

Relevance And The Proprium Of Otjize In Nnedi Okorafor's Binti: The Complete Trilogy

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Abstract

Nnedi Okorafor's Binti: The Complete Trilogy (2019) highlights the significance of Otjize emphasises a cosmetic practice. Otjize is a multipurpose powder that symbolises for both healing and cultural identity. The Himba people's traditional mixture otjize is a reddish clay serves as a symbol of identity, heritage, and ties to the land of the Himba people. The protective function of the skin extends beyond shielding the body from the harsh desert environment and safeguards the hair and bears cultural and spiritual significance, symbolising the essence of pride and vitality. Through Otjize, the Himba demonstrates their values, beliefs, traditions, and resilience, exhibiting a close relationship with their past and surroundings. Otjize transcends mere aesthetics, encapsulating a diverse cultural tapestry that mirrors the Himba people's principles, convictions and lifestyle.

Keywords: Powder, Himba, Pride, Sunscreen, Culture, Spiritual, Respect, Values.

Introduction

The article analyses Nnedi Okorafor's Binti: The Complete Trilogy and seeks the relevance of Otjize as an identity, culture, and paranormal occurrences in an engaging and thought-provoking narrative. The power of African culture significantly lies in its ability to reshape their identity, resilience, and development across the continent, with its diverse values, beliefs, and traditions defining the uniqueness of African societies and individuals. The blend of African historical continuity and contemporary adaptation which constitutes the bedrock of African culture offers a strong foundation for social cohesion, governance, and progress. African culture also has a knack to unite people, preserve heritage, uphold their cultural inheritance, and lead nations towards a future that harmonises tradition with innovation.

The Herero and Himba people are semi-nomadic pastoralists who inhabit Southwest Namibia and Southwest Angola, and their population is close to fifty thousand. The indigenous community resides in the Northern Namibian region, the Kunene region, and the Southern Angolan region across the Kunene River. The Himba people's distinctive customs, tenacity, and manner of living make them unique among African cultures. Africa has become synonymous with a representation of the traditional Himba women. The Himba women

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emphasize the significance of their traditions, beliefs, and ties to the land while working to preserve their traditional way of life in the face of pressures from modernity and urbanisation. Otjize is one of the traditional components that the Himba people utilize as their pulvil.

Otjize is a widely recognised traditional combination mixture utilised by the Himba people of Namibia, made up of ochre pigment, butter fat or animal fat, ashes, or plants containing fragrant resin, mainly known as *Commiphora multijuga*. Otjize gets its unique colour from ochre, a naturally occurring red clay pigment formed of a combination of sand, clay, and ferric oxide. On a daily basis, ochre stones are ground into tiny bits and combined with butter or fat to create a smooth paste.

In the current era, women like to apply sunscreen to their face which consists of physical or chemical blockers to protect the skin. But Himba women apply otjize paste to their skin to protect against the harsh desert temperature, sun, and insects, mostly for hygiene reasons owing to limited access to water. The consistent use of otjize forms a defensive barrier on the skin, effectively obstructing the penetration of ultraviolet radiation and also aids to remove dirt and exfoliating dead skin cells gradually. This shield helps maintain the integrity of the skin and helps to prevent sunburn, premature ageing, and other ultraviolet induced skin damage. As an academic researchers Borg and Jackcobsohn says, “The use of otjize has been locally adopted by neighbouring ethnicities as a cosmetic skin protection from the sun”(44). Himba people also believe that applying otjize to their skin makes them appear glossy and it evokes the deep red colour of the soil and blood, which are seen as the essence of Himba existence and the ideal of beauty.

The otjize's efficacy as ultraviolet protection may vary depending on factors such as the viscosity of the paste, the thickness of application, and the skin's adherence. In contrast to Otjize, the modern sunscreens provide dependable ultraviolet protection and consistent formulations that guarantee uniform application. Modern sunscreens undergo rigorous testing to verify their effectiveness in blocking ultraviolet rays, and provide a higher level of protection compared to the use of otjize. However the Himba people traditionally use Otjize as a means of sun protection, the scientific evidence supporting its durability and efficiency in extended sun exposure is not as well established as that of modern sunscreens. Compared to modern sunscreens, otjize's robustness and consistent ultraviolet protection in various environmental conditions is seen as an adverse effect.

