African centered approach to becoming self and actualizing that self, bodeme works within chi na eke and khepert as an indigenous way of being and becoming. Characters (and peoples) like Ijeoma (*Under the Udala Trees*) fight to develop their sexual and gender identities in tandem with who they are meant to be to those around them and alongside all other notions of self. As a result, the writings of these communities by authors like Okparanta can have a positive impact on the way we understand non-heterosexual peoples and honor their duty to self and contributions to society. Sharif H. Williams describes ADKT as "not merely a framework for understanding lesbian, gay and bi-sexual sexualities. It is a project to advance understanding of African/Black sexualities that embraces all of who we have been, are and will be. It seeks to honor the humanity and sacredness of African people…" (Williams 2010, p. 26). The sacred connects these individuals to the spiritual and back again, and as a result kweer people embody a vibrational consciousness useful in particular ways to a community's ecosystem.

As mentioned earlier, the Dagara people of Burkina Faso recognize these people as bodeme, or an indigenous way of identifying non-heterosexual/kweer peoples by forefronting their ability to move between physical and spiritual realms. As a result of their travels, they return to humanity with ways of understanding existence necessary to helping their community along (e.g., healers, artists, teachers). As gatekeepers they help to maintain balance between earthly and spiritual gates, and thus are provided a power, a vibrational capacity, used in being able to translate between worlds for the benefit of their people. Learning about bodeme from Dagara shaman Maladoma Some, Williams offers that "gatekeeping is part of one's life purpose, announced before birth and developed through rigorous training to ensure that its power is not misused. A gatekeeper is responsible for a whole village, a whole tribe" (Williams 2010, p. 71). Like chi na eke, to be bodeme is determined before birth and to recognize this is to come closer to one's chi, one's spirit, one's identity before then acting towards one's destiny. It is on the road one who is like the scarab rolls to and fro to create themself anew, their process of khepert. Understanding Ijeoma this way is important to recognizing how she is able to center her relationship with God to be more assertively a woman who loves women during her earthly biblical lessons with her mother aimed at ridding her of her desire for women. Understanding Ijeoma as bodeme helps us make sense of how she is able to fight to become herself in order for future generations to heal from traumas imparted by rigid traditions that are byproducts of colonialism.

Chi na eke and khepert are central to how this paper understands the power behind Ijeoma and Binti's resilience in order to find a true version of themselves. It is centered in their own existence, and is therefore more powerful and salient than any societal derived version of self to meet a normative expectation. Becoming is steeped in traditions normal to ancient African cultures (e.g., bodeme), where their resilience is a push away from contemporary oppression and not overall away from one's community and cultural heritage. Their process of coming to themselves may be seen as separate from their family and community, but is understood as critical to help their family and community's survival by dismantling systems of oppression that have weaved themselves into their everyday life.

3. Being Igbo Daughters, Becoming Igbo People

Understanding Igbo familial and communal structures and expectations for its children, women, men and adults is critical to contextualizing the realities of Ijeoma and Binti, understanding their points of departure and what grounds them to their journey home, to Okparanta and Okorafor's writing home. The Igbo people believe in the importance of contributing to the community as a whole. Each has their role to themselves, to their family and to their community. There are many manifestations of this, for instance umunna, children of the father, brings a community together by blood ties and as such structures in place hold each responsible to the betterment of the whole (Shelton 1968). Outwardly, the Igbo child develops through multiple rites of passage that move from baby to child, child to youth, youth to adulthood—all of which are communal processes where they are responsible for the knowledge offered by those within their peer group, learning from elders, and mentoring those who come behind them. From infancy, rites of passage

> . . . qualify him into becoming a human being. A child therefore develops into an adolescent to a responsible adulthood. Young adults are raised to the status of husband and wife and so on. Each phase of life has role expectations that must be performed. Another example is "otu ogbo" formation and entry into age grade. By this, the person is ready and initiated into the wider society as a responsible member who can be fined or asked to contribute money or physical strength for developing the society. (Isidienu 2017, pp. 166–67)

These rites of passage are critical to ensuring that the youth matriculate well into adulthood as a contributing member of society. To move against the collective, contributing to it, is a negative attribute as hard work is positively attributed to Igbo identity. However, due to the project of European slavery and its brother colonialism, many of these rites of passage are ceasing to exist amongst the Igbo and across African cultures.

Igbo women have particular responsibilities to their fathers' land as daughters of the soil. There are three major kindred groupings among the Igbo—that of the men, daughters and women. The men are considered the head of the households, leaders of their communities, a group that the sons eventually enter, remaining a part of the very same community. However, the daughters—who may or may not join another community via marriage but who are always seen as born of their father's community—are an important force to their community's stability.

> The daughters are next in hierarchy in the structure of the kindred. They comprise all the adult women born in the kindred whether married or unmarried. They serve as checks on the men and the wives. They are traditionally charged with maintaining peace within their fathers' families and among and between the other units in the kindred. The daughters are held in very high regard in the kindred. They intervened in controversial disputes among the men especially where they feel that the men are not able to boldly declaring truth. (Ebo 2021, p. 33)

They are seen as the ones who can come together as a kindred group to resolve issues and be the balance between other kindred groups. They have the ability and duty to tell the truth in times when societal structures may politically move a community in a different way that doesn't align with its determination. One such grouping is called Umuada which is particular to the first daughters. Even after marriage and joining their husbands' communities, they are a part of their Umuada (Ebo 2021; Chukwu 2020). Wives, who are married into a kindred group, also have a particular set of responsibilities given only to them. They can find that they are in many ways responsible for both their father's home and their husband's home. This provides evidence of a heightened level of responsibility *and* capacity to work in ways that benefit the community. That is without mentioning their responsibilities as leaders within their homes, their contribution to the workforce, and of course to themselves.

It is also important to mention the way that the Igbo understand a woman's capacity to mothering, which aligns with her ability to provide outward to the world around her (family, kindred, community) regardless of if she has children or not. Solomon Madubuike and Valerie Solomon imagine this as the woman's ability to be productive and reproductive, the former her capacity towards providing for community and the latter the divine capacity to give birth to children. Chikwenye Ogunyemi provides a framing of the community mother by way of her leadership and responsibilities to a society. For instance, she reveals how the market woman is seen as Umunwa (Igbo) or Iyalode (Yoruba) which translates to leader, sister, mother or daughter of the soil and is the "guardian and moving spirit of the land" of her community. The contemporary market woman is both this woman of her own, and of her environment (Ogunyemi 1996, pp. 47–49). The system in place promotes a communal practice of trade, buying and selling, which is developed and controlled by women. The recognition of her varying ways of mothering attribute her to Ala, the earth goddess of the Igbo people who is the protector of the land, the living and the dead, and a symbol of fertility. This is so much so that the Igbo recognized her as the visible mother, the visual representation of Ala (Madubuike and Solomon 2007). All of this plays an important role in how Ijeoma's motherhood impacts her decisions in *Under the Udala Trees*, the way Ijeoma's and Binti's decisions contribute to their leadership and participation in their communities, and it helps us contextualize how their mothers struggle to see

their daughters' destiny's in the midst of their own expectations for them. Both women, Ijeoma and Binti, move towards the productive aspect of mothering, as daughters who fight to reframe familial and more generally societal expectations to incorporate at least understandings of who they are.

