

I Have Always Meant to Fail: from Abiku to Abikuisms (Speaking of Nigeria and Road Desire)

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Apropos on the problem

Movement in Nigeria is as much about livelihood as it is about a culturally specific modus operandi of frenetic movements between ‘here’ and ‘there’. What directs deeper anxieties in these, move beyond the socio-economic into certain inner compulsions informed by mythic narratives. An instance is the myth of Abiku.¹ Supported in the cultural memory through a range of familial, religious and artistic/literary output, Abiku flourishes in the portrait of a mythic driving force, an ancestral impetus of movement, failure and desire. In its tenet concept of *road* as itinerant vagrancy, Abiku represents both *the problem* and a challenge to the existing pastoral idea of ‘African sociality’; whereas, in its application, Abiku mutates as what is coined here as *Abikuisms* to give face to a worrying excessive individualism collectively performed. Applying a previously unmade link available in sacred Ifa texts, this essay explores the myth of Abiku to suggest a double-layered impact displayed by the collective cultural psyche and how the individual psyche is impacted by ancestral inheritance.

What is ‘the problem’?

So prevalent is the Abiku in the collective psyche of the Nigerian imagination², its significance ought to be explored beyond generalised literary and popular applications. Portrayed as both myth and phenomenon Abiku describes an individual on a chronic (self-directed) mission of movements between oppositional worlds of heaven and earth, *the problem* being the hybrid (ancestral, human) nature of this movement and its vagrant itinerancy (chronic, incomplete). Through its organising code of chronic movement directed by individualistic will, the Abiku presents the problem of perversion of the procreative accumulative goal of movement. Consequently, the action that must be carried out by the family or society to prevent itinerant vagrancy and sever the human from ancestral interference is a system of ritual intervention performed by the sacred community. In ancient Edo mysteries, along with Life (sea, abundance, fertility, future – represented by Olokun) and Earth (world, continuity/stability, lineage, present – represented by Orunmila), Death (mortality, movement, path, suffering, experience), whose messenger is Esu, is one of the ‘siblings’ of creativity to establish the existence of humans on earth. Coming from the Sea (abundance, Olokun) but intrigued by Death (experience, Esu), the spirit-child is the individual capable of fruitful continuity but for his/her own ancestral peculiarities, favours a life of wandering existence. In full disdain of representatives of Orunmila (familial, society, law and order – who in turn are forced to intervene), Abiku defers death by dealing directly with the divine trickster, Esu.

Known across West Africa as the mirthful psychomp hanging about crossroads to trick humans with an existential riddle, Esu is the death dispenser – the clincher – who ensures mortality. However, in the context of Abiku, it is in the abstract concept of Death – that is, Ifa’s feminine principle of Death as Life – that the Abiku matrix is fully realised³. In the Ifa divination system⁴, life consists of two principles, Life (*Ogbe*, father, male, represented by I) and Death (*Oyeku*,

1 Or Ogbanje, both being the Nigerian version of the West African spirit-child myth. Although both names describe the same phenomenon, what is true for one might not hold true for the other. For our purposes, I shall refer always to Abiku in its specific connection to Ifa (Orunmila).

2 Abiku being more within the esoteric realm of literature, media and sacred divination; the word Ogbanje is more likely to be used on the streets of Lagos, with the popular assumption that the terms are interchangeable.

3 Ifa’s feminine principle of Death as Life is Oyeku. In this essay, I may refer to Oyeku as ‘Deathmother’. The oppositional force, Life, is represented by Ogbe.

4 Ifa in the Yoruba refers to a system of divination (practiced across West Africa under various other names, such as Afa in Togo and westwards, and Orunmilla among the Edo and surrounding peoples). In Ifa, consultation with the gods is made through sacred oral texts depicting principal forces represented by a binary code system of I (masculine, Life) and its ‘returnings’ II (feminine, Death).

mother, female, represented by II)⁵. In the Yoruba, Ifa speaks of Oyeku's II as 'coming and returnings' – that is, as the *continuing* force. In this sense, Oyeku's Death principle (her 'coming and returnings') is a conduit for lived experience and comprises death qualities of movements, experience and the capacity for suffering. It is here, in the Deathmother, that we find the mythic narrative of the itinerant vagrant Abiku: the deferment of 'death' for ongoing Death.