Traditionally, Himba people apply otjize to their long, braided hair in intricate patterns, symbolizing various factors such as marital status, age, wealth, and social standings. As a result, while the young men of the community guide them to the grazing areas, the Himba women diligently apply otjize to their skin and hair every morning before tending to the cattle. In the way, otjize became an important component of Himba people's daily existence and firmly embedded in their cultural heritage and it passed down through several generations.

The Nigerian American writer Nnedi Okorafor in her novella *Binti: The Complete Trilogy*, clearly highlights the significance of otjize. The novella consists of three parts, includes in one edition, *Binti* (2015), *Binti: Home* (2017), and *Binti: The Night Masquerade* (2018), along with an inclusion of a short story *Binti: Sacred Fire* which are interconnected with single narrative. The remarkable substance otjize embodies a potent symbol, epitomising cultural identity, tradition, and a deep rooted link to African heritage and ancestral land. Okorafor's clever approach effortlessly combines the rich cultural tapestry of the Himba people from the *Binti* novella with the expansive realm of intergalactic space in her trilogy, resulting in an enthralling blend of fact and fantasy.

Okorafor emphasises the significance of cultural traditions in shaping the Himba people's identity through the use of otjize. She also draws attention to the difficulties that the protagonist Binti has as she strives to reconcile her cultural heritage with the unfamiliar environment she encounters at Oomza University in outer space. Okorafor discusses otjize in her Binti novella from an entirely new angle, besides adding to its scientific merits and practical applications through new interpretations, ideas, inventions, and uniqueness to the concept of Otjize.

In Binti, a novella, Okorafor explores the pride of the Himba people in the use of otjize. Despite the perception of otjize as an indication of inferiority and untraditionality, the Himba take great delight, tremendous joy, immense satisfaction and enormous pleasure in its usage. During the spacecraft travel to Oomza University, the protagonist Binti is harassed by other Khoush women while one of them touches her otjize. The Khoush women sniffed the smell of otjize and awful at her that, "I hear it smells like shit because it is shit" (05). However, Binti remains undeterred and takes pride in her application. She proudly says that, "It is otjize, only my people wear it and I am the only one of my people on the ship. I'm not Khoush" (27). This demonstrates that the Himba people who described in the novella take great pride in their use of otjize, which makes them perfect sense of considering that God has created the ochre powder specifically for the purposes of harsh climate and its implications.

Moreover one of the extraterrestrial species known as Meduses, specifically an individual called Okwu, requests Binti to provide additional otjize to repair its wounded tentacle resulting from the massacre, Binti refuses to comply and responds to Okwu as, "I couldn't give all my otjize to this Meduse; this was my culture" (28). As Binti's otjize contains the combination of red clay, oils and native flowers of Himba, potentially it contains antimicrobial properties, which has the capacity to inhibit or destroy microorganisms such as bacteria, viruses, fungi, or protozoans, Okwu demands it for the purpose of healing his injuries. Though Binti is aware of Okwu's capacity to terminate her life, and the medical value of otjize she regards her culture as more important than her own survival. Okorafor acknowledges that the use of otjize is inseparable from the Himba people's way of life, since it is deeply ingrained in their culture and traditions.

According to Okorafor, Himba people believe that otjize is a highly respected type of clay as they consider themselves to be the offspring of the Himba land. Being an authentic Himba citizen, Binti recognises the significance always carrying otjize with her, as she firmly believes that otjize grants her prosperity and helps to preserve the connection with her place of birth. Binti explains that, "The weight of my hair on my shoulders was assuring, my hair was heavy with otjize, and this was good luck and the strength of my people, even if my people were far far away" (23). Otjize makes Binti to feel empowered as she wields her weapon.

