

Empowerment Through Jujuism: An Accomplishment Over Darkness In Nnedi Okorafor's *Akata Witch*

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Abstract

Nnedi Okorafor's *Akata Witch* presents an intriguing story of empowerment through the term Africanjujuism, demonstrating how magic and self discovery enable the protagonist Sunny Nwazue, to overcome adversity. As a young albino girl, Sunny traverses her dual existence in both the real and mystical worlds. Sunny's exploration of the enigmatic realm known as the Leopard Knocks Society reveals her dormant magical powers. Through intensive training and cooperation with her extensive circle of friends and instructors, she utilizes jujuism not just as a means for personal development but also as a weapon against malevolence. The novel underscores the transformational power of magic, accentuating perseverance, identity, and the victory of light over darkness. Ultimately, *Akata Witch* extols the power derived from accepting one's individuality and then employing it to overcome challenges.

Keywords : Juju, Jujuism, Initiation, Knowledge, Culture

Juju is a spiritual belief system and practice rooted in West African traditions, which includes enchantment, supernatural powers, and religious rites. It is fundamentally embedded in African cosmology and is often connected with the use of charms, amulets, and spells to affect occurrences, confer good fortune or safeguard humans from danger. Juju can have both beneficial and detrimental ends, dependent upon the practitioner's motivation. It is often associated with indigenous religious traditions, whereby deities, ancestral spirits, and natural elements significantly influence and direct human existence.

The term juju encompasses not just magic but also represents a lifestyle for several African groups. It integrates moral and ethical principles, emphasizing reverence for spiritual beings and preserving equilibrium between the physical and metaphysical realms. Some individuals use juju for healing, fertility, and wealth, whilst others could use it for vengeance or curses stemming from malevolent spirits. Juju practitioners are occasionally referred to as traditional healers, diviners, or priests who are meant to possess profound knowledge of spiritual laws and the capacity to engage with spirits.

However, in several African cultures, it is a venerated spiritual practice that offers direction, protection, and resolutions to personal issues. Juju is intricately linked to the belief in the interconnection of all entities in the cosmos and the ability to harness spiritual powers to get certain results. Despite the impact of modernity and globalization on African spiritual

traditions, juju continues to play a key role in the beliefs of many individuals, determining politics, commerce, and personal choices. Jelena Zivkovic describes juju as:

It is this form of witchcraft that has canonically surfaced prevalently within Nigerian culture. In the present moment, such fetishes are small in size and intentionally shaped, with the belief that they may bless the owner or the practitioner with incantations or wisdom deriving from Arabic scripture (118).

Juju and jujuism are interconnected concepts, however they possess unique definitions. Juju manifests in tangible artifacts like talismans, which are thought to possess spiritual power, or it can be enacted through rituals by practitioners like diviners or traditional healers. People often view it as a tool for influencing events and maintaining balance between the physical and spiritual worlds. Conversely, jujuism is the overarching belief system or philosophy that supports the practice of juju. It embodies a perspective that recognizes the presence of supernatural powers and their influence on human events.

Jujuism encompasses the moral, ethical, and spiritual tenets that dictate the use of juju. It establishes the foundation for comprehending the interplay of individuals, spirits, and the cosmos, frequently including religious and cultural traditions. Juju denotes certain behaviours, objects, or manifestations of supernatural power, while jujuism is the ideology and framework of thinking that rationalizes and elucidates such activities. Essentially, juju refers to the practice, while jujuism denotes the underlying belief system.

Jujuism is strongly connected to Yoruba culture and is mainly performed in Nigeria, especially in the southwest parts of Edo State and the River Niger Delta. Their belief system is based on deep spiritual ideas, including the notion of spiritual connection. This means that things or people that have been physically close to each other and keep similar spiritual qualities even after they are no longer together. People who practice this belief think that events in life are decided by gods and spirits and that nothing happens by luck. Jujuism is not just good or bad, it is a complex spiritual system that shows a deep cultural knowledge of human life and how the spiritual and physical worlds are linked.