4. Chi Leads the Heart to Love in *Under the Udala Trees*

> "If you set off on a witch-hunt, you will find a witch. When you find her, she will be dressed like any other person, But to you, her skin will glow in stripes of white and black. You will see her broom, and you will hear her witch-cry, and you will feel the effects of her spell on you. No matter how unlike a witch she is, there she will be, a witch, before your eyes." (Okparanta [2015] 2016, p. 196)

Under the Udala Trees is a story about a young woman, Ijeoma, who comes of age as a woman who loves women in a war torn (Nigeria-Biafra war) and homophobic post-colonial Nigeria. She must negotiate her love for women within the backdrop of a society that doesn't welcome diverse notions of sexuality, and a mother determined to use culture and religion to move her from this aspect of her process of becoming. This section aims to reveal Ijeoma's journey towards who she is as a process that first demands she trust in who she is, and then demands she moves towards that existence. Trusting in self is understood as an alignment between Ijeoma and her chi, and then to move towards it (eke) is to become oneself as authentically as possible. Additionally, this section attempts to show how this journey involves moving away from family to achieve such goals, as Ijeoma and her mother are divided about who she should take as a partner. She moves through life, embracing change, building herself, and as a result practices khepert through constantly reinventing herself towards her most authentic self and purpose. Ultimately, she develops a new family by way of her partner and daughter who embolden her to follow her chi and to walk her path.

Ijeoma is a child budding into teenhood as the war begins, and then finds the world around her drastically shifting the environment in which she grows. Some major events and conditions that make up Ijeoma's reality during the war are loss due to fear, immobilization that leads to her father's suicide, her mother's response to such, dealing with child abandonment, shifting of social positions and means of livelihood, a building normalcy of dispossession, and unpredictability of daily life. It is within this environment that she begins to come into various notions of her identity, and must constantly negotiate it to understand her way. While there is description of the external reality such as the bombings, the loss of stability, displacement, and other characteristics of the real Biafran war, Chinelo Okparanta spends more time considering the internal development of Ijeoma as a result of her immediate surroundings. Her father commits something like suicide after losing a sense of self during the bombings on Biafra. In the moment when they needed him, and him them, instead of going to the bunker to protect himself he froze, went within himself, and was determined to stay where he was and the house was bombed. Coming from a stable household with her husband alive, Ijeoma's mother became less and less able to mentally and economically care for Ijeoma and placed her in the care of a teacher. Ijeoma went from staying in a home of her own with her parents, to a boys quarter (rooming unit annexed from the main house) of a stranger's house. She is left alone in ways to determine who she is for herself. It is in this solitude that Ijeoma begins to discover herself, grow into herself, on her own terms. A major catalyst is the moment she meets Amina and eventually falls in love with her. The story moves towards a fight for Ijeoma to acknowledge and believe in her love, the way she loves, and who she loves in order to free herself.

The novel helps to bring narrative and context to two lesser discussed, or written, topics among Nigerian or African writers: sexuality and the Biafran perspective of the

war. They are, in a large sense, taboo topics that are highly politicized within Nigeria. In the article "The Promise of Lesbians in African Literary History", Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi reveals Okparanta's contribution by discussing its rarity amongst the existing canon of literature about Biafra or non-heterosexual women in Igbo postcolonial history. Osinubi argues that Okparanta "extends the feminism potentials of these writers by stretching to accommodate other feminisms within the Anglo-Igbo novel" (Osinubi 2018, p. 680). Okparanta takes this into consideration as she tells the reality of Biafra, and in ways that compliments Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (Adichie 2007). Adichie's book, one of the few novels to take on the topic of the Biafran war, is a story that provides a deep analysis of neocolonial gender, class, ethnicity, race, representation, and culture and intimate relationships between diverse peoples in a fragmenting Nigeria and Biafra. Where Okparanta shows adults who shift away from themselves as a psychological effect of the war, Adichie does so but also shows various points of extreme resilience and agency amongst the characters that represent real instances of women during war. For instance, the main character Kainene, engages in some of the guerilla warfare tactics that actual Biafran women undertake to protect and nourish their families and communities. She participates in Affia Attack, or Biafran women who pose as Nigerian to cross the border, farm or trade, and bring provisions back to Biafra. It was very risky for women to go across those borders, because to be discovered could result in imprisonment, separation from family, or death (Achebe 2010, p. 795). Okparanta's narration of Ijeoma reads as a lived experience, everyday events during war that lead to an organic relationship with her first lover Amina. This then positions the reader to be invested in Ijeoma's journey, and ride along on it as she goes through her experiences of moving between relationships with a man and women. The reader sees how Ijeoma finally realizes who she is becoming and how she lives that truth out loud. These two books are notable for storytelling about the war from the Biafran perspective. They then go further to build upon topics of sexuality, gender, race and ethnicity through the development of their characters. They each have strong representations of resilient women who engage and overcome the impossible. This aids in the representation of real Biafrans during the war, while proliferating the voices of global African women through the reliability of the lived experience.

Unlike *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *Under the Udala Trees* takes on the topic of Ijeoma's sexuality and affixes her love of women as part of her self determined journey of becoming. Imagining her as bodeme, she is without a community that can validate what is happening to her. Her sexuality is part of who she is, and who she is becoming and living as such is critical to finding her place and being the woman she is meant to be for herself and her family. The book uses the Biafra background to focus more on the experience of a girl who isn't as aware of what's happening, beyond her childish purview and continues years after the war. Perhaps others' preoccupation with critical livelihood allows her to her own devices to explore her own identity. The notion of intimately and physically loving a woman, becomes easily realizable as love develops between her and Amina. For much of their growth as lovers, they are in a world of their own, within Biafra but completely hidden from Biafra. It is not until they are discovered, that Ijeoma's resilience to continue to discover, and protect her identity begins.

Ijeoma's mother's decision to send Ijeoma to live with a teacher and his wife created a space for Ijeoma to grow into herself on her own terms, and allowed her to envision her future outside of the expectations of the community due to the preoccupation of war. During this time, Ijeoma later meets a lost girl Amina, under an udala tree. They shared time and space there, taking time to look onto and then into each other, and "the moment our eyes locked, I knew I would not be leaving without her" (Okparanta [2015] 2016, p. 105). This expressed a bond between girls as sisters, but eventually deeper, as lovers.

Okparanta places them under a tree that by Igbo culture "symbolizes fertility and the spirit of children" (Ofei 2021, pp. 68–69). Josephine Ofei expands on this moment by offering that the udala tree is a meeting place amongst Igbo communities where they "express companionship, love, as well as sharing and caring" (Ofei 2021, p. 69). Ijeoma and Amina's union is an auspicious event and is normalized to the natural flow of meetings under an udala tree. They meeting and falling in love under the udala tree is natural to the human spirit and Igbo understanding of companionship. This is further revealed by their youth which promises pure intent and innocent nature of their spiritual connection to each other. So, Amina follows her home. She is Hausa, which is seen as an enemy to Biafra, but she can pass for Igbo, and so the family takes her in. This is where she and Ijeoma become extremely close, living in the same quarter. This, like Adichie's novel, shows the humanity between ethnicities within a hateful war. This ease of humanity by the teacher's family and Ijeoma to Amina, and reciprocated, creates a space of normalcy that can allow for organic love between the two very different girls to grow, mirroring a seemingly unimaginable love affair between the north and south, Hausa and Igbo, Muslim and Christian, and between two girls in a country that still determines the act illegal and immoral. Osinubi's argument of Okparanta's extension of feminisms is situated in part here. The book takes on the topic of same sex desire, but also imagines the loving relationship between ethnicities at the opposite end of a war. There is a narrative of self-love and love for others that Okparanta shares in many ways through Ijeoma's experiences. Ijeoma and Amina begin a beautiful friendship and sisterhood. Being each other's friends, they are able to move forward given the difficulties of war, and the loss they have both faced—Ijeoma of abandonment by her mom and her father's death, Amina of her displacement and disconnection from her family.