A masculine rising, Abiku takes on the feminine death qualities of Oyeku's 'coming and returnings' to direct its take on 'Life' as an ongoing question of Difference and Movement. An intrepid vagrant, the Abiku establishes in Oyeku (that is, in the Death principle) its organising concept of *road* not as death, but as self-exploratory movements of Death as the creative force. In the eyes of the family and society however, the *problem* Abiku presents stops at the deferment of death achieved by the Abiku in its manipulation of Esu. Though Abiku merely employs Esu as trickster-jester guide in its wandering existence of 'coming and returnings' (Death), the family/society/law sees neither the symbolic idea of quest nor the chaos of experience, but rather the introduction of mockery and trickery (for which Esu is well known) into the family home of continuity and procreative stability.

If in the ancestral sense of Time as cyclical, the Abiku is merely 'on the road', moving between 'here' and 'there' of the existence of things, in the perception of 'town of people' (family and society), Abiku is a distortion of how life ought to be lived in all its linear goal-oriented fullness. Its hybridity, its difference and solitary movements (through death⁶) are offensives to the procreative society of blood and lineage. Abiku schemes in direct opposition to and as perversion of the African idea of a Complete Life⁷ to pose in its collapse of the borders between heaven and earth a mockery of law and the human order of things. Left alone in the individual, Abiku supports the need for self-invention, self-reflection and refusal. In the eyes of family and society however, Abiku is a kind of pathology: *the problem* of worrying individuality that perverts established ideas of 'home'.

What really is 'road'?: the significance of II⁸ (Mapping mythic strains in the vagrant)

Before we move on to Abikuisms, we must first understand the concept of *road* in Abiku. In extant oral Abiku literature, the *esé*⁹ in Odu¹⁰ Ejiose states: '...*the child who does not die but returns to road is road...*' Road and its 'returns' are the double-bodied attributes of II as the feminine principle of Death. If I is 'Life' then II is 'two lives' or 'life returnings': *life in its processes of being*. As 'two lives' or 'life returnings', Oyeku's II is synonymous with the physical act of dying (supervised by Esu) as well as the abstract idea of Death as the creative force. The sign II connotes movements between spatial realities as well as the *nonplace* of in-between subjectivities. The sign II suggests the true existence of Abiku as lived experience of (preferred) in-betweenness. It marks both the loneliness of the hybrid Abiku and its preference for associative,

5 Oyeku stands in oppositional but complementary relationship with Ogbe.

6 Some Abiku are deemed blockers of the maternal womb who simply 'lock-up' its earth mother's womb by holding back its birth – an act perceived as a gesture of death, since prolonged barrenness is nearly as dreadful as death itself. This is true of the Ogbanje among the Edo, for whom Ogbanjes are a gift/curse from the river goddess Ogbankuan, river wife of Olokun.

7 That one is born, flourishes, buries one's aged parents and dies in respected old age buried by one's own children.

8 The interpretation and links I make here are the result of diverse research methodologies. These take into account folk and popular, theoretical, literary and the ethnographic psychoanalytic, including the experiential particularly plumbing the area of personal cultural familiarity. My research work in Nigeria included conversations with professed Abikus (or Ogbanjes), as well as interviews with key babalawos (priests of Ifa), Ifa babalawo Kayode the awise of Oju Ota, and particularly, Ifa babalawo Eleibuon the awise of Oshogbo, whose compound I resided at during my 2003 visit to Oshogbo. Under guidance, I was allowed access to rituals and consultations with clientele of the babalawos to observe fully the processes of divination. On some level, the connections that I draw here are creative interpretations. However, my feeling is that, in terms of religious texts and beliefs, including experiences associated with the same, we are talking of infinite meanings and interpretations. For this reason too, connections I draw might not, in fact, be agreed upon by every babalawo.

9 Also written as 'ise' or 'ase', an *ese* is a prayer toward something), a saying or line on oral poetry. An *ise* has the power to recognise the problem and well as arrest (fetter) it.