In literature, many writers use the term jujuism to show national identity, spiritual beliefs, and the conflict between modern life and traditional knowledge. In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the author presents traditional beliefs such as divine forces and traditions which shape the character's lives and the structure of society. Jujuism in writing is often used to look at themes such as fate, power, morals, and the conflict between traditional beliefs and modern or foreign effects. Jujuism stories help readers understand the richness of African faith, how it influences people's lives, and its importance in today's stories.

Jujuism is often misunderstood in literature, film, and music within popular culture. The portrayal of malevolent magic and superstition is also incorrectly shown. However, contemporary African creators are reclaiming its authentic richness, showing it as a living, evolving spiritual practice rather than just a horror trope. A Nigerian American author, Nnedi Okorafor has introduced a new literary term Africanjujuism that represents a distinct subcategory of fantasy centered on African life and experiences. Unlike conventional jujuism, which often refers to a set of spiritual practices, Africanjujuism is a storytelling framework that respectfully blends African spiritualities with imaginative narratives, varying across regions, ethnic groups, and traditions. It is interwoven with cultural, theological, and social structures, making it a living and evolving practice rather than a static or purely mystical notion.

Okorafor's *Akata Witch* examines magical practices rooted in African spirituality, illustrating the significance of juju and jujuism in cultural identity. Okorafor reinterprets the narrative in the work, which has been influenced by colonial prejudices, especially on the representation of African magic, spirituality, and identity. In the novel, the protagonist Sunny Nwazue, uncovers her affiliation with a clandestine mystical organization known as the Leopard Knocks Society, where magic or juju is authentic. In this society, people possess

supernatural abilities, and the ancestors of its members are profoundly interwoven with specific positions within the group. This depiction embodies conventional African beliefs, particularly among Igbo, Yoruba, and other West African societies, where spiritual forces affect everyday existence and ancient knowledge directs humans. The juju in the story encompasses not just spells or magical skills but also the comprehension of one's position in the cosmos, the respect for balance, and the responsible use of power. By foregrounding Jujuism in the novel, Okorafor reclaims and honours African spiritual traditions that have often been incapacitated or misunderstood in Western literature.

Sunny as an albino girl, born in Nigeria but with American heritage, often experiences feelings of alienation as she seeks her identity in the world. However, her life transforms dramatically when she learns that she is a Leopard Person, which means a member of the Leopard Knocks Society and someone born with innate magical abilities. This revelation arises from her association with Orlu, Chichi, and Sasha, who acquaint her with the hidden realm of Leopard People, where juju is integral to existence. Unlike the real mundane Lamb world, where logic and rules dominate, the Leopard world thrives on knowledge, mysticism, and the equilibrium between light and dark energies.

Sunny's official initiation into jujuism involves a rite that solidifies her identity as a Leopard Person, which signifies her formal entry into this secret society. On a particular day, Sunny is brought to the hut of the Leopard Knocks Society scholar named Anatov, which is located in a hallowed and magical place of the Leopard People. As an initial step of initiation to enter the Leopard Knocks Society, Anatov walked a circle around her. He reached a handful of white powder from his pocket and began to sift it from his palm while circling her once again. Once he finished the powder circle, he produced a knife, its handle adorned with red gemstones. He seemed to be drawing in the air a soft red symbol and a circle with a cross in the center, which floated above her head like smoke, and it slowly descended on her. As she exerted a downward force, Sunny's mouth filled with earth, and the earth was pushing its way down her throat, pulling up her eyelids, scratching her eyeballs, grating her clothes away, and exerting pressure on her skin. In this sense, Earth symbolizes wisdom, evolution, and the profound relationship that exists between the physical and spiritual domains. During this process, Sunny's condition deteriorated, causing her skin to fluctuate between cold and hot and then cold again, as if she were passing through various living and dead parts of the earth.

