

**MYTH, MYSTICISM AND THE SPIRIT-CHILD SYNDROME
IN *THE FAMISHED ROAD***

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Abstract

This paper examines the Yoruba belief of the concept of Abiku or spirit-child and mysticism as enshrined in the Yoruba's cosmology which is exemplified in Ben Okri's "The Famished Road". The work will focus on the mystic power of the spirit-child and how the novelist used this in advancing the plot development of the text. The scope of the research is to assess the extent of commitment applied by the author and how well he is able to instill same in his characters. The theory adopted for this research is the magical realist theoretical framework, propounded and popularised by Franz Fanon in 1925. This theory deals with myths, the supernatural, fantasy and reality. The text foregrounds African world-view regarding the belief in re-incarnation and Abiku syndrome. This study unravels Ben Okri's commitment towards the exploration of myths to reveal an aspect of the African cultural relevance. The methodology for the research is theory-based. Therefore, data was sourced from primary and secondary sources. The study notes that Ben Okri applies his mythical narrative to unveil the themes of corruption and failed leadership of the Nigerian State. The study also reveals how the author successfully explores real-life, fantasy and the supernatural. The study concludes that people not only believe in abiku myth, but also believe in the abiku-child. This has resulted in the recent establishment of a worship congregation: 'Ogbanje Church of All Nations,' in Nnewi, Anambra State of Nigeria on the fifth of August, 2023. It also recommends more research on the myth, its existence in other cultures, the name it bears and the modus operandi.

Keywords: Myth, Mysticism, Abiku, Spirit, Supernatural, Reincarnation.

Introduction

In Africa, mythical narratives are told, considering the African perspective, peculiarity, uniqueness and cultural context. This is because, it is oftentimes tied to the cosmology, religious and cultural heritage of the people. Eric Gould asserts that: "Myths derive their significance from the way they try to reconstitute an original event or explain some fact about human and its worldly or cosmic content" (6).

Associating myth in the African context with history and literature, Wole Ogundele avers: "Although there is much ado about myth, history and literature in African discourse, the overwhelming bulk of that labour is expended on myth and literature, they fairly have little to spare on history and literature" (35).

This brings to the fore, the issue of *abiku* child who belongs to both 'space' and exemplified in the novel by Azaro and Ade his friend who die and return to life either to their parents to different parents. Okri as an African magic realist writer

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succinctly explores *abiku* mythic tale to highlight his arts in this regard.

Abiku in Yoruba means a child whose dies after a short-lived lifespan, and is re-born multiple times as the case may be. But in the novel under review, the *Abiku* could return to earth through other parents. For the Yorubas, **reincarnation** is a belief-system which is highly held in reverence. Most African societies share similar beliefs. Although, they adopt different names for it. For instance, the Igbos call it *Ogbanje*. This is interpreted in English as the spirit-child. The Yorubas' believe in the *Abiku* is phenomenal because, the Yoruba-speaking people constitute approximately, 30 million people. They are found within West Africa, and beyond. For instance, parts Togo, Benin republic, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Cuba, Brazil and the Caribbean amongst others.

Reincarnation in Yoruba is called: *Atunwaye*. The people believe that there are three forms of reincarnation as follows: *Ipadawaye*, this means the re-birth of the ancestors. The second is, *Akudaaya*. Those who reincarnate here are said to make appearance after death. And lastly, *Abiku* who are born to die and return afterwards.

On his part, Ikenna Kamalu sees Ben Okri's "*The Famished Road*" as creating a balance in the African world that is "being threatened and upset." As the stress are now "covered with yellow dresses" ... symbolizing imminent death. As he avers thus:

"This is because of the colonialist's decision to subdue African by constructing a road through its dark and thick forest" (Kamalu, 2008).

Giving credence to the existence of magical realism in African Literature, Isidore Okpewho argues that the figures in mythical time can be wholly human or non-human, or else combined on varying degree (14).

Another critic, Eric Gould, sees mythical tale which *The Famished Road* is categorized as deriving their significance from the way they try to 'reconstitute' an original event or explain some facts about human nature and its worldly or cosmic context Gold (198:6).

One of the instances of mysticism and spirit-child syndrome in *The Famished Road* by Ben Okri is seen the king is said to be born uncountable times. He sometimes appears as a cat which is extra-ordinary and mystic. As the persona's voice is heard thus:

Our king was a wonderful personage who sometimes appeared in the form of a great cat. He had a red beard and eyes of greenish sapphire. He has been born uncountable times and was a legend in all worlds, known by a hundred names. It never mattered into what circumstances he was born (*The Famished Road* 3).