4.1. Truth of Self

This utopic bubble of Ijeoma and Amina bursts open, which challenges them to each decide how much they are willing to live with the truth of who they are in the days and months to come. The reader joins Ijeoma's journey, both of her family's response to her identity and her own negotiation of this response. One evening, in an intimate setting of their bedroom, Ijeoma and Amina start to explore each other's bodies sexually more than they had before. This is a blossoming, critical to their transformation as women, the exploration of love through sex. However, it is at this very moment that the school teacher walks in and catches them in the middle of their intimacy. Their innocence is destroyed by the school teacher's reaction to them, "pointing to [the Bible]" and calling their act "An abomination." This is combined with the exposure of their young woman bodies to a grown man, and the inability for them to process their experience on their own, and together, during and after the intimate scene truly colors the way that each of them act thereafter. In a moment he inflicts "both physical and mental pain on the girls by first pulling them off the mattress and slapping each on the cheek" (Ofei 2021, p. 71). Before any reflection, they are "lectured and lectured. . . [a]s God must have lectured Eve" (Okparanta [2015] 2016, p. 125) and they are separated until school begins again. Ijeoma is led down the path of a religious revival from her mother, to move strongly towards Christian values. We don't know much about Amina's process but we know that when we meet her again she eventually distances herself from Ijeoma. Ijeoma is still determined to be with the girl she loves, as she has gone through her biblical punishments and has come out with questions that challenge her mother's words and reasoning with her understanding of self, and of God's love. This is clear in her reflection with Amina.

> "If I said, "God loves us all the same", she said, "Not the thieves and the liars and the cheats, not the murderers, not the disobedient. He couldn't possibly love us the same".

> Once, I went so far as to quote her John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that he Gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believed in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life". And I said, "You see, God loves us all the same. He gave His only son to save us all. All of us, even the thieves and the liars and cheats, even the murderers and the disobedient. Even those of us accused of abominations". By this time, a large part of me did not believe I had committed any type of abomination, but I said it anyway. Just to point out to her God loved us all. Just to point out to her that He didn't put any qualifiers on His love. Not even when He said to love your neighbor as yourself. He didn't say don't love the thieving neighbors, don't love the adulterers, or don't love the liars or the cheats or the disobedient children. He simply said, "Love your neighbor as yourself".
>
> All of this explaining. Still, Amina would not budge. (Okparanta [2015] 2016, p. 159)

This type of rationale is meant to serve as Ijeoma's reflections toward her encounters with Amina post exposure, and her response to her mother's extensive lessons against being an "abomination." Okparanta's extensive use of the Bible eventually explains the ways God advocates an equality in love, given by God and given by humans, as a way to advocate for others who love people of the same sex. Ijeoma's explanation to the reader that she uses "abomination" only as context for Amina, also reveals that she does not see her love for Amina as such. For instance, during her lessons with her mom she prays. . .

> *Dear God, I am a sinner, and I come before you to beg you to please show me the path of righteousness. . . . Lord, I am confused. Please give me a sign. If there is any evil in my heart, please give me a sign so that I might recognize it and, in doing so, avoid it.*
>
> . . . I grew eager and afraid at once, because this was, after all, the sign I had asked for. I heard a sound of footsteps behind me. I turned around. I screamed at the sight, because if this was God's sign, then Mama was the evil in my heart". (p. 197)

What is important here is Ijeoma's innocence and yet purity of heart in search for truth in the matter. She is dedicated to obeying her mom, but by listening to God for answers. It becomes clear to her, over time, that God's response to her was very different from her mother's. In Igbo culture the supreme god, Chukwu, assigns children their chi and eke (Ananambu), so we see here honest reflections between Ijeoma and her chi, between Ijeoma and Chukwu. And the answer she receives is to continue loving herself, which aligned with chi na eke can suggest that God made her this way and placed it on her path, her purpose. She is bodeme, according to the Dagara people, and has a specific purpose she must find and enact. So Ijeoma moves through her journey, in respect of her mother, but diverting when her mother's wants for her contradict her own chi's determination of her destiny. Moments like these are critical in Ijeoma's process of becoming, and a marker of her resilience as she determines what morally constitutes God's love, versus social determinations that do not vibrate with her chi's notion of self. However, she does find herself going through moments of doubt, but these moments of reflection are critical to her return to herself. So as her chapter with Amina closes when Amina leaves her to eventually marry a man, Ijeoma is able to blossom further in her identity as a woman in a positive and affirming space.

Ijeoma's encounter with Amina pushes her onto a new part of her path of becoming herself and knowing who she is. Her chi is at the forefront portraying new versions of their reality, and at some point Ijeoma must be in alignment or against her chi as a regular engagement of understanding her identity. Being called an abomination and the events that follow against her identity are now new components of her environment that she must contend with in order to self-define, and her chi is the one responsible for her failure or

success in this process (Onyibor 2019). Her mother is her biggest challenge, as who mom wants her to be is against her chi and the Igbo have a proverb—one does not challenge their chi to a wrestling match. This divine within Ijeoma, that is Ijeoma, must come through even if on a solo journey which is not uncommon when aligning with chi (but never alone, as where something stands something else stands by it—Ijeoma and her chi). The ability to walk alone in the search for one's identity as determined by chi is a characteristic of becoming, of chi na eke. Ultimately, one walks alone to determine self with the support of the community (Achebe). Ijeoma does not find that community with her mother and uses her lessons with the bible as a way to deepen her relationship with herself, her chi. And as a dutiful daughter she reads the bible and prays as she is told, but chooses to follow her chi which does not push her away from her love of women. She instead interprets God's love in a way that is affirmed by her chi, and quickly realizes that to exist in authenticity will mean to move away from community in ways. However, the promise of khepert is that change is necessary, and she must be responsible for the way this happens. Community is also redefined as a result of becoming herself as is naturally determined, as alignment with chi is seen by the Igbos as the most natural form of existence towards destiny.

