

Culture, difference and social change: Theoretizations by Molaria Ogundipe and Obioma Nnaemeka

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Abstract:

The article departs from an argument by the Nigerian political scientist Claude Ake which he presented at the *International Conference on Popular Participation in the Recovery and Development Process in Africa* in Arusha, Tanzania, in February 1990. Ake asserts the idea of *building on the indigenous* in development processes in African contexts, of grounding social change practices within local people's spheres of relevance. An exploration of the underlying understanding of tradition, culture and collectivity in Ake's argument prompts a more differentiated approach that takes the contested character of these phenomena into account. The Nigerian scholars and activists Molaria Ogundipe and Obioma Nnaemeka, centering their respective works around the life realities of African women, offer theoretical frameworks for such a critical and differentiating examination of social conditions in their oppressive and empowering dimensions. A reading of Ogundipe and Nnaemeka as cultural theorists enables an inquiry of the relationship between culture, difference and social change in their theoretizations. The analysis shows how the authors' conceptualizations of difference impede the construction of a simplified opposition between powerful and powerless and how the relationship to the past, certain traditions and cultural practices can contribute to social change aimed at empowerment, emphasizing the significance of negotiations over meaning.

Introduction

'The indigenous is not the traditional, there is no fossilized existence of the African past available for us to fall back on, only new totalities however hybrid which change with each passing day' (Ake 1990: n. pag.).

At the occasion of the *International Conference on Popular Participation in the Recovery and Development Process in Africa* which was held in February 1990 in Arusha, Tanzania, Nigerian political scientist Claude Ake brought a point of large significance to the floor when he argued for the centrality of *building on the indigenous* in development processes in African contexts. This plea for 'the indigenous', which Ake defines as 'whatever the people consider important in their lives, whatever they regard as an authentic expression of themselves' (1990: n. pag.), contains two interconnected dimensions. First, it asserts its fundamental and inevitable significance, as Ake explains the failure of development in Africa with the establishment's lack of consideration of local people's realities, needs and potentials. Second, it makes an argumentative and normative point claiming the indigenous needs to be the basis for any developmental action in order to benefit the local people and to be sustainable.

Today, almost three decades later, Ake's argument remains relevant. The crisis of the so-called impasse in development theory in the 1980s and 1990s dismantled the explanatory hegemony of previous grand paradigms such as modernization, dependency or structural adjustment and has led to the adoption of concepts such as human development and actor-centered and participatory approaches into the mainstream (Nederveen Pieterse 2010: 13; Kothari/Minogue 2002). However, these changes in dominant development theory discourse need to be scrutinized regarding their reflection in the realms of institutions, policy and practice within an increasingly neoliberal environment. Thus, current theory and practice of development and social theory in general can still be challenged through the range of themes provoked by Ake's argument.

As indicated in the quote above, Ake distinguishes between 'the traditional' and 'the indigenous'. This short observation raises theoretical questions concerning the character of the relationship of the present to the past, the condition of the present and possible implications for social change processes. In the *first part* of this article I decompose the understanding of tradition, culture and collectivity that seems to underlie Ake's argument and

which leads me to identify the contested character of these phenomena. Building upon this inquiry, the *second part* engages analytically with the respective theoretical writings by the Nigerian authors Molaria Ogundipe (previously: Ogundipe-Leslie) and Obioma Nnaemeka. Reading them as cultural theorists, thus approaching their works from a different perspective than their common reception as 'African feminists', allows me to take into account aspects that are generally neglected. Though in different ways Ogundipe and Nnaemeka are both committed to a critical and differentiating investigation of present social conditions and their historical development, as well as the conceptualization of frameworks aimed at social and cultural change that is grounded in the local. The main idea supporting the analysis is concerned with the proximity of concepts related to culture, difference and social change¹ as theorized by Ogundipe and Nnaemeka. While the second part offers a certain focus on culture and social change, the *third part* concludes with final remarks concerning the question of difference.

Relating to the past

When Ake argues that 'there is no fossilized existence of the African past available for us to fall back on' (1990: n. pag.), he dismisses the idea that the past can be retained in a direct and unambiguous manner, an idea that he seemingly relates to the concept of tradition. This leads me to critically interrogate the underlying understanding of tradition to thereafter explore important revisions of it.