Also, apparently fed up with being re-cycled in a birth and death circle, the persona decides not to inflict the early parents with further pain and grief. Instead, he decided to exist as half-spirit, half-human as

Ben Okri echoes the persona's voice in a rhetorical device style below:

How many times has I come and gone through the dreaded gateway? How many times had I been born and died young? And how often to the same parents? I had no idea so much of living was in me. But this time, somewhere in the interspace between the spirit world and the living, I chose to stay (*The Famished Road* 5).

The persona recalls as a child, when he used to hear strange voices that question him for not returning to meet them in the spirit world. He tells them of his intension to live, and they threaten to make his life miserable if he doesn't return to re-unite with them.

Mysticism further unfolds as the persona recounts that the *spirit companions* in a bid to make good their threat, manipulate him as they use her earthly mother's voice to call her. She tries to cross the main road with vehicle almost ramming over her as he recalls:

“One day I was playing on the sand when they called me from across the road with the voice of my mother. As I went towards the voice a car ran me over” (3).

The persona woke up to find himself in a coffin and his parents have commenced burial rites. His miraculous survival earned him the name *Lazaro* which was shortened as Azaro by his earthly mother. Lazaro symbolizes the biblical Lazarus who was raised from the dead.

Underscoring Ben Okri's bluntness in unveiling the mythical characteristics of Azaro in *The Famished Road*. Like Azaro's confession in the above excerpt, Ikenna Kamalu avers:

“Okri employs metaphorical concepts to highlight and interrogate certain historical experiences that the west would like to hide, but Africa would like to reveal, and vice versa” (37).

Before this incident, Azaro also saves his earthly parents' life as his *spirit king* wakes him up in the middle of the night. He runs to the middle of the road with his parents running after him to drag him back. Only for their rented apartment to be gutted by a raving fire. The landlord becomes angry and hires the colonial police who flog the tenants, resulting in a free-for all. The ensuing riot and confusion make Azaro to displace from his parents. One of the women takes him through a hut to the shrine house. On his way back, he meets the goddess of the Island as he confesses:

She was an image with a beautiful face and eyes of a marble that glittered in the sun. All around her feet were metal gongs, kola-nut, kaolin, feathers of eagles and peacocks, bones of animals and bones too big to belong to animals. In a complete circle round her were white eggs and black saucers (13)

From the quotation above, it is obvious that Azaro is a mystic character who intermingles with the natural and the supernatural worlds in line with African belief-system. Isidore Okpewho agrees to this

when he avers as follows:

“African society has long grasped the fact that man lives in a more than human context and so must exploit those extra human elements if he is to sustain his existence and justify his place in universal order” (41).

As a result of Azaro's disappearance, he was shown pity and accommodated by good Christian family who keeps him. The man is a policeman. They had a boy who is dead. While there, the ghosts and spirits that torment and accompany Azaro almost set the policeman's house ablaze, but for Azaro's intervention as they extinguish the fire.

As a result of Azaro's disappearance, his earthly mother becomes worried, searching for her only son. Finally, she consults a female herbalist who tells her that Azaro is trapped in a house of ghosts. In the end, she presents all that she needs to carry out a spiritual inquest and cleansing. Azaro had an accident as he wandered around in the street. That's how the Policeman found him to assist until he locates his family. As she tells Azaro's mother: “I have broken all the spells except one. That one is too powerful for me. Only lightning can break that spell” (30).

Azaro is kidnapped by strange spirit customers at Madame Koto's bar. Tied with sack over his face and whisked away. Before then, another customer, a midget had given him a pen-knife. As they got to a river, he miraculously finds the penknife, cuts the socked sack, and escaped. His abductors took him away in blind-fold, he narrates:

“I became convinced that I was being taken to an underwater kingdom, where they say certain spirits reside” (112).

After his miraculous escape from these spirits, Azaro returns to catch Madame Koto performing ritual sacrifices:

At the edge of the forest, I saw Madame Koto with a plate of chicken ... she stopped at the roadside, looked in all directions to make sure no one was about, and proceeded with her passionate supplications... when she had finished with her praying and chanting, she lit a candle and put on the plate (115).