10 An Odu is a verse in oral Ifa literature. In the Yoruba, an Odu consists of *esé* or incantation, which might serve as a prayer. These often appear as poems and can be quite lively. Odu are sacred and number 256 in total. An authentic babalawo is one who knows the entire 256 verses by heart. Although a history of 'committing to memory' was part of the apprenticeship toward professional priestly practice, it is not always possible to find a priest who can truly recite the entire 256 verses by heart.

non-linear relations based on ideas and shared interests. The sign **II** is flexibility and chaos and counterbalances Ogbe's Life with Death, light with dark, victory with uncertainty, success with process and so on. This series of opposition to Ogbe's life qualities are death qualities absorbed by Abiku in its adoption of the feminine forces of **II**. An excerpt of a verse found under Oyeku Meji is as follows and pertains directly to Abiku:

*Death taught me also, I said
 Death stored in a calabash head
 Growing, spreading all over the ground
 Death taught me thinking
 Creeping gradually covers the bole* (Gleason et al 1973: 52)

The chronic road travelled between *here* and *there* ultimately meets at the crossroads, that is, toward some sense of direction. However, when Esu, the guide at the crossroads, has been co-opted, the confrontation at the crossroads results not in direction but a pluralism of subjective realities, of discourse and the soul, fully aware that located at non-place are repetitions, recurrences and hybrid positionings where the centre has no hold. The rationalist, unified ideal loses its place to the reasonable but irrational. The schism between self and society informs an existential unease, but the Abiku forges forward to overlap, at the intersections of ideas, the divergent lives and peripheries encountered. This is Abiku road. It is at Abiku road that the despair of a creeping unease grows, spreading and thinking where the guide is not *death* of the flesh – not Esu's domain though he heartily provides riddles and mirth – but *in Death*, meaning the Deathmother herself. The shifts between excesses (body) and emptiness (spirit), between experience and existence, between life and Death, that *death calabash* full of life plagued by those certain anxieties, these are the stuff of Abiku road.

The In-between Space of Road: Road as Nonplace (a diagram/the many roads)

HERE	NONPLACE	THERE
<i>earth</i> (family, town)	(quest)	<i>heaven</i> (self, ancestral)
<i>body</i> (material)	(hunger and suffering)	<i>spirit</i> (spiritual being)
<i>mother</i> (stability, lineage)	(orphanhood)	<i>Deathmother</i> (uncertainty, creativity)
<i>art</i> (history, form)	(style, spirit: form and content)	<i>artist</i> (spiritual autobiography)

Abiku, Abikuisms and the problem: Nigerian road desire

In Nigeria today, Abiku is at once taken as descriptive of ‘identifiable’ Abiku person. Meanwhile, we must consider the possibility that indeed demonstrated in the contemporary Nigerian city is a continuation of ancestral strains that renders active certain aspects of the myth in odd manifestations. As a kind of ongoing struggle in the collective psyche, instigated perhaps by the socio-economic pressures alongside others, the Abiku defining concept of ‘road’ presents interesting connections between the mythic narrative (of the death-obsessed Abiku) and ‘road desire’ in Nigeria – itself a phenomenon compounded by fervent Pentecostal-evangelical born-againisms.

Abikuisms is a distortion of a distortion. A misreading of a critical and dynamic ritual perversion, Abikuisms is *the problem* as attitude and behaviour – a national phenomenon, which, far from addressing the issue of ‘road’ and the dynamics road unveils, imitates, as a kind of warring tool, superficial aspects of *the problem* and attaches to the concept of movement purely acquisitive goals instigated by the fear of death. The sum of such mimicry is what is coined here as *road desire* which, in the context of the collective psyche represents the embodiment of attitudes attributed to myths through irrational desires for material acquisition in the belief that an unreasonable outlook will bring about the end of suffering. ‘Road desire’ is the starting point of Abikuisms. Subsequently, Abikuisms become the extremes of ‘road desire’ through the excessive application of what is assumed to be ‘Abiku will’.

If the power of the Abiku is believed to be natural ability for effortless charm and wealth generation – attributes much admired by others in the Abiku – Abikuisms is an attempt to embody Abiku in its most acquisitive interpretation. While such acquisitive powers are supposedly disregarded by the so-called Abiku-person due to oppositional ancestral possession of his/her ‘head’, Abikuisms must be seen as the willed assertion of so-called Abiku attributes. The myth of Abiku represents the heights of potency possible in the self: a *mythic privilege* whose acquisitive powers equals the intensity of its pathology. Thus, though pathologised, the ‘effect’ of that mythic privilege is in fact the desired order. The notion of Abiku as “privileged, apart” (Soyinka 1981: 16) is enormously seductive because to *be* Abiku, or at least be perceived as having some connection to supernatural ‘privilege’, is to possess an awe-inspiring mythic access in the simultaneous accumulation of wealth and alleviation of suffering. On the evangelical level, it is a seduction coupled with Abiku mythic narrative spliced into the Pentecostal Evangelical ‘born-again’ idea of being ‘chosen’, that is the corresponding ability to bring to earth material abundance attributed to heaven, while simultaneously banishing Esu and Chaos long since simplified as Satan and Confusion respectively.