As Binti leaves her native Himba land to attend Oomza University, she wipes off the otjize from her forehead, kneels down, touches her finger to the sand, and expresses gratitude to the earth. The application of Otjize to her body distinguishes Binti as a member of the Himba tribe and is a source of pride. It symbolises the fundamental aspects of life, the vibrant red hue of the soil, and the beauty standards upheld by the Himba community. Binti explains that, "I swiped otjize from my forehead with my index finger and knelt down. Then I touched the finger to the sand, grounding the sweet smelling red clay into it. "Thank you," I whispered" (1). Her reverence for her homeland is also evident in the way she honours the earth with the holy red clay known as Otjize.

Okorafor also affirms that Otjize has spiritual and cultural value inspite of seeing it as a means of shielding against severe weather conditions. Okorafor elucidates the otjize as clay with life preserving properties. As Binti travels in the Third Fish spacecraft towards Oomza University, Meduse an extraterrestrial creature akin to jellyfish, attacks the spaceship. A perceived act of betrayal drives these entities desire for retribution. The Meduses attack the ship and kill almost everyone on board. Binti on the other hand, manages to evade her assailants by taking refuge in her dorm room and use her wits.

Binti promptly applies Otjize to her body and spread it thoroughly. The clay not only alters her visual appearance, but also transforms her fragrance and consistency. This metamorphosis renders her imperceptible to the Meduse and provides her with protection from their assaults. Binti successfully navigates the ship using otjize as a kind of camouflage, ultimately confronting the Meduse commander. Okorafor argues that otjize not only provides protection against the sun or ultraviolet radiation, but also has the capability to safeguard individuals even against extraterrestrial beings.

Okorafor portrays otjize as a cultural symbol that signifies both environmental adaptability and societal unity. She emphasizes the importance of applying otjize on the skin and hair as a way to demonstrate a strong connection to one's cultural heritage. Binti is acutely conscious that if the Himba people get glimpse without otjize on her body, they would consider her as mentally deranged and they regarded it as most unacceptable and disrespectful conduct of the individual. Binti's Himba people could go without clothing, but not without otjize. Binti explains her experience as “I was on my bed in my room, naked except for my wrapped skirt. The rest of my body was smooth with a thick layer of otjize” (40). Additionally, they are very cautious about using fresh otjize in order to further enhance the thickness of their braided hair. They are also careful to conceal the dark brown colour of their hair when new growth occurs. Okorafor's portrayal of applying otjize to hair has also been seen as a resistance to prevailing Western beauty norms and the frequent discriminatory discourse around black and African hair textures.

An examination of the Himba people's use of otjize can be analysed from the perspective of postcolonial theory in the field of English literature. Postcolonial theory analyses the impact of colonisation and imperialism on culture, society, and politics and to explore how colonised societies resist, adapt to, and preserve their cultural identities in the face of colonial domination. In the context of the Himba people, Okorafor presents otjize as a traditional practice that signifies cultural resistance and preservation, even in the aftermath of World Wars.

The Himba people use otjize for both practical and symbolic reasons. It helps to protect their skin and signifies their deep-rooted ties to their country, cultural legacy, and spiritual beliefs. Furthermore, it acts as a kind of resistance against the imposition of Western ideals of beauty and values. The Himba people challenge societal norms and express the beauty of their cultural traditions by embracing their natural look and adding otjize into their everyday routines. This undermines the concept of a single, universal criterion of beauty enforced by colonial powers despite the impact of a technologically sophisticated civilization, they maintain their traditions, demonstrating resistance against colonial ideas that aim to diminish indigenous cultures.

Though Binti believes otjize is a symbol of her heritage, she decides to leave her planet without taking additional supplies for the new planet. Yet she serves otjize to other species to heal the injuries, showcasing her adaptability and the potential for cultural exchange in diverse environments. As Toliver comments, “Her otjize symbolizes a metaphorical rebirth of the

Himba culture in a new land” (143). This article emphasises the significance of otjize as a cultural preservation, spiritual consideration, adaptation, and hygienic ingredient.

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