Haven put the ugly kidnap experience behind him, Azaro returns to Madame Koto's bar without disclosing to anyone what he passed through. But as he makes it back to the bar, he identifies his abductors in the same bar and opens up to Madame Koto whom he has come to realise flourishes in her bar business through the presence of the spirits and mankind. As such, he tries to demobilise Madame Koto by removing the fetish charm that she has planted at the bar. She resists, protesting as she demands back her stuff. The spirits were also happy with Azaro as he narrates:

The spirits were after me as well, and one of them held his detached arm in the air liked misbegotten club. I fled down the paths. Their heavy footsteps sounded behind me and they shouted my name: “Azaro! Azaro”! (138).

As three men invade the photographer's residence, and studio, to attack him over the sad incident that led to the destruction the politicians' campaign van for poisoning the people with rotten milk, there was palpable fear within the neighborhood, with people scampering for safety. Spirits call Azaro intermittently in his childish imaginations as he takes cover in a car. Okri writes, referring to Azaro whose voice is being heard:

As I sat in the car, overcome with fear, I saw the dead rising. I saw them rising at the same moment that the second wave of havoc started with the chants of the antagonists. The dead joined the innocents, with thugs, merged with the night, and plundered the antagonists with the cries of the wounded. The dead uttered howls of mortal joy and they found the livid night a shrine with fevers (180).

After Azaro's unruly behavior at Madame Koto's bar that caused him another escape, he wanders into the forest. At the forest, he picks up a magical mask with which he sees through different worlds: spirit and otherwise when he wears the mask. Some old man trailed him, but when he puts on the mask, he sees a young boy who blesses him as he narrates below:

The boy stared at me with simple eyes that conferred on me an unspoken benediction. I took off the mask and saw the old man re-entering the anthill. I put it on again and was amazed to see not an anthill but a grand palace with beryl colonnades and jade green verandahs, parapets of gold, mistletoe clinging to the fierce yellow walls, with sculptures in dazzling marble all round (245).

The spirit boy, Azaro is a serious source of frustration, misery and endless trouble for his earthly parents (Mom and Dad). For instance, the evil spirits and spirit-companions that follow him about control him by plaguing his family with trouble, hardship, unexplained complications, and misery. These occur repeatedly as they cash in on his father's temperament to cause needless and unprovoked fights that leave him bleeding as a distraction to lure Azaro, their companion rejoin them in the land of the death, against his wish without them knowing.

Azaro's spirit companions send a spirit with three heads to once again, lure him to return to them as he was alleged to have promised before he was born. The spirit declares to Azaro in the midst of the woes they meted out to his father as follows:

“They said I must bring you” (302). The quotation here is in tandem with the Yoruba believe that the *Abiku* is obligated to fulfilling the secret pact that he reached with his spirit-companions in the supernatural realm.

“I won't come! Azaro insists” (302). On the contrary, Azaro's refusal to yield to the return call by his spirit-companions to the world beyond is a strange one. His desire to live rather than die and return to the spirit world further mystifies the *Abiku* syndrome in Yoruba cosmology, leading to the polarization of the myth as it exists in Yoruba land.

In a sustained directive and plea from the three headed spirit to Azaro on the issue, the spirit discloses:

Remember that I have only three hands. After I have failed, you companions will send the spirit with four heads . . . And after that they will send the spirit with five heads . . . And when it gets to the turn of the seven-headed spirit nothing will be able to save you (303).

It is obvious that the spirits have continuously cast a spell on Azaro's father to manipulate and disgrace him to ruminate in pain and poverty by causing him to incessantly fighting his perceived adversaries in groups. Taking foolish pride and relish in the physical strength as he vaunts before Azaro his son as follows:

“When people fight you, toughen up, study them, wait for the right time, and then fight them back. Fight them like a madman, like a wizard, then they will respect you” (305).

Azaro's father is just an innocent eye in the midst of his spirit-child. Azaro and his spirit companions in the world beyond are aware of every manipulation that afflicts him, whereas he is unaware. Although Azaro feels for his earthly parents over the plight that he brings them, he is utterly constrained by the unseen powers from the spirit world to explain things to his parents and help them solve the problems because as the saying goes, 'his hands are tied'. Hence, there is a limit he can tolerate on such issues. It is to him, a helpless situation. That's why, when things come to a head, he advises his father to accompany him home and let go some issues.

His father sees him as a child and shoves him away to have his way. For instance, when he arrives Madame Koto's bar and finds the set of prostitutes that are newly employed at the bar, Azaro spiritually pictured danger and tells his father:

“Let's go home” (296).

He becomes surprised at his son's advice and responds:

“Why? I've only just arrived. It's been a devil' day. Fetch me some palm-wine. Where is Madame Koto” (296).