Her community and family immediately shifts after her lessons and it starts when she meets a woman named Ndidi, a teacher, who becomes her friend, and soon thereafter they become lovers. It is in this relationship that Ijeoma is able to explore herself as a woman engaged in love and intimacy with another woman without the notion of shame coloring their relationship. Osinubi suggests when comparing Ijeoma's relationship with Amina versus Ndidi that Amina marked a time of "trauma and prohibition" on Ijeoma's life journey, where with Ndidi was able to "anchor reparative re-education and affection" and encourage her shift towards new chapters in her life (Osinubi 2018, p. 680). With Ndidi, Ijeoma is invited to sacred spaces, private spaces, where other women who love women are able to enjoy themselves, and be amongst each other. Ijeoma's family and community is found, created, and redefined as a result of Ijeoma's success in following her chi, and her process of khepert which leads her to people who can help her continue her journey to herself. However this is a very precarious space, as being found out as gay could lead to death. And indeed she finds herself brushed with death, paralleling her experiences in Biafra. Men burst into the old church where they are having a party, determined to do away with these women who love other women. Most of the women are able to escape into the backyard into an old war bunker, mirroring the experiences of running for protection from bombs or soldiers during the war. The majority of them make it to the bunker but one woman, Adanna, was burned alive. These women are forced to deal with these traumatic experiences alone, or at best together. Who can they go to discuss this other than themselves, for doing so would reveal themselves and put them in danger as well. So here is a group of women, who resist in order to love, in order to become themselves. Without the spaces they would have a little to no accessibility to what it means to be them. So they must force space, conjure space, create it to maintain community. And it is difficult to protect. Why expose oneself to danger, but for an opportunity to survive and perhaps thrive? This is definitely the case for Ijeoma, and these types of spaces, as well as her relationships with Ndidi allows her to deepen her own beliefs and understanding of self. When she returns home, all she can do is tell her mother she is tired as her mother already has listed off her accusations about her actions and whereabouts.

4.2. Becoming Self

What would it mean to exist authentically in a world that condemns who one is? Whether Ijeoma chose to marry a man as Amina did, or continue to live her life in secret, it was potential death either way. So may as well take the risk of potential physical death, in

order to live rather than die a doubled physical and spiritual death. It is also suggested that the challenges Ijeoma faces are intersectional by way of the socio-economic realities of being an African woman in Nigeria (e.g., gendered labor inequities) and the support that marrying a man can offer. Emeka Chukwumezi and Elizabeth Onogwu posit that "Okparanta shows through Ijeoma's challenge the problem that the African woman faces; while she bears the burden of her queer identity, which is termed a transgression by Christianity and the indigenous religion, she still battles with the economic problem that beguiles the third world and stipulated gender roles" (Chukwumezie and Onogwu 2023, p. 6). So eventually succumbing to the pressures of society, especially her mother's to be "the daughter I always envisioned you could be" (Okparanta [2015] 2016, p. 217), Ijeoma allows herself to be wooed by a young man that she grew up with, Chibundu. He was kind to her and loved her, was in love with her, but she could not return that love. And she tried. Perhaps one of the saddest moments in this whole book is her realization of her mistake and her pending future the night of her marriage. Her husband is assuming that they will consummate the marriage, but instead our protagonist is overwhelmed with a sense of agony and grief. She stands by the window all night, dressed, reflecting on the past, present and future.

> I left him where he sat and walked over to the window. I stayed by the window, still in my wedding gown. Every once in a while a breeze blew in through the open space. In the few instances that the breeze was strong, I pushed my face into it, as if it would somehow blow away all my agony.
>
> Even when I heard Chibundu's soft snoring, I continued to stand by the window, wide awake. (Okparanta [2015] 2016, p. 236)

At first, she makes a strong effort to show Chibundu love, but we find her early on praying to understand "why was it that I could not love Chibundu the way I loved Amina and Ndidi? Why was it that I could not love a man?" (p. 228). She is increasingly distant and detached from the relationship and her husband over time, and he takes notice. She is dying internally, and cannot see her way out, back to the self she discovered in her childhood. This section is important because it shows her intention, her desire to conform to heterosexuality but as a result she fights her chi and goes deeper into an unhappy marriage as she is unable to reciprocate the love given to her.

At this point in the book, Ijeoma has entered a wrestling match with her chi and tragically lost. She moved towards society's expectations of herself and not the divinely determined version of herself, and as a result she slowly loses herself, changes are marked by pain and loathing. Her questioning of her lack of love for Chibundu against her easy love of Ndidi is a marker of that wrestling match. Remembering that khepert is her own responsibility, we see the consequences of suppressing her chi's determination to transform. She is at a major crossroads, and the ability to move towards chi means sacrificing participation in societal norms if she is to align. At the same time, it means challenging family to also transform with her in order for them to remain community.

The family member who pushes her back on her path is her daughter. The fear that her daughter may not live and love her authentic self because Ijeoma was not modeling it was a literal wake up call. It is a point that she must revisit who she is, and starts to envision who she is meant to become. She must be responsible for her own evolution and transformations, and to do so she and her chi must have a conversation to come back together again. The role of the mother ignites this change and she determines that she can no longer be imprisoned by her marriage, if not for her sake then for her daughter.

> I woke up with a start, frantic, drenched in sweat, gasping for air. I started blankly around, trying to make sense of where I was. It was then I made the realization:

> Chidinma and I were both choking under the weight of something larger than us, something heavy and weighty, a weight of tradition and superstition and of all our legends. (Okparanta [2015] 2016, p. 312)

She and Chidinma are not the only ones imprisoned, but also so is her husband by Ijeoma's apathy and melancholy. The idea of living a full life for the well being of her daughter becomes a priority in her life, and a catalyst for her to leave her husband. The book ends with her returning to Ndidi and living her life with this type of contentment, raising her daughter and kind. And here a generation of children who understand diverse ways to love is born.

Part of the power in this tale is the way that the mother/daughter relationship is revised and envisioned as a result of Ijeoma's journey, and resilience that leads to her freedom within self and then outwards to those around her. It ends with the promise that within one's freedom and self actualization is a hope for the wellbeing of those to come. Osinubi suggests that the ending challenges and attempts to transform notions of the relationship between Igbo (Nigerian/African) daughters and mothers in relation to sexuality and political: "(1) the lesbian daughter and the heterosexual mother, and (2) the lesbian mother and heterosexual daughter" (Osinubi 2018, p. 683). It represents and positively imagines possibilities of sexual diversity, and thus the ways that one may relate to the other. Related to bodeme, Ijeoma's decision offers new interpretations of the relationship women have with their daughters, and provides new visions of what that can look like by living her life according to her most authentic self (lesbians raising a daughter in a homophobic Nigeria). Osinubi uses this as a way to reaffirm his notion that Okparanta is contributing to transformative feminist genealogies, in revealing the realities of both having a lesbian daughter and mother. Chinelo Okparanta herself is granddaughter to a woman who married another woman. Similar to the daughter born in this text, she represents a generation of people who understand various ways to live, in normalized circumstances circumvented by colonial Western rule.