For an increasingly evangelical society that demonises its mythic histories and religious belief systems, the seduction here is one fraught with misconceptions and righteous agitations. The problem becomes how to wear one’s disapproval of *juju* and at the same time brandish one’s access to mythic potency. In Lagos, to astounding visual effects, pastors such as Helen Ukpabio, the Nollywood actress and producer¹¹ often include the ancestrally-chosen coterie of ‘Ogbanje, Abiku and mamiwata’ in their mission against ‘witches and principalities’. Meanwhile, as pastor-actress-exocist, Ukpabio never fails to instill a visible, palpable sense of her own personal power. For the reason that knowledge of Abiku lies at its most superficial, to be called ‘Ogbanje’ is to be accused of communicating with Satan, archenemy of our particularly fervent brand of evangelical born-again. That said, the ability to create palpable visual effects that wound people to one involves being in possession of special powers that go beyond the lukewarm attempts of Christianity into another space: a space that is mythic, ancestral, potent; a space that traverses heaven and earth, high and low – the Abiku space.

¹¹ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Ukpabio

Although the seduction principle attracts however, the ‘curse’ that Abiku metes out remains. Strange as it sounds, this becomes a possible explanation for why in Lagos in particular or Nigeria as a whole, the warped assumption that appropriation of Esu (Satan’s) Confusion and Trickery supposedly transforms into one’s ability to master circumstances of strife, hardships and suffering. As the *nowhereness* provided for in Abiku sets in on national, public proportions, the result is widespread religious and social exigencies to ‘conquer the devil within’ in frenzy of death deferment claims, where the individual’s *will* to defer death meted out by Esu is exponentially augmented as the mastering of Confusion and Trickery through no other than the model Abiku, Jesus Christ. Abiku co-opts Esu but the problem of present day Nigeria is the double-edged embodiment and demonisation of Esu for Jesus.

The suggestion here is that we have lost all understanding of Death; that what we have in its place is a new terror over death. Failure or inability to understand and reflect on *movement* as something other than material accumulation of travel and the commute is the corresponding failure to appreciate the disaster lurking in frenzied death deferment claims. So terrified are people of death in Lagos and across the country that everyone claims its deferment by personal connections, personal *juju* or, for the born-again, ‘*Jesus name*’.

If Esu, now Satan the devil, is strife, traffic jams, mistrusts and shouts of distress, Abikuisms are displays of unreasonable actions under the fronting of having overpowered death (conquered Satan). This is why in Lagos, a grown man shouts, chest palpitating, fronting as a conqueror of death to ask, *Do You Know Who I Am?* On a Lagos road every driver is a king in waiting. To be Nigerian is to have witnessed and know at heart, the frontings of death in the eyes of another; to ‘dispense’ death – the illusion, that is – is to have *Abikuisms*. Though tailored after Abiku, as forced ‘procurement’ of the lesser part of Abiku *will* governed by Esu, Abikuisms is obscured application of supposed mythic will. While on the positive side, Abikuisms is what props the countless number of Madame Kofos of Balogun Market as they respond to an increasingly capricious capitalist economy with shockproof smiles, it is Abikuisms that directs the refusal to stand back a little, to ease off the over-assertion of self. Abikuisms manifests in the merchants’ smiles as they do in the national attitude of ‘*push me, I push you*’.

Can we truly apply ancestral mysticisms such as Oyeku, Abiku, Esu, Olokun to actual movements of bodies and the fraught nature of relations known as *the (Nigerian) problem*? What is *Abikuisms* as opposed to *Abiku*? Why is the former clearly made problematic here? Firstly, as myths do, Abiku speaks to the existence of *a problem*. Secondly, any study of Ifa as it pertains to Abiku reveals that key to the mythic narrative of a two-fold manifestation of errant vagrancies and excessive individuality is that the problem identified is also the problem addressed. The prevalence of a worrying disintegration of borders addressed in the story (the myth) is also a system of self-correcting mechanisms of rituals of identification and ‘fettering’ (of the problem) contained within as the story itself. The *esé* that *the child who does not die but returns to road is road* suggests that *the subject is the story is the problem itself the resolution*. The myth of Abiku is the recognition of a problem as it is its own ‘arrest’ or fettering.