While the etymological origin of the term 'tradition' encompasses the act of handing down certain knowledge or practices from one generation to the next one (Williams 1983: 318), generally the association is made with the object – the knowledge, the practice – that is handed down. Connecting traditions or the traditional to the image of 'fossils', Ake reproduces the historically dominant understanding of the phenomenon. Before the postmodern turn static and simplified conceptualizations of tradition have prevailed in scientific disciplines as for example Sociology, Anthropology or

¹ Although Ogundipe and Nnaemeka in some parts of their writings refer implicitly or explicitly to the idea of development, I regard their theoretizations to make claims about social change in general. Hence, the analytical perspective in this article is framed around social change which is inclusive of the concept of development (Nederveen Pieterse 2010: 3).

area studies. Such a concept of tradition, characterized through continuity and stability, thereby omitting subjects' agency, closely relates to a similarly theorized and homogenizing concept of culture, which both have formed as part of (neo-)evolutionist and modernization discourses. The concept of tradition, 'the traditional' and especially the idea of so-called traditional cultures need to be understood as constructed in dualistic opposition to the notion of modernity and so-called modern cultures. The discursive establishment of such a dichotomy has been closely intertwined with the structuring of global relations through colonialism, and later through development, its legitimization in ideological and material terms and the production of identities, as postcolonial authors show. Certain cultural elements – see for example the concept of 'survivals' in Edward Burnett Tylor's 'Primitive Culture' (2010 [1871]) – or whole communities outside of the colonial centers have been constructed as leftovers from past times, as 'anachronistic space: prehistoric, atavistic and irrational, inherently out of place in the historical time of modernity' (McClintock 1995: 40; Fabian 1983; Schech/Haggis 2000: 26). Although different geographical spaces, cultures and subjects have been located within this temporality, fixed within either pole of the hierarchical traditional-modern opposition, the theoretical possibility of change is envisioned in universal and linear evolutionist models of development as modernization, as Westernization (Nnaemeka 1996: 261; Ferguson 2006; Chevron 2012: 214ff.). This tension continues to figure as a scheme in social theory even though the discursive environment and its qualifiers have undergone significant changes as part of the cultural turn in the social sciences (Nederveen Pieterse 2010: 73).

Emphasizing severe criticisms of the predominant concept of culture, the cultural turn has allowed an investigation of the concept's underlying essentialism that leads to the construction of culture as a bounded, continuous and homogenous entity defined by 'radical alterity' from other cultures (Keesing 1990; Schech/Haggis 2000: 22). These interventions have also drawn attention to the diffuse and complex character of the term as such, as its meaning shifts between a reference to certain aspects of social reality - certain practices, forms of expression or material artifacts -, and the social whole. A fundamental revision of the culture concept emphasizes the significance of the interplay of structure and agency as a permanent process whereby cultural elements and culture in its broader meaning cannot be 'fossilized' but need to be continuously (re-)produced by subjects within a

certain structural and material environment. This implies at least two things for the concept of tradition as a cultural element that has predominantly emphasized notions of continuity and permanence. Firstly, it shifts the focus towards the act of handing down certain knowledge or practices, which is captured well by the German term *Tradierung* (Chevron 2012: 213, Exenberger 2012: 64), and requires a differentiating theoretization and empirical inquiry of these processes, sensitive of the ways in which the condition of agency entails the possibility of change and in which a sense of continuity is produced. Secondly, traditions continue, however, to be regarded as fundamental for the formation of the cultural heritage, cultural knowledge and collective identity of a certain group or community (Mückler 2012: 18f.; Chevron 2012: 217). The sense of temporal connectedness, the way in which one, as an individual or as part of a group, relates to the past and makes sense of it, is assumed as of great significance for the formation of identity: Which knowledge and practices are regarded as passed on throughout generations? Which events and experiences are perceived as formative? Which elements are emphasized in the narration of the past? Feminist and postcolonial authors have powerfully challenged the idea that such questions can be answered in a clear and harmonious manner, that collective cultural identities build upon homogeneity. Their critical positions opened debates surrounding issues of authenticity, representation or spokespersonship: Who makes/can make legitimate claims about a certain community's present and past, culture and tradition? Who within a group determines/can determine what is regarded as an 'authentic expression of themselves' (Ake 1990: n. pag.)? Hence, any thinking about culture must consider the diverse subjectivities, social locations and experiences of persons within a given community which requires as its basis a consciousness for relations of power and domination, for the contested character of culture as 'an arena of political and ideological struggle' (Nnaemeka 2003: 374). This point is also essential for the theoretical understanding of culture within Cultural Studies. While culture has come to be included as an important aspect within development discourse since Ake's speech (see the culture and development discourse), it is the lack of this understanding, of culture as a contested sphere, that constitutes 'the crucial weakness' of the discourse (Nederveen Pieterse 2010: 64). With the focus shifting from national culture, the local remains romanticized as the site where authentic, united and traditional culture is presumed to be found