> "Before the West decided that homosexuality was a sin", says Okparanta, "I don't think anyone in Africa, based on my research, thought it was a sin. Our own cultures were not against women-to-women marriages. My own grandmother was married to another woman". Okparanta sees her writing as a way of "opening up conversations", which is not to deny that just having those conversations can be difficult. (Obi-Young 2018)

Okparanta is the granddaughter of a woman who's fought to exist in this light, which in result has aided Okparanta to understand and accept grandmother's world despite a culture's continuous disavowal of it. She writes the reality of people like her grandma and her belief about it into a novel form. By doing so she exposes the complexities of love in a human sense, similar to that of women writing in the 1960/70s. Rather than only hearing negative stereotypes of lesbians, we get the complex coming of age narrative. In it is relationships with denial, acceptance, rejection, deep contemplation, religion. Ofei suggests that Okparanta imagines a "utopia that promises hope for queer sexualities in their Nigerian setting. This utopian moment of imagination stimulates the likelihood of conviction for a future social order that embraces all forms of love" (Ofei 2021, p. 75). The idea of representing "utopia" is a marker of Ijeoma's success on her journey towards her most perfect self—a woman who lives with her woman partner, finds peace with her mother without sacrificing who she is, and raises her daughter to become an authentic version of herself. And she did it by first aligning with her chi, and while there were fights along the way, she ultimately realigned with it in order to understand how to move, how to live. And in the end, her community benefited. Paralleling this, we can imagine that Okparanta is like that daughter of Ijeoma, a product of the natural transformations of

another to contribute positively and powerfully back to the community by writing this novel. While these conversations are extremely hard in contemporary Nigeria (global Africa), Okparanta helps to shine a phenomenal light on people like Ijeoma and encourage them as creators of their own reality, those who must align with their divine to become themselves. We see the series of events that led her to overcome her societal expectations for a version of self-love, guided by her chi, that has the potential to reverberate for generations to come, as it seems to have for Okparanta's grandmother as well.

5. The Chi Leads the Voyager Home in *Binti*

> "A bird who has flown off the earth and then returns to land is still on the land. . .Remove your shoes and listen"—(Okorafor 2018, p. 57)

The novella *Binti* Series (*Binti, Binti: Home,* and *Binti: The Night Masquerade*) is the story of Binti, a girl who leaves home to become who she is meant to be only to find that her destiny is (1) to be more deeply herself from a cultural and traditional perspective while (2) also embodying the identities of some she meets along the way. Binti's chi na eke leads her planets away, deeper into home on Earth, exiled from family and society, and yet a better a leading force of change and of pride for her community. *Binti* is set partly in space but "is deeply and intentionally rooted in the history and imagined ancient traditions and culture of the Himba, who are an indigenous community of northwest Namibia and southern Angola" (Alexander 2023, p. 9). Africanfuturism allows the bending of space and time in *Binti* by imagining future societies dealing with realities that parallel our world's. It then goes beyond our world to create solutions that dive deeply into African history and epistemologies. In this case unveils imagined solutions through living spaceships, nonhuman beings, tangible mathematics that work with nature to harmonize the living, and ancient African artifacts that heal alien beings. Josephine Alexander sees this as a process of Sankofa, or the Akan (Ghana) notion of going back to fetch the past in order to inform the present and future. She argues that "Okorafor utilises African history and an African worldview, long marginalised by colonial misrepresentation and distortion, to address contemporary African issues and to create an imagined future deeply rooted in the African experience in Africa" (Alexander 2023, p. 7). We see this in new ways that allows the readers to join Binti in her process of becoming herself and enacting her process of khepert, challenging the reader to become themselves through new futures as well.

Binti starts with a story of a girl proudly from the Himba people whose dreams pour out beyond the walls of her village. She is one of the town's strongest harmonizers, or something like a mathematical engineer who uses nature's vibrations to do her work, learning from her dad who also specializes in the sacred crafts of their people. She is aware of the power of the knowledge she's received from her father, generational knowledge that she carries proudly. This "Sankofa in (imaginative) action" (Alexander 2023, p. 11) positions the reader to understand how important knowing and honoring her past is to Binti understanding and carving out her future. She uses "treeing," or meditation in alignment with the environment around her, in order to bring her mind to balance, in order to allow equations to move around and *through* her to communicate to the devices she creates. Imagined as the Himba people who are connected to a universe full of races of beings, members in her community do not leave home. They do not leave Earth and go off to the other worlds. No person from their community has ever left, nor had seemingly thought about leaving. It was a non conversation starter, and also taboo at the same time. While her identity is tied to maintaining some of the most sacred aspects of her Himba culture wherever she is in the worlds, Binti saw limitations in what her home could teach her and sought to get an education at Oomza Uni, a university on another planet. After

gaining admission, and knowing the consequences of leaving, she does so in the middle of the night.

> I was defying the most traditional part of myself for the first time in my entire life. I was leaving in the dead of the night and they had no clue. My nine siblings . . . would never see this coming. My parents would never imagine I'd do such a thing in a million years. By the time they all realized what I'd done and where I was going, I'd have left the planet. (Okorafor 2015, pp. 9–10)

Entering a living spaceship called Third Fish, "a type of ship closely related to a shrimp" (Okorafor 2015, p. 19) fate sets her destination unknown. There she meets people of different races and cultures from the same planet for the first time. She is immediately seen as an outsider, 'dirt bathers', tribal, for her people's lack of communication and interaction with the outside world and the women's use of red dirt, otjize, to cover their body. She understood it as her people "prefer to explore the universe by traveling inward, as opposed to outward" (Okorafor 2015, p. 21). However, our author does well to allow us the insider's perspective of our dear Binti, knowing that this daughter of the soil has more potential than any person there. She harbors skills from her community that are not common knowledge to others on the planet. Her edan, a device, protects her during an alien attack on the ship, killing all on board except for her. So if the reader is to have hope for Binti then they must acknowledge that her world and her spirit has something to offer that the worlds have yet to see. This must be true despite societies' notion and determinations of her inferiority and despite her family's desire to keep her perpetually within their community.

During her time on Third Fish, Binti is forced into the middle of a war that is not her own, and as a result finds herself expanding her role as harmonizer beyond the Himba across peoples and plants. Her destiny unveils itself both in who she becomes, and how she contributes to her indigenous and new societies as a result of her travels, experiences, and identities. Upon Third Fish, everyone on the ship is killed by the Meduse, an alien race attempting to retaliate and finish a longtime fight with the Khoush people. Not knowing the difference between the Khoush and others, the Meduse execute everyone but Binti who is saved only for the edan she carries. The edan is a device whose power she is yet to understand, an object she found when wandering alone in the desert as a child, where she met a Desert woman who explained that it was a 'god stone' and an old but powerful device of their people. Seemingly ironic, but cleverly placed by Okorafor, Binti is protected by her people even in this far off place and in possession of the only device that can harm her attacker, among a ship of extraordinarily diverse peoples and cultures. Additionally she finds that her otjize can heal the Meduse people. Different aspects of home are able penetrate space to offer solutions for Binti, beyond what home could imagine in new spaces. Arit Oku suggests that "Okorafor uses the tool of speculative fiction to showcase alternative pathways for Africa's post-crisis development and economic prosperity, enabling one to focus on astonishing future possibilities, rather than the excruciatingly painful present" (Oku 2021, p. 85). To save her life, she must negotiate with the invaders, using a combination of her story, their story, and what she can offer as a result of the two to encourage them not to kill her. These people, the Meduse, envisioned as tentacular creatures like a squid, jellyfish, or octopus, do so by first requesting she submit to them, directly transferring some of who they are into her. Binti, who is not aware until later the true nature of this union, finds her spirit and physical appearance shifting to embody the two worlds. It isn't until the second book, *Binti: Home*, that a space of becoming is complicated with this new identity, and she must find herself anew in the midst of this process. It is just the beginning of her embodiment of new worlds and peoples in ways our real world cannot imagine, but that demand harmony across diverse cultures that readers must contend with. She is human, she is Meduse, and she will become more and thus new ways of being are on her

path of becoming. The notion of home opens up a portal to new journeys towards self and community, but first by Binti understanding the truth about all parts of who she is and can be.