Ultimately, she stopped her descent and began ascending gradually. As she climbed, she was engulfed by tumultuous river water that threatened to dismember her, but she was propelled upward amid swirling debris, bubbles, and the cacophony of underwater currents. She abruptly disappears from the entire ceremonial procession. Okorafor explained that the induction of Sunny into the Leopard Society is a multilayered and intricate ritual, deeply rooted in Africanjujuism. It functions as a conduit for her spiritual and personal development while emphasizing the cultural and ethical aspects of African spiritual traditions. In this initiation, Okorafor propels the narrative and honours the reinterpretation of African customs within a contemporary fantasy framework. In this way, the novel highlights the significance and beliefs of Jujuism and its capacity to strengthen people and communities through both ordinary and supernatural adversities.

Upon joining the Leopard Society, Sunny's mentor Anatov, instructs her in honing her abilities, emphasizing the significance of discipline, self awareness, and reverence for the unseen forces that regulate juju. A pivotal phase in her voyage occurs when she enters the enigmatic city of Leopard Knocks, where she observes the enormity of jujuism and the accompanying obligations that she needs to manage appropriately. During her training, she discovers that her abilities are intrinsically linked to her distinctive identity, which means her albinism, once a subject of mockery, is now marked as a symbol of significant potential. As Ewa Drab describes in an article:

Interestingly, juju magic allows Sunny to liberate herself from the mostcumbersome aspect of albinism, namely the necessity of protecting her skin for fear of sunburn. When she becomes a confirmed Leopard person, she can forget about the difficulties she has been enduring (135).

Throughout the narrative, Sunny encounters several trials that test her comprehension of jujuism and her inner fortitude. A significant challenge is her engagement in thwarting Black Hat Otokoto, a perilous criminal who exploits juju for malevolent purposes. Sunny's tutors, Sugar Cream and Anatov, are important in her maturation, imparting the concepts of jujuism and underscoring the need for balance, accountability, and reverence for the spiritual powers she wields. This instruction equips her for the paramount task of confronting Black Hat Otokoto.

Before facing Otokoto, Sunny and her friends engage in preparations that align with jujuist practices. This preparation not only enhances their abilities but also fortifies their togetherness and collective purpose. The use of symbolic artifacts, incantations, and community assistance underscores the significance of tradition and group endeavor in jujuism. Through jujuism, Sunny discovers a realm where she really belongs, demonstrating that true empowerment comes from understanding and appreciating one's own qualities.

On a particular day, Sunny and her friends Orlu, Sasha and Chichi arrive at his hideout hut, a dark and ominous place brimming with malevolent energy. Otokoto, who plays soccer as well, underestimates Sunny and her friends at first, believing them to be mere children. As the battle unfolds, Otokoto uses deadly magic on them, summoning monstrous shadows and dark forces. But Sunny and her friends counter with their own juju. Sunny's best friend Orlu has the ability to undo spells, which helps to weaken Otokoto's magical defenses. Chichi's powerful incantations help to call upon ancient forces to shield them, and Sasha's combat magic disrupts Otokoto's attacks, forcing him to lose focus.

By embracing her full potential, Sunny weakens Otokoto's evil magic. In a final desperate attempt, Otokoto leaps on Sunny, but she resists, engulfing him in flames with her newly acquired fire spirit skills. Otokoto is certain to fail due to the team's combined strength. The team's combined strength has defeated and rendered Otokoto powerless, preventing him from harming innocent children or anyone else. Sunny not only demonstrates that she is a Leopard Person through this conflict, but she also gains self assurance and competence.

By portraying jujuism, Okorafor creates a universe in which magic is integral to society, influencing beliefs, traditions, and individual development. The work underscores the transmission of spiritual wisdom from one generation to the next, thereby reinforcing an individual's sense of self and global position. Additionally, it dispels myths and preconceptions about African spirituality by presenting it as multifaceted, potent, and rich in historical context. In addition to providing readers with entertainment, *Akata Witch* teaches them about the importance of jujuism in African customs by fusing folklore with contemporary stories. In the end, the novel highlights how spiritual legacy enhances cultural identity and how accepting one's origins promotes self awareness and self determination.

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