Conversely, Abikuisms is yet to attach to itself rituals of arrest and quell. Rather, Abikuisms operates on the distorted idea that the absence of limits to one’s actions is the fullest extent of one’s personal power. If Abikuisms has a mythogeography it would be as terrain of everyday terror, as a torrent of repeated application of force in which the abused body or system is exaggerated beyond its natural dynamics to a mangled state of confusion and the body-terrific. Here the identification of the problem cannot automatically effect self-correcting mechanisms within the recognition of the problem as problem. This is because distortion in Abikuisms is not critical. It is submissive to the established confusion and respects, as its ultimate aim, a hierarchy of connections operating on power assertions through terrific personal access. The result is the

ultimately passive assumption that duress is action and confusion, activity. If Abiku undermines the status quo, Abikuism is all affirmation, where warped notions of privilege and personal power overtake civility and nation building. When states of inaction and confusion are taken for activity and action, the middling space of human aggression and shared mutual abuse becomes, paradoxically, the way 'up' to peace of mind and freedom from worries.

In the essay, 'Climates of Art', Wole Soyinka calls for the diviner, the "creative hand" needed to "earth" the worrisome Abiku (Soyinka 1998: 258). What Soyinka believes must be earthed is Nigeria's unstable politics, which Soyinka treats as a manifestation of the vagrant Abiku. Thus, initiated by Soyinka perhaps, to date, the word Abiku is often used in popular and journalistic writings to refer to the problem of Nigeria's unstable politics. Yet, Soyinka and others speak as if the politics and politicking in a nation are completely foreign to the way of being of the people of that nation. *The problem* of Nigeria is not one of a recall to clever myth parallelisms, but rather a situation of direct mimic and unwitting embodiment of the pathological. Abikuism is wholly modern, current and in practice. It is a collection of gestures presumably in possession of the deferment of death, but which are in effect tragic embodiments; and nowhere is this demonstrated as in the carrying out of so-called political leadership duties.

Abiku of 'I' and the society of 'we'

Though chiefly formulated on the rather prevalent nostalgia of a pastoral, cordial Africa, the larger context of African philosophy may serve as a kind of measuring tool if we are to understand, not only the extent of *the problem* of present-day Nigeria in broader terms, but the interesting detour that the Abiku matrix presents. The Congolese philosopher, Tshiamalenga Ntumba coined a Lingala-based word, *Bisoité*, to describe, to paraphrase, an ontological way of seeing one's self in Africa. From the Lingala, *Biso* means 'us' or 'we' and *Bisoité* is, according to Ntumba, a social philosophy of 'usness' or 'weness' (Ntumba 1985: 83). In the article, 'Old Gods, New Worlds', Kwame Anthony Appiah explains that in (traditional) African societies, argumentative confrontation is discouraged and that by virtue of a communalism, the (traditional) African has a personal identity that is substantially based on 'group identity' (Appiah 1996: 223), or what Mbiti describes as 'I am because we are, and since we are, I am' (in Nyasani 1989). In other words, for the African, so absorbed is 'I' in the interiority of a fully resolved 'us', that the 'I' might not in fact exist, certainly not as an autonomous being having its own interiority, its own inner persuasions and desires.

In thinking about 'road desire' and *the problem*, we cannot help but consider that the sociality examined from Ntumba to Appiah is innocent of the changes in certain African cities; that perhaps something has been lost. Or should we simply accept that Nigeria is a case different from other African nations? On the other hand, in terms of Abiku movement and discontinuity – its excessive *will* against structures of authority, claims to the natural communalism of the African mind could only lead us to consider the possible tyranny woven into existing traditional praxis and the customary codes of conduct that support them. Like all ritual perversion, the very existence of the myth is a system of correction as instances of what in fact exists as problem. The concept of *road* in Abiku matrix must be seen not only as an act of conflict and discontent expressed within and against the system, but also as a process of address (to a problem), a wily system of control set in place by the community.

Meanwhile, the arguments being made for the apparently resolved nature of the 'I/We' of African sociality serves the need for a broader understanding of the role of Abiku. What the myth of Abiku reveals are deeper discontents wherein the relationship of 'I/We' in African sociality is dynamic and unresolved. Set on the *road*, the 'child' in Soyinka's Abiku utters 'I' in the first instance as a point of conflict to suggest that the concept of *road* is the problem of the unresolved 'I' in 'We'. In Soyinka's poem, the Abiku protagonist appears critically in the very

first word and first line with a declaration of its self-defining individuality, 'I am' (McCabe 2002: 45–74), its individuality an unsympathetic assertion that deters possibility of reconciliation with the family and society it taunts. It furthers its self-definition by exhibiting detachment from *settled place*, from 'weness' – from mother's womb, family, lineage and community – to declare in the seventh stanza:

*Night, and Abiku sucks the oil
From lamps. Mothers! I'll be the
Suppliant snake coiled on the doorstep
Yours the killing cry (Soyinka 1967)*

Soyinka's *Abiku*, like the myth itself, alerts us to the reality that the status of Abiku – the status of the individual – is an uneasy position and its relationship with 'usness' problematic not simply because there are occasional individuals 'selected' in a gift/curse dichotomy of being 'privileged, apart' (Soyinka 1981: 16) but rather deeper strains of existential discontent run the course of the larger society dismissed and unacknowledged. What the Abiku myth exposes is the existence of an opposition to what is being argued for and dreamed in the nostalgia of Time Past espoused by African philosophers. If the African is inherently communal and empathetic, the Abiku position is paradoxical: it manifests not symbiotic but critical positions, its tone is not empathetic but cruel. The tone of Soyinka's *Abiku* is cruelly antisocial. It has the impersonal cruelty of wayward godless spirits; it describes the displaced one who, in rejection of community, lives in a stranglehold of Oyeku's Death forces unable to arrive at a sense of 'home'.

Yet, in terms of the collective, the myth of Abiku maintains the system of constitutive law and order by appearing to heed the irrational ancestral space. This is the element that Abikuisms misses. The differences between the note of individuality and necessary 'selfishness'¹² provided for in the Abiku and the subdued, somber tone argued as the authentic African by African philosophers is indeed a shrill one. The texture of this note must be seen however, not only as possible response to the tyranny of lineage and the domestic home, but as well, the resolution meted out by the community since the identification of the problem is, in Abiku, the solution. An organising concept, Abiku *road* becomes a way to curtail larger displays of a way of being considered unproductive and death-inclined. The entire Abiku matrix is in short an elaborate design drawn from the actual body of the Abiku child or person: chosen to expose tensions in the traditional idea of the African 'self' and 'home', that body performs for all, the need for stability within the constitutive, procreative order of things. Here, the distortions created by hybridity and difference are exorcised and placated through the pathologised bodies of the 'identified' mythic vagrants who *must move between places*.

The Abiku individual must examine his or her own existence as a consequence of his or her own actions and failures. This is indeed the kind of corruption that *road* invites. But more importantly for the collective, that 'corruption' is also the collective cleansing that the Abiku, by performing its *road*, provides for the community. An individuality opposed to the essential 'communocratic'¹³ society (of fixed place and fixed address of blood lineage and of group), the Abiku 'I' roams the associative anti-social collective of friends in heaven in opposition to the hierarchical rule of family and place. As 'thief of heaven'¹⁴ and as spatial vagrant opposed to the procreative wishes of family and normative order of society, the Abiku is the furtive loner, caught in a perennial state of never quite arriving.

But the community has had its way, naming and arresting and pathologising. While Nyasani provides that 'the individual exists also' (Nyasani 1989:15) there is indeed a preferred consensus across the continent that the African in his/her uncorrupted element exists in a *conflict-free* state of selflessness with others – a state of unbroken filial obligations and unquestioned fulfillment

12 Quoting Ifa babalawo Eleibuibon, the awise of Oshogbo during a personal conversation, Oshogbo 2004.

13 Sekou Touré (1959) *Présence Africaine*. Nos. 24 and 25,

14 Ifa babalawo's description of abiku.

– of customary duties. In the case of Abiku rituals, through the family the community sees itself as victim to a cruel punishment meted out by ancestral forces evident in the unblinking eyes of a child born to its despairing mother. Guided by ancestral forces, the Abiku child speaks the cruel note of refusal. However, the fettering of that methodically cruel note of refusal so concentrated in the Abiku, is set as example to curtail latent strains of the pathology in others.

Undoing Abikuisms: how not to miss ‘road’

Firstly, if the predominant attitudes in Nigeria stand diametrically opposed to the note of empathy and stability that Ntumba and Appiah find necessary to explain, it would be unimaginative to simply dismiss the contrary position in Nigerian towns