5.1. Truth of Self

A sacred ritual for Biniti, that constantly connects her to her home, is the process of applying the red clay mixed with oils from flowers, or otjize, onto her body and her long locs. The otjize is an anchor for Binti's Himba cultural identity throughout the series. It is also a marker of her relationship to her chi and alignment in order to walk her path. Each moment with the otjize is a reflection of who she is and who she is meant to be. It evolves with her in new worlds, revealing the capacity to grow while still being centered in who one is. Even when ostracized by others outside of her community, she still wears her sacred otjize. For instance, on the ship her group leader asks why she's "covered in greasy clay". After she tells him their significance to her culture, he says she can wear it "but not so much that you stain up this ship" (Okorafor 2015, p. 21). Once she is transformed by the Meduse, by a sharp piercing by their stinger that defines who they are, her locs transform into big tentacles, or okuoko, similar yet vastly different from her locs. She notices when one of her teachers asks if she will ever return home, noting that her people don't like outsiders. She begins to lament that she is still one of the Himba when she notices the transformation.

> "I am not an outsider", I said, with a twinge of irritation. "I am. . ." And that's when it caught my eye. My hair was rested against my back, weighted down by the *otjize*, but as I'd gotten up, one lock had come to rest on my shoulder. I felt it rub against the front of my shoulder and I *saw* it now". (Okorafor 2015, p. 80)

She rubbed off the otjize and saw that it glowed, and noted that her relationship with her hair had changed. She not only could feel her hair, but her hair could feel her hand. The okuoko were the physical manifestation of her transformation and initially she uses the otjize as a way to now hide this change from the world. It also turns out that her otjize can heal the Meduse when injured. The otjize parallels Binti, one who is connected to the earth of her people, is deeply reverent to upholding cultural traditions, and eventually is realized to be a healer and peacemaker (harmonizer) not only of the Himba, but of other people, races, and worlds. When she runs out of otjize while away from her home, she is worried she will not be able to reproduce it in a far away land, noting the different landscape from desert to forest noting that the "denseness of the trees, all the leaves, the small buzzing creatures, made me feel like the forest was choking me" (Okorafor 2015, pp. 85–86). However, she does so successfully, realizing that the power of her people is within her, and not solely in the land around them. Like the Igbo, the Himba of Binti's universe see land as sacred. So perhaps, any land she calls home, is the land of her people, as is the case of the Igbo and their notion of "ala anyi", our land (Ala being the earth goddess in kind). It is sacred land, and from it comes "all living things, including human beings" (Kanu 2018, p. 129).

Binti has gone through radical transformations of her identity, and her journey is also affected and must be negotiated to move through life as chi na eke determines. She is a traveler who is planets away, transformed to be partly Meduse, and also acculturating to new cultures away from home. Binti's process of khepert has led her to new worlds, and thus she must evolve with these new worlds but guided by who she is. So her continuous relationship to the earth, to the otjize, and to her culture indicate her ability to recenter herself with who she knows she is while undergoing vast transformation.

However, her Meduse identity becomes the most challenging transformation, as she must now redefine herself as a daughter of peace and a daughter of war. There is a rage and direct honesty that is Meduse she must negotiate, one that was not of her before as

a person who was trained to mediate as a way to access her scientific arts, as a mediator, a harmonizer. As she observes "It was there sometimes, and then sometimes, it wasn't, I was peaceful, then all I could see was war" (Okorafor 2017, p. 75). While others see this and comment on it during her return to her community, no one is seemingly able to help her. When she finally returns home a new set of challenges begin, as her community have not seen anyone like Binti, anyone who has left and returned, one of their own who is part Meduse. When she becomes angry at her sister's biting critique of her departure, she spits in her sister's face and her okuoko "writh[ed] atop [her] head, again". Her father exclaims "What has happened to my harmonizing daughter? . . . The peacemaker? She spits in her older sister's face" "What did that place do to you?" (Okorafor 2017, p. 75). A clear insult and disappointment. As Binti takes on new identities, bonded with other identities she must make sense of her chi, her spirit, and together understands their new destiny. It is not until she meets her grandmother, that she's able to learn how to negotiate her two realities (and beyond).

Binti is a marker of change to her people, and in order for her community to benefit from her transformations Binti must find ways to realign her now strengthening chi. She is Meduse and she is Himba, and completely Binti and her chi na eke. The Binti who came home only existed because the Binti who left away aligned with her chi and reified her identity, her purpose, and recognized that she must return home to fully become herself. Home was a part of her journey, and once there new challenges arose in her journey to support family, due to a new distancing from community. Binti's people still have expectations of her as a young woman, and *Binti* does well to situate African traditions as the heart of negotiating Africanfuturistic realities. At the same time she's seen as undesirable for marriage due to her departure she's also expected to join a pilgrimage, rituals critical to her passage into womanhood. On the night before her women's pilgrimage, the same day she returned home, she was visited by the Night Masquerade, a spirit that only reveals itself to men of their community in times of great triumph, revealing the honor bestowed to their community. It also represented "immediate drastic change" (Okorafor 2017, p. 126), which was soon upon her once more. This aligns with Igbo culture, where the task of embodying the masquerade is only given to men, a secret group called Ikpu ani (Isidienu 2017, pp. 167 & 176). As a young woman visited by the Night Masquerade, there is an alignment between Binti's changing identity and that of her community that is perhaps spiritually understood even if it takes the people time to catch up. Alexander recognizes that "the unprecedented appearance of the Night Masquerade to Binti allows Okorafor to tap into an African spiritual and ancestral world view, which is often perceived as evil when viewed through the lenses of Christianity, modern civilization and Western education" (Alexander 2023, p. 15). Okorafor inscribes khepert, change, as a factor of tradition, shifting with the guidance of the divine which humans must reconcile.

The visit of the Night Masquerade triggers a visit by the desert people, or the "Enyi Zinariya" who take Binti on a journey deep into the past that she'd always felt connected to, but did not know existed. This journey into the past is the key to negotiating her identities, aligning with her chi, and finding new ways forward to continue becoming who chi na eke determines her to be. Binti did not know her father came from the Desert people, a community who are even more obscure and cast away by their Himba community. They are seen as "savage", "primitive and mentally unstable" by the Himba because of the way their hands continue to move when they stop speaking. The Himba see them as "Desert people" instead of the Enyi Zinariya that they are—an ancient African people predating the Himba with far advanced technology. The speaker of the group is her grandmother, her father's mother. "We'll take your daughter, *our* daughter, into the desert. . .Your daughter too. [to Okwu] She will speak with our clan priestess, the Ariya" (Okorafor 2017, p. 98).

It is important to note Binti's grandmother's inclusion of Okwu/the Meduse in naming Binti's family (Grimbeek 2023). Her grandmother's acknowledgement of Binti as one of the Meduse's daughter foreshadows her ability to revere the past while quickly acknowledging and honoring the present and future forthcoming. Binti never told her family, but she is aware that the Ariya is the woman who long ago explained that her edan, the god stone, was an ancient device of their people. At her mom's resistance, but her father's deep understanding, Binti realizes she must go. She eventually learns what her grandmother already knows—that there is something there that may even help her with the balance she's seeking now that she is part Meduse.

She goes through a four day journey of remembering past encounters with the desert, a place that was always conforming to her, a refuge, while discovering new ones through lessons from her grandmother and the Enyi Zinariya people. Alexander likens this portion of the story to African folklore as it is "rooted in African oral culture and traditional belief in the spirit world, where inanimate objects, elements in nature and animals are imbued with human attributes within the context of African climate, landscape, and life-forms" (Alexander 2023, p. 19). The Enyi Zinariya had been known as the taboo "desert people" to Binti by the Himba. Her grandmother spends time to help her learn of who she is, while allowing her space to come into who she is as Himba, Meduse, and now aware of her Enyi Zinariya identity. When meeting the Ariya again, she activates Binti's zinariya (a power which is also the name of the people), which binds her deeply with the earth, understanding her otjize, the Mother, more intimately as one, and connecting her to "an entire people and a memory" (Okorafor 2017, p. 150).

It is this power to connect with all around her, and knowledge of self that gives Binti the potential power to heal her divisions, and come together as one within herself, as Himba, Meduse, and Enyi Zinariya. In Maladoma Somé's autobiographical narrative *Of Water and Spirit: Ritual Magic and Initiation in the Life of a Shaman*, he discusses the critical relationship between a child and a grandparent. Each connected to one side of the physical and spiritual world, one just entering the former and the other about to rejoin the latter, they have much to teach each other (Somé 1994, p. 19). So it is telling that it is her grandmother's call that is the one Binti follows, helping her to understand who she is and her family history, leading her back to her people and the Ariya, and through this process grounds her solidly through the remainder of the series. Binti is a powerful character, one who is constantly challenged to determine who she is, and rarely do we see her fighting her chi. Rather, as she goes through her process of khepert, she becomes new versions of herself and we see the representation of the change and evolution of Binti. And more powerfully, we see its ebbs and flow between self and family, self and community, and ultimately she follows the most taboo community who is the most ancient and knowledgeable family, to provide her tools necessary for her future endeavors. She is a daughter of all the people she identifies with, and as a result of finding the truth of herself and a balance of it, is poised to support her community in kind.

5.2. Becoming Self

Binti's journey comes full circle with full knowledge of who she is and who she is becoming by way of old identities known and discovered (Himba, Enyi Zinariya) and new identities emerging (Meduse, later New Fish). After going literally across the universe and back home, she is ill equipped to handle the power that has come from her journeys combined with the resilience and self worth that comes with reification of her traditions in hostile conditions. Where all she wants is to come home to her family, she returns to a family equally ill equipped to receive who she is becoming. However, from across the universe she finds herself further from and closer to home, deep into the desert. The irony

is that she goes to Oomza Uni to study her edan, her ancient foreign object from the deserts of her homeland. However its mysteries are revealed only when she returns to her own ancient history and people, that of the Enyi Zinariya. If we apply this back to the real world, then this is a powerful narrative of Sankofa. Binti's story is truly one that exemplifies what it means to go back into one's past and culture in order to find tools to strengthen oneself, fine balance between all that one faces, and to empower your community to do the same, in time.

Binti goes through the most significant and difficult transformations of her life, and in the midst of it must negotiate what family means to her, both those she's known her whole life and those she joins as part of her journey. Marinette Grimbeek suggests that Okorafor's books "repeatedly articulate utopian desires for change in family norms, as well as in interpersonal and interspecies relations" (Grimbeek 2023, p. 135). These assembled families are a means of agency for Ijeoma and represent to the reader and society possible ways to create and recreate family and community. Her relationship with Okwu and connection to the Meduse, make her Meduse as well. Her otjize is a constant reminder of her desire to continue maintaining her Himba culture, as is her return home and desire to find a way to maintain connection with a distancing family. Her journey with the Enyi Zinariya, and the unlocking of the zinariya inside of her, provides her resources useful to balancing all of her identities tied to a vast knowledge coming from the earth, from those before her, from animals and people. The notion of family expands drastically for her, and similar to the Igbo so then does her responsibility to her communities. Just as she's unlocked in the desert, her family is attacked, Okwu and her Himba family. Now, she is dealing with her Meduse identity, that of her Himba self, the new knowledge of old culture continuously unfolding. This unlocking consists not just of communication with the living but a retelling of the past that continues as she tries to make herself at home, and the trauma of her experiences beforehand. Noticing her challenges while guiding Binti to and from the desert, her travel companion Mwinyi, a harmonizer of the Enyi Zinariya, patiently but honestly tells her on their journey back to help her family,

> "You try too hard to be everything, please everyone. Himba, Meduse, Enyi Zinariya, Khoush ambassador [peacekeeper between Khoush and Meduse]. You can't. You're a harmonizer. We bring peace because we are stable, simple, clear. What have you brought since you came back to Earth, Binti?" (Okorafor 2018, p. 23)

To this she replies "I need my family" and he responds, "I know." Deep understanding between them, and the audience, of that which grounds her in order to be the harmonizer she is, melding and bringing together all that she is, old and new. At this point she has completed another transformation with self, alignment with chi despite society's disdain for the Enyi Zinaryia. She has embraced herself and is now on the journey to be the most perfect journey to herself, one who can balance all her identities. As soon as she acknowledges this, her journey to her family becomes the next pressing path of her journey. Her process of khepert is at work, as living in her evolved state amongst her people means living her transformed life while following chi to help determine how she meant to engage her community now as this evolving Binti.

She returns to her people, finding herself in the middle of a war between the Khoush and Meduse, which leaves her family seemingly dead (she later saves them), their land destroyed, and many of the Koush soldiers dead for Okwu's attempt to protect Binti's family. Here, her master harmonizing skills are put to the ultimate test in its evolved form with new identities and understanding of them in tow. In an attempt to help her Himba elders see reason within a world they do not understand (as peace without interaction with other communities is all they know), she reminds them that they can help end the war

between the people fighting on their land. She asks them to bring the Meduse and Khoush together to evoke "deep culture," a method known only to the Himba to evoke something deep within the fabric of their people to encourage those around them to listen and truly hear a proposal to hear and speak truth. The elders see Binti as an important conduit of change, and for it the night masquerade visits her two more times. However, they also see her as someone who has abandoned her culture, and with her okuoko think she is no longer truly Himba. Coming into herself, and no longer centered by what others think of her, Binti proclaims "I am more than and better than what I was when I left here" (Okorafor 2018, p. 65). This is an affirmation of her journey, her understanding of who she is, and the effect of her transformations as it applies to this moment of supporting her community. Her elders initially agree but then in the last moment abandon her, and she is forced to evoke the deep culture, something only the most revered elders can do, and does so and successfully brokers peace between the peoples (Meduse and Khoush).