(Gupta/Ferguson 1992), intensifying its significance for contemporary developmentalist interventions.

Within research on traditionalism a number of these points culminated in an examination of the ways in which the notion of tradition is evoked, in which certain traditions are utilized, instrumentalized or even invented by a present or aspirant elite in order to legitimize political or religious projects of domination. The insights gained allow to reframe the temporal relationship, as it is from the standpoint of the present - oriented at a certain vision for the future - that a certain kind of history is constructed, that certain traditions are found or projected into the past (Hobsbawm 1983; Schech/Haggis 2000: 118ff.; Exenberger 2012: 76). The present condition, only from which one can relate to the future and the past, is described by Ake as 'new totalities however hybrid which change with each passing day' (1990: n. pag.). While the dynamicity of continuous change might be understood in rather general terms, the aspect of hybridity can be further qualified through the postcolonial condition in which countries and local communities on the African continent find themselves. Postcolonial theory primarily ascribes this hybridity to the 'inevitability of the contamination of the colonised with practices of the dominant imperial culture' (Gqola 2001: 13), while it also has its roots in the syncretism of heterogeneous elements as a result of the encounter and exchange of different social and cultural groups (Chevron 2012: 219). Following from the latter, the general condition of hybridity - though in varying degrees - can be argued for all communities in a present and historical perspective (Gyekye 1997).

This section departed from Ake's argument which points towards the inherently problematic character of ideas surrounding presumably fossilized cultural elements and emphasizes the hybrid and dynamic condition of the present. Yet, in his speech Ake fails to deconstruct central concepts underlying his argument – such as tradition, culture and collectivity – and to specify his understanding of the indigenous.² Focused on the general argument for the significance of the indigenous for development, Ake leaves undiscussed how people, as part of a group,

² In the following analysis I am not able to provide an inquiry into the concept and discourse of indigeneity. Although Ogundipe and Nnaemeka at times refer to it, their main point of conceptual reference can be located within the idea of culture. In general it can be observed that the authors tend to use terms such as culture, indigeneity or tradition with no clear definitional boundaries.

determine what they 'consider important in their lives' (1990: n. pag.), how they relate to the past and how these processes are embedded into relations of power and domination.³ The range of questions and themes opened up by this exploration of Ake's argument ask for a differentiated and comprehensive account for which I turn towards the respective works by Molaria Ogundipe and Obioma Nnaemeka.

Contesting victimization: Multiple jeopardies and African women's agency

A theoretical understanding which simultaneously emphasizes the role of traditional and cultural elements for social change processes, such as development, as well as argues for the contested character of what is and can be regarded as such elements, can be found in the works of Molaria Ogundipe and Obioma Nnaemeka. The writings by Ogundipe and Nnaemeka on which I base my analysis have mostly been taken up in discourses on African feminism(s) and in debates how African feminism(s) are different to Western feminism(s) (i.e. Arndt 2002; Guy-Sheftall 2003). Undergirding my paper, however, is the conviction that it is more than worthwhile to approach Ogundipe's and Nnaemeka's works with other analytical interests as well, as mostly the same narrow fraction of their thoughts has been addressed within the common reception. Fundamentally, Ogundipe and Nnaemeka offer frameworks for the analysis of the African present, with a focus on social relationships of inequality, discrimination and exploitation, and articulate concepts for self-reliant and empowering social change. Though in different ways, both authors depart in their analysis from the life realities and everyday experiences of African women (Nnaemeka 1998: 7; Boyce Davies/Adams Graves 1986 in Guy-Sheftall 2003: 58; Gqola 2001: 17), seeking to describe and understand by which kind of oppressive dimensions these are shaped.

Ogundipe and Nnaemeka generally refer to *African* women. Different to race-centered conceptualizations, Nnaemeka asserts that African women 'speak geography (Africa)' (Nnaemeka 2002: 11).⁴ This prompts the

³ Considering the context in which Ake presented his speech, some points of criticism could be explained with strategic political decisions by the author.

⁴ However, this speaking of *geography* is indeed a contested issue: Who is included? Is it all people of African descent? All people historically or contemporarily living on the African continent? (Lewis/Ogundipe 2002; Ogundipe 1994: 216; Gqola 2001: 18)

anticipation of a larger point of criticism. Pinkie Mekgwe, a Botswanan scholar, criticizes in her article *Post Africa(n) Feminism?* (2010) the, often unquestioned, way in which African feminist theories have reproduced the term and idea of 'Africa'. Drawing on Valentin-Yves Mudimbe's work (1994) Mekgwe argues that 'the idea of Africa' needs to be understood as a product of a (neo-)colonial relationship through which 'Africa is constructed as paradigm of difference with regard to the West' (Mekgwe 2010: 191). However, as South African scholar Desiree Lewis argues: The reference to 'Africa' is legitimized as a 'continental identity shaped by particular relations of subordination in the world economy and global social and cultural practices' or as a decision for 'strategic generalisation' (Lewis 2001: 5). As Ogundipe and Nnaemeka do not address this issue in their writings, their respective line of reasoning cannot be followed up nor inserted into the context of this discussion.

(a) Six mountains and critical transformations: Molarra Ogundipe

The following analysis of writings by Molarra Ogundipe⁵ draws on her main publication *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women & Critical Transformations* (1994) which contains critical speeches and papers of about three decades. Ogundipe strongly argues for an analysis of social realities and the situation of women out of a class, and in particular a Marxist, perspective as she elaborates in her papers *Women in Nigeria* and *African Marxists, Women and a Critique* (both in Ogundipe 1994). However, such a focus on one axis of structural inequality cannot adequately explain the situation of African women whom she describes to carry *six mountains* on their backs. Ogundipe first presented this idea, an adaption of an image proposed by Mao Tse Tung who claimed that Chinese women carry four mountains (1994: 28), in her keynote address *African Women, Culture and Another Development* (in Ogundipe 1994: 21-41) for the *Association of African Women in Research and Development* conference in Dakar in 1981. The *six mountains* on African women's backs constitute 'oppression from the outside, especially the

⁵ Ogundipe, a scholar, writer and literary critic from Yoruba background, is a founding member of the organizations *Association of African Women in Research and Development* and *Women in Nigeria*. She was on the Editorial Board of the Nigerian *Guardian* Newspaper and National Director of Social Mobilization in the Nigerian government between 1987-1989 (Boyce Davies 1994: xii). Apart from *Re-Creating Ourselves* Ogundipe has published in English *Sew the Old Days and other Poems* (1985) and edited together with Carole Boyce Davies *Moving Beyond Boundaries* (1995, two volumes).

ravages of colonialism, some African cultural traditions, the backwardness of the African woman, men, race and herself' (Guy-Sheftall 2003: 33). This metaphorical concept makes thus visible that the social realities of African women are shaped by different systems and practices of domination in their internal and external dimensions. While I return to the aspect of tradition later, I like to shortly quote how Ogundipe herself explains the third mountain: 'her backwardness is a product of colonization and neo-colonialism, comprising poverty, ignorance, and the lack of a scientific attitude to experience and nature' (Ogundipe 1994: 35). Although this mountain contains the relevance of a historical perspective, it does not only represent in itself a problematical choice of terminology but also promotes the disputed idea of social change as a universal and linear process.

Following the dominant structuring of the historical narrative along the lines of coloniality, Ogundipe emphasizes how colonization has caused a fundamental deterioration of African people's conditions, in material, structural as well as cultural and mental ways. Colonization, in order to form an exploitative and patriarchal system, introduced new forms of domination to African societies but also enforced oppressive elements of local cultures, causing an erosion of traditional spaces of agency and power for women (Ogundipe 1994: 73). While Ogundipe argued in *Women in Nigeria* that the Nigerian woman has become deeply oppressed within marriage, thus, in her role as a wife (1994: 75ff., 13ff.), she stated in other contexts that one should not reduce women to this one role only (Lewis/Ogundipe 2002; Ogundipe 1994: 13). The multiplicity of social roles available for African women leads to experiences of oppression but also allows for agency and self-determined action and contains the complicity in the patriarchal oppression of 'other women who come into their own lineages as wives' (Ogundipe 1994: 76) or within the class system. Thus, Ogundipe's differentiating analytical perspective on multiple axes of inequality and differences within one person impedes the construction of a simplifying opposition between powerful and powerless which would ultimately fix African women within the latter category. It works against the dominant and victimizing construction of 'the African woman' as passive and non-modern which 'fossilises rural women [and African women in general] in time and space' (Ogundipe 1994: 48, my own addition; Nnaemeka 1996: 255f.; Taiwo 2003: 57). Though the *six mountains* are an impairing burden, they are not entirely restraining. As the mountains'

location is on the backs of African women, South African scholar Pumla Dineo Gqola argues 'we are able to move with them. This analogy is mindful of the nexi of power relations at play in Blackwomen's lives whilst acknowledging the agency with which we engage with them. The mountains are not overwhelming, even if they are monumental and strenuous.' (2001: 12)⁶

Within such a dynamic and shifting framework Ogundipe emphasizes the necessity to make the history and present of African women's resistance and power visible, contesting one-sided, victimizing representations: 'Are African women voiceless or do we fail to look for their voices where we may find them, in the *sites* and forms in which these voices are uttered?' (Ogundipe 1994: 11, original emphasis). While Ogundipe defines tradition as one mountain on African women's back, as described above, she observes that 'indigenous feminisms also existed in Africa' (1994: 230). Thus, a reference to a historical past and certain traditional practices can potentially contribute to empowerment. It is this grounding of transformative practices and creative visions of African women within the specific historical, social and cultural context which constitutes what Ogundipe describes as *Re-creating Ourselves*. Ogundipe's analytical approach to social relations through a comprehensive systemic perspective (Lewis/Ogundipe 2002) is also reflected in her insistence on holistic transformative practices. For this purpose she coined the conceptual term of *Stiwanism* (STIWA: Social Transformation Including Women in Africa; Ogundipe 1994: 207-241), which allows her 'to discuss the needs of African women today in the tradition of the spaces and strategies provided in our indigenous cultures for the social being of women' (Ogundipe 1994: 230). Within her multidimensional framework for understanding oppression 'critical transformations' and liberatory practices need to take place on a structural level but also in people's minds (Ogundipe 1994: 146ff.). Within the sphere of culture structural relations are manifested and oppressive practices find their expression, while it can also be the source for self-determination and empowerment for African women. This leads to the imperative to critically examine what is regarded as tradition or culture within one community, how the relationship to the past is shaped, as Ogundipe argues: 'Should culture be placed in a museum of minds or should we take authority over

⁶ Gqola bases her article, in which she also discusses Ogundipe's and Nnaemeka's analyses, on 'Blackwomen's theories in Africa' (2001: 11, emphasis added).

culture as a product of human intelligence and consciousness to be used to improve our existential conditions?' (1994: 224, 7).

Overall Ogunديpe's focus lies primarily with the investigation of social relationships of inequality and oppression and offers only a delineation of what it can mean for African women to *recreate themselves*. This is where I regard it insightful to think further with Obioma Nnaemeka's theoretizations.

(b) Culture and negotiations: Obioma Nnaemeka

Obioma Nnaemeka⁷ discusses in her paper *Development, Cultural Forces, and Women's Achievements in Africa* (1996) in which way culture has and can gain meaning for processes of development and seeks to challenge the 'prevailing colonialist and imperialist idea that African traditional cultures in their *entirety always* constitute an impediment to progress' (Nnaemeka 1996: 252, original emphasis). Nnaemeka argues that culture, with regard to so-called developing countries, has primarily been understood as negative and as an obstacle to development within dominant development discourse. Thus, it is crucial to critically investigate the underlying idea of development. And likewise what is commonly seen as cultural: When is a certain action regarded as an expression of culture? Which kind of problems are ascribed to root in the cultural sphere? (Nnaemeka 2003: 372). Nnaemeka argues that from a dominant perspective any phenomenon or problem can be explained with culture and cultural difference instead of seeing its cause in specific socioeconomic formations or racism. In order to adequately understand social realities in their present and historical configurations, social inequality and oppression must be examined in their complexity for which Nnaemeka suggests using US-American Black feminist Patricia Hill Collins's concept *matrix of domination* (Nnaemeka 1998: 19). Thus, power relations cannot be understood along one-dimensional oppositions, such as male-female or colonizer-colonized, which resonates

⁷ Obioma Nnaemeka is a Nigerian scholar from Igbo origin and holds a professorship of French, Women's Studies, and Africana Studies at the Indiana University, Indianapolis. Nnaemeka is president of the *Association of African Women Scholars* and has organized the international conference series *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora* (WAAD). In addition to a ten-volume publication on the conference's proceedings comprising over 200 original papers, Nnaemeka edited the volume *Sisterhood, Feminisms and Power: From Africa to the Diaspora* (1998) on its basis. She has also edited *The Politics of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity and Resistance in African Literature* (1997).

with Ogundipe's approach. Challenging a mainly negative apprehension, nevertheless, ought not lead to an undifferentiated appraisal of culture or tradition. Though investigations of pre-colonial social structures and cultural practices are vital for developing an adequate understanding of history and recovering African women's achievements and traditions of resistance (Nnaemeka 1996), 'it is misleading to argue along precolonial and postcolonial lines by exaggerating women's power in either of the two periods. [...] [O]ne can extol Africa's past without romanticizing it by downplaying or totally ignoring gender inequalities' (Nnaemeka 1998: 19). Nnaemeka generally suggests conceptualizing power in relative and not in absolute terms, focusing on the social practices through which power is 'negotiable and negotiated' (1998: 11, 19). For social change or development to be successful in the sense of providing a lasting and liberating transformation in form of a 'participative, democratic process' (2003: 377), it needs to be carried by theories and practices grounded in local people's particular life realities - such as Claude Ake expressed with his call for *building on the indigenous* to which Nnaemeka refers directly (2003: 376ff.). The insight that culture is inevitably of large significance and needs to be considered as such (1996), is accompanied by the recognition that culture cannot in itself or as a whole be positive or negative. It requires an active investigation of the past and the present in order to identify and make visible those spaces and cultural practices through which African women, and men, have been able to exert self-determination, to 'find out in what ways culture is a positive force that can serve development well' (2003: 375). Nnaemeka, thus, echoes and carries further Ake's and Ogundipe's insistence on development and social change in general as an endogenous and self-reliant transformation of society that requires a conscious inquiry of the cultural elements and traditional institutions that should be mobilized for this objective.

In her editorial introduction to *Sisterhood, Feminisms and Power: From Africa to the Diaspora* (1998), a volume which comprises a part of the proceedings of the first conference *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora* (WAAD) held in Nsukka, Nigeria, in 1992, Nnaemeka analyzes the landscape of feminist engagement within African contexts. She emphasizes the plurality and heterogeneity, the manifold divergences and contradictions which are constitutive of African feminism(s) while she also finds underlying commonalities. Nnaemeka argues that what unifies them is the way 'how

they *speak* their truth' (1998: 1, 5; 2003, original emphasis) which caused her to coin the term of *Nego-Feminism* to describe the kind of feminism(s) practiced on the African continent. Derived from the central role of giving, taking, and negotiating within Igbo culture, the term *nego* simultaneously refers to *negotiation* and *no ego* (Nnaemeka 2002: 12). The dimension of *no ego*, which is not further discussed by Nnaemeka, expresses the centrality of community, the close relationship between the individual and the collective and challenges an individualistic and egocentric sense of the self. *Negotiation* means that oppressive conditions, as for example patriarchy, are addressed and challenged through flexible, context-specific and strategic practices which may imply avoiding direct confrontation. Negotiating in and around different situations and finding compromise 'evokes the dynamism and shifts of a process as opposed to the stability and reification of a construct' (Nnaemeka 2003: 378). Mary E. Modupe Kolawole (1997) relates Nnaemeka's concept to Ropo Sekoni who reveals a complementary and insightful dimension. Commenting on the Yoruba trope of the market, Sekoni parallels how negotiation is practiced at the marketplace - as '[b]argaining and haggling over the price of a commodity' - to the way in which 'the value of meaning of any social phenomenon is open to negotiation by the human subjects that value and revalue such phenomena' (Sekoni in Kolawole 1997: 35). For example, Nnaemeka shows with the case of the *Igbo Women's War* against the colonial administration in 1929 how one historical event can be interpreted and valued divergently by different African feminists. The meaning of the Women's War for a history and present of female resistance against oppression is contested and depends amongst others on how oppression, agency and empowerment are defined, how the mobilization and the success is explained from a certain perspective (Nnaemeka 1998: 17f.; 1996: 263). Thus, single historical events and cultural practices are not entirely fixed. They gain their meaning from the ways in which social actors perceive them and engage with them as 'culture is dynamic in the sense that it derives its meanings, evolution, and reformulation from people's encounter with and negotiations in it in the context of historical imperatives' (Nnaemeka 2003: 374). This means for the example of the *Igbo Women's War* that its significance for contemporary activism aimed at social change in African contexts is a result of negotiations between differently located subjects.

Recognizing difference and shifting of vantage points: Concluding remarks

This final section opens with preliminary remarks of conclusion, after which some of the article's lines of inquiry are brought together through a focus on the dimension of difference. The primary aim of my article has been to engage with the works of Ogundipe and Nnaemeka from an angle different to their common reception as 'African feminists' and to read them as cultural theorists. This examination of commonly omitted subjects, ideas and connections within and between their theoretical writings shapes the article's rather conceptual nature. The emphasis is placed on general conceptual ideas, in particular the exploration of the connection between issues related to culture, difference and social change in Ogundipe's and Nnaemeka's theoretizations. Hence, some questions could not be treated with extensive analytical depth and detail, while other aspects such as the concept of indigeneity had to be put aside at this point. Building upon this article, future research could – in depth and in its detailed implications – further inquire the hypothesis concerning the close relationship between culture, difference and social change in Ogundipe's and Nnaemeka's writings, or examine its meaning in relation to the concept of indigeneity.

The analysis in the previous section outlined major points of argumentation within Ogundipe's and Nnaemeka's works. Explicitly addressing social change and culture, difference so far has remained rather implicit but constitutive of the theoretical understanding of the other two concepts. Ogundipe's and Nnaemeka's point of departure from which they develop their respective approaches but also their final concern are the life realities of African women, while their larger vision aims at possibilities of broad social change inclusive of all members of a community. Grounding their work in the life realities of African women, Ogundipe and Nnaemeka start with the very recognition of difference and particularity which calls for a specific examination: How can these life realities be adequately understood? The authors show how it is from the plurality of this location that the categories, structures and discourses of difference significant in a specific context are to be investigated, 'how they configure in and relate to *their own lives and immediate surroundings*' (Nnaemeka 1998: 7, original emphasis). The social relations and cultural practices - in their oppressive and empowering dimensions - shaping these can only be understood if a multifaceted, differentiating and historicizing perspective is applied. Ogundipe and

Nnaemeka reject one-dimensional and static approaches that only consider one axis such as gender or class, thus, allow for the construction of a simplistic opposition between powerful and powerless, between oppressors and oppressed, as I showed in the second part of this article. The recognition of difference in a historical perspective enables, on the one hand, a more adequate understanding of the present and, on the other hand, a consideration of the ways in which social actors as members of a community relate and can relate to the past. Ogundipe and Nnaemeka point out how this relationship, certain traditions and cultural practices can contribute to social change aimed at empowerment, not implying continuity or neglecting the endeavor's contested character but emphasizing the significance of negotiations over meaning. Nevertheless, the authors' insistence on the centrality of differentiation seems to contradict their general emphasis on the particularity of *African* women's situation, something that is for example expressed in both author's predominant referral to 'Africa' or 'African women'. The question on which grounds an African identity is constructed and legitimized, and how this could negatively impact the social change envisioned by Ogundipe and Nnaemeka, is of significance and would require further investigation.