He was thereafter served by one of the prostitutes who demanded for money. He was a bit reluctant to pay and was threatened by the woman as his countenance changes. He pays, but nursed a grudge at her. Subsequent events at the bar climaxed into a fight with political thugs that come afterwards, as they left him bleeding. He complains to Madame Koto who returns drenched, and she declined to speak on the issues. He becomes angry at her and invokes a curse on her as follows:

“You are a wicked woman, a witch . . . And, because you don't care about human beings terrible things will happen to you. Me and my son will never set foot here again” (304)

After paying fixing the blind, old man's glass broken by Azaro, Azaro's father locks him up in the room and flogged him thoroughly. Azaro suddenly withdraws his human sympathy for his parents.

Particularly, his father who never blinked an eyelid over Azaro who had resolved to toe the 'famished Road.' (Starve himself) and embarks on hunger strike. As he decides to heed the advice of the three-headed spirit and return to the spirit world to commune with his spirit companions who long to reunite with him as Azaro says of his father:

I stopped listening to him. I withdrew from the world of feelings, sentiments, and sympathies. I refused to eat the next night. My mouth became dry. I lost energy and felt myself becoming light. I felt a terrible ecstasy growing in me (325).

Reiterating and emphasizing Azaro's return to the spirit world, the three-headed spirit cashes in on the unfeeling and lack of love that Dad demonstrates towards Azaro for embarking on a hunger strike and says:

“Human beings don't care. They don't know how to love. They don't know what love is. Look at them you are dying and all they do is polish their boots. Do they love you? No!” (326).

In his response to the spirit, Azaro says:

I paid attention to the words of the spirit. And his words led me into a blue terrain beyond the hungers of the flesh. Sunbirds sang from branches. The trees were golden. I travelled on the wind of amnesia till we came to a might road (326).

At the end of a long sacrifice embarked upon by Azaro's parents, aimed at forestalling the return of their son to the spirit world by separating him from the spirit of the dead, and his spirit companions. Azaro narrates that although herbalist was gone, his shadow and the flight of his eagle feathers remained.

Mum made me drink bitter herbs. Dad made razor incisions on my chest and shoulders and forehead and pressed stinging potions on the cuts. I cried out for food. “They paid no attention. I tried returning to my journey but couldn't shut my eyes. Mum fed me with water, and pap, and orange juice (340).

After the Black Tyger, (Dad) beat Green Leopard, (the politicians' chief thug) and won the one hundred pounds bet placed for the fight. Dad slept and didn't wake up for three nights, signaling danger. He was tormented by the spirit of Yellow Jugular's ghost. The late boxing champion whom he unknowingly beat as a ghost. Madame Koto as a result, brought three women to restore his situation. There was also an herbalist contracted to return the Black Tyger's spirit from the land of the fighting ghosts as Azaro his son would say:

“They didn't seem to mind my presence. I stayed silent in the corner and watched them calling Dad's spirit back from the Land of the Fighting Ghosts” (404).

While dancing with the midget girl who in posed herself sexuality on Azaro while partying at Madame Koto's bar, the dead infiltrates the party as ghosts and spirits with human features, but beastly legs.

Hence Azaro declares:

I saw that some of the prostitute, who would be future brides of decadent power, had legs of goats. Some women, who were chimeras and sirens and broke courtesans, had legs of spiders and birds. Some of the politicians and power merchants, the chiefs and innocent-looking men, who were satyrs... and Satanists, had the cloven hoofs of bulls (460).

As a result of the infiltration of the ghosts, Azaro suddenly realizes that he wasn't dancing with the midget girl any more, but with the four-headed spirit that has been plotting to return him to the land of the dead where he is to re-write with his spirit companions who have been expecting him. This Azaro narrates as follows:

I was falling in love with life and the four-headed spirit had chosen the best moment to dance with me, turning and twisting me through strange spaces, making me dance my way out of the land of the living (460).

Cooper describes Ben Okri's central character in *The Famished Road* Thus:

Azaro lives in many dimensions and tells his story through his life, his dreams, and his entry into the dream of others... exists on the plane of his pre-life and perception of spirits and ghosts invisible to others. He is hijacked into seeing through the film of slim of the old man's decayed vision, and also through the mask of the carver, whose vision of reality is as terrifying to the youthful Azaro as the blood and guide of the perspective of Madame Koto and the three headed spirit (105).

By his view about Ben Okri's narrator, Azaro in the foregoing quote, it is obvious to Cooper that "*The Famished Road*" is focalized around the consciousness of Azaro. He uses other characters: humans, spirits, landscape, vegetation and so on to focalize in the world of the text. Commenting on the structure of language used in *The Famished Road*, Musa Idris Okpanachi stresses that language structures used by the creative writer constitutes his ideological orientation.