Binti's ability to evoke what only the community elders can do was again an indicator of her major contributions to the people, and also indicative of her ability to find balance within all that she is, now and in her continued journey towards chi na eke. It is the height of the series—Binti understands who she is and who she has become and as a result her community benefits from it. She found herself from within, from the perspective of her chi na eke, and walked towards that reality. She went through painful transformations that can represent the difficulty of following one's chi na eke, that the journey of khepert is not a straight one but one fraught with challenge. Transformation involves transfiguration and the individual is forever different, forever more as Binti asserts. Like Khepra, Binti has created herself anew again and again and even after this, Binti continues to change. She is killed in her effort to broker peace, and her body is prepared for an interstellar journey and taken onto a ship, the child of the living ship that took her across the galaxy and back, Third Fish. Unknown to all but the ship, New Fish is able to bind herself with Binti, healing her while also giving her some of who she is, and also becoming some of Binti. Binti's new power allows her to enter space, and move through it with the ship. And this way she visits the rings of Saturn, and meets new people who've been calling to her in dreams because they recognize her as someone who, like them, is constantly growing beyond where they came from. "We're people of time and space. We move about experience, collecting, becoming more. This is the philosophy and culture of our equation" (Okorafor 2018, p. 171). And so Binti steadily accepts who she is, who she's becoming, and now all that makes her who she is. When meeting the people of Saturn, she introduces herself as all that she is now, "My name is Binti Ekeopara Zuzu Dambu Kaipka Meduse Enyi Zinariya New Fish of Namib" (Okorafor 2018, p. 169). These are all of her identities that were her, that now embody her, and come together to make up who she has become. She is poised to continue becoming, her process of khepert is not complete because it is ongoing. Finding her own equilibrium, and equation to it, is a major take away for the reader and our societies when reading this series for how one follows their chi towards their destiny. Her solo journey was never that, as her chi always stood next to her, and it led her to deeper parts of who she is and set her on her path towards her purpose. And her purpose led her to protect her family, her community, and come into a new consciousness of her relationship to the world around her.

6. Growing Toward Self, Forever for Community

The woman, alone,
finding parts of herself
she never knew existed
will always be more powerful.

—Ijeoma Umebinyuo, *Questions for Ada* (Umebinyuo 2015)

Ijeoma and Binti's journeys intertwine when it comes to the isolation they feel as they come of age, becoming as their chi na eke define (self-definition) and their process of khepert determines (self-determination). Yet they find balance with their families, and create new ones imagining new futures that create new worlds while honoring the old. They must become the conduits linking their worlds with their cultures' ancient rituals and traditions. They become examples of the necessity to center a child's understanding of his/her destiny in guiding the child through the world. Within the novels, the old ways and the new ways have not come together and that is clear in the experiences of our two women. Ijeoma must travel outside of the safety of her family in order to become herself as a lesbian woman in mid 20th century Nigeria, and Okparanta must leave Nigeria to create Ijeoma. Ijeoma chooses to conform and the rebellion thereafter is expected, as envisioning an authentic future for her daughter finally allows her and her mother to truly realize that heterosexual marriage is not her future path. Binti leaves home in order to find herself only to realize that part of her disjuncture with her community is that she was not given access to her ancient self. Okorafor sets Binti's world within an Africanfuturistic reality to create communities that do understand Binti and her journey. And so Binti's grandmother comes to help her, giving herself back to her to balance all that she has become already. Each of our characters travels in order to write themselves into existence, some to far off nations, or worlds, where others to unknown parts of their home in which their communities exist.

When it comes to the truth of who they are and aligning with their chi, perhaps Ijeoma had a harder time following it at all times, where Binti followed it in a steadfast manner. The Igbo believe that the efficacy of a human is dependent on living a moral life that allows one to be at peace with their chi and their ancestors (Amanambu 2020). Ijeoma's fights with her chi allowed the reader to see what happens when someone doesn't follow their chi from a perspective of Igbo morality and a natural striving towards peace. Okparanta uses the Christian bible as a way to challenge the relationship between society and the individual by allowing Ijeoma's chi na eke to have a relationship with the divine that is separate from society's expectation of humans. Read with this notion of peace within self, Ijeoma's struggles and choices away from her chi reveal that no peace is truly made by denying self of who they are when they have honest conversations with one's spirit. Binti on the other hand is constantly fighting for her peace, and never stops for a moment. Her pauses are only to understand in order to determine which way to go. She represents a character who never loses her efficacy in relation to Igbo cultural identity. She is steadfast on her process of khepert constantly rising to new challenges of identity and then taking on the new transformations that are only possible as a result of successfully aligning with chi in past experiences. She takes on every identity with radical self awareness and gradual but always actual acceptance of who she is. Both characters do exemplify that they are in alignment with their most divine, most natural self, but not without human challenges. We the reader can come away that Ijeoma and Binti followed their chi na eke despite what their society said, and in the end they found ways to continue to give to their community in ways that allowed for its continued self-definition with honest notions of their collective identity.

Binti and Ijeoma both first need to be in alignment to then be able to positively impact their community. They have found their path to their destiny, which was one part of khepert, and then another is walk on it, rolling their ball, their sun, around their universe with a force that promises regular evolution and (re)creation of self. The Igbo use the term "onye na chi ya"—one and their chi—as a cosmological way of understanding how any person exists with their chi (Amanambu 2020, p. 75). It reinforces the reciprocal relationship

between a person and their chi, always meant to be in tandem. Binti na chi ya are able to successfully continue khepert when destiny demanded she leaves home; become part Meduse; returns home; leaves home with people seen as inferior with acknowledgement and acceptance that they are her blood family; negotiate peace between two races using ancient traditions; become part New Fish; and travel across the solar system. She was challenged to walk away from her chi at each of these turns, and in her case she walked towards it triggering the next change in her life. Binti's story has so many significant examples of her accepting who she is, that it offers a strong narrative to young African and Black folk, to young people about the way to be the most ultimate superhero—to constantly work towards your most perfect self by way of chi na eke. And Binti's story, while in dynamic Africanfuturism, is radically real in the everyday experience of a young woman. The road can be rough but to be as transformed as Binti is to face life everytime and trust that the changes are part of how you are meant to be and become. Similarly, Ijeoma na chi ya continue their process of khepert by returning to their path which means changing their physical conditions to do so. She leaves her husband's house to live with Ndidi. Her fight with her chi ends, and she must reflect on the vision of the future she can now imagine for her daughter. She must live authentically to become the mother who encourages her daughter to live authentically too. Her process of khepert puts her in a safe environment that reflects who she is, and in that space she can envision transformed relationships with her daughter that she did not have with her own mother. We can imagine that to this point she has created invaluable tools within herself to always remain aligned with her chi. Come what may, Binti and Ijeoma find that the only way they can exist and make it along their journey to self is to be exactly who they are. Onye na chi ya.

What are Okparanta and Okorafor telling the African woman, the African child today? Our authors are telling us something that is critical—their opinion from experience on what it means to become a self defined woman who is in command of their particular gait walking along the path to determining their future. They are telling their stories, written as maps for others to live as onye na chi ya and tell their own stories as they continue their life journeys. Ijeoma's story ends with hope for the future, as her actions are meant to provide a healthy environment for her daughter, who is perhaps symbolic of the future of Nigeria and other nations when it comes to accepting sexual diversity (perhaps like Okparanta). Binti's story reveals the importance of not only seeking out who one is, but how home, family, and tradition are central to really knowing who you are. In each case, ties to home and family are journeys first into the abyss and then back again with tools useful for the future of the whole. Okparanta and Okorafor's works, read through chi na eke and khepert, offer contemporary ways of fighting systems of oppression against Black and African women to be who their families and communities actually need them to be. They are visionaries pushing boundaries while considering the well being of the whole. They are in essence, women becoming.

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