The perspectives offered by Ogundipe and Nnaemeka point towards how notions and categories of difference are mobilized or produced in order to legitimize systems of domination and exploitation. This legitimization of hierarchies, violence or the limitation of possibilities of different subjects and communities through difference stands in tension with the productive and emancipatory potential of difference. Nnaemeka in particular offers a strong emphasis on an understanding of difference not as something that is ultimately dividing (both within and outside of an oppressive logic). The recognition of the differences that constitute us as individual subjects, as members of communities and that shape one's experiences and the underlying conditions, is the basis on which connection, exchange, learning and negotiation can take place (Nnaemeka 2003: 374). This means that discourses and practices aimed at social change may focus 'less on the transcending of difference and more on the challenges of living successfully with contradictions, less on the obliteration of difference (an impossible task!) and more on allowing difference to be and in its *being* create the power that energizes *becoming*' (Nnaemeka 1998: 3, original emphasis). At this point it remains an open question how Nnaemeka, in more detail,

would suggest that difference can unfold its positive potential *within* the existing relations of domination and inequality. Thus, how the limiting and enabling capacities of difference can be brought together. In its very fundament Nnaemeka's argument for the recognition of differences and the plurality of frameworks and theories is an epistemological one. As it is out of one's specific social and cultural location that a subject perceives and experiences, it is only through this multiplicity of standpoints that a more adequate understanding of reality can be gained. Nnaemeka grounds the refusal to absolutely fix the perspective to one location only, the centrality of a dynamic process which comes from a constant movement as 'vantage points shift' (1998: 3), within the cultural wisdom of the Igbo, who say:

'adiro akwu ofu ebe enene nmanwu

(One does not stand in one spot to watch a masquerade)'.
(Nnaemeka 1998: 3, original emphasis)

(Nnaemeka 1998: 3, original emphasis)

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Zusammenfassung:

Der Artikel geht von einem Argument des nigerianischen Politikwissenschaftlers Claude Ake aus, welches er bei der *International Conference on Popular Participation in the Recovery and Development Process in Africa* im Februar 1990 in Arusha, Tansania, präsentiert hat. Ake bezieht sich auf die Idee eines *building on the indigenous* für Entwicklungsprozesse in afrikanischen Kontexten, einem Verankern von Praxen sozialer Veränderung in den Relevanzsphären lokaler Bevölkerungen. Eine Betrachtung des Verständnisses von Tradition, Kultur und Kollektivität, welches Akes Argument zu Grunde liegt, verlangt nach einer differenzierteren Betrachtung, die den umkämpften Charakter dieser Phänomene berücksichtigt. Ein solcher theoretischer Rahmen lässt sich in Arbeiten der nigerianischen Wissenschaftlerinnen und Aktivistinnen Molar Ogundipe und Obioma Nnaemeka finden. Die Lebensrealitäten afrikanischer

Frauen zentrierend setzen sich die Autorinnen kritisch mit sozialen Bedingungen in ihren unterdrückerischen und ermächtigenden Dimensionen auseinander. Eine Lektüre von Ogundipe und Nnaemeka als Kulturtheoretikerinnen erlaubt eine Betrachtung ihrer Theoretisierungen in Hinblick auf die Beziehung zwischen Kultur, Differenz und sozialem Wandel. Die Analyse zeigt inwiefern die Autorinnen mit ihren Konzeptualisierungen von Differenz die Konstruktion einer simplifizierten Opposition zwischen machtvoll und machtlos verhindern, und wie die Beziehung zur Vergangenheit, gewissen Traditionen und kulturellen Praxen als Produkt eines Aushandlungsprozesses zu sozialem Wandel im Sinne von Ermächtigung beitragen kann.