In furtherance of this, Okpanachi is of the view that ideology is the "cultural norms social values and schemata through which people interpret events and against which background discourses are processed and understood" (89).

I can agree no less with Okpanachi in this regard. It is true that Okri has adopted the first-person point-of-view, Azaro in telling the story. On his view about *The Famished Road* by Ben Okri, Ezekiel Asakitipi asserts that ... "the belief in Abiku/Ogbanje myth is already engrained in the belief-system of the people, and they shape their behavior" (70).

A projection of hopes for the world based on the release of mankind's yet untapped mental and physical resources. Okri's novel reads like a mystical piece. There is no

defining the line between the living and the world of spirits. Human beings intermingle with ghoulish creatures. In one scene, Azaro is walking home when he sees a messenger of the sea king (66).

I say that Tunca's understanding of *The Famished Road* is legendary. She had seen in Okri's novel, one that projects hopes for mankind across the globe.

Conclusion

Ben Okri uses his craft as a magical realist African creative writer to expose a Nigerian and African society, where the belief-system revolves around mysticism. This is occasioned by the possession of the spiritual powers to manipulate the world of reality. His thrust in *The Famished Road*, (1991), is to bring to the fore, the scourge of *abiku*, the spirit-child syndrome that is prevalent in his immediate society.

Ben Okri makes the reader appreciate that most of the successes and breakthroughs that people in the world of the text record is either by fetish involvement in the world of the spirit, witchcraft, charms or outright worship of the unseen gods. Although these gods are unseen, Ben Okri leaves us with the impression of reality as the sacrifices that are offered to the gods in the physical disappear in the public glare as the gods are said to have consumed them.

The issue of endless reincarnation by the spirit-child or *Abiku* as it is tagged in Yoruba is a reality which humans in the world of the text have to contend with. For instance, Azaro the persona narrates a situation whereby, the *abiku* leader in the text reincarnates as many times as possible. Either as a human being or an animal. To this he says:

Our king was a wonderful personage who sometimes appeared in the form of a great cat. He had a red beard and eyes of greenish sapphire. He had been born uncountable times and was a legend in all worlds, known by a hundred names. It never mattered into what circumstance he was born (3).

The above excerpt suggests that the *abiku* myth as expressed in Yoruba land has come to stay. This quotation is in tandem with Niyi Osundare's assertion when he avers thus:

“Since the *abiku* myth is the manifold complex of Yoruba cultural behavior, not in isolation from it, its representation therefore should involve an examination of that aspect of Yoruba, nay African belief from which “*Abiku*” takes its root” (93).

This study reveals that Ben Okri uses his repackaged *abiku*, the spirit-child deconstruction tale to reveal a looming danger that imminently awaits Nigeria as a country, if the political rot and official corruption persists. The research also reveals that Ben Okri in *The Famished Road* seeks a damage-control measure to salvage the country from premature extinction which is satirically likened to *abiku*, the spirit-child

myth whose lifespan is short-lived. The study has also justified the conscious exploration *Abiku* myth by Ben Okri with a view to fine-tuning the myth with the introduction of a new version. The author has drawn from the African tradition. In the course of his work. Specifically, the Yoruba where the myth goes by the name: *Abiku*.

This is in agreement with F.B.O Akporobaro's assertion that:

“Although, the African creative writers drawn from their oral traditions, preserve its myths, based on the vital nature of the beliefs and worldview embodied in myth that ensures the survival of a culture” (188).

This study further concludes that *The Famished Road* is consequential in contemporary Nigeria. This is because, the people's belief in *abiku* myth has metamorphosed into the establishment of a worship center called: 'Ogbanje Church of All Nations' in Nnewi, South\Eastern Nigeria. *Ogbanje* or *abiku* worshippers commenced their service on the fifth day of August, 2023. *Ogbanje* is the equivalent of *Abiku* in Igbo land.

It is a society where the people believe that for one to record any form of prosperity, and financial breakthrough, the person has to worship and sacrifice to some gods and spirits. For instance, Madame Koto suddenly becomes rich as she is involved in party politics wherein they perform sacrifices to gods, and are engaged in spiritual warfare to outwit one another. Azaro narrates about Madame Koto:

“The rumors got so wild that it was hinted her cult made sacrifices of human beings and that she ate children. They said she had been drinking human blood to lengthen her life and that she was more than a hundred year old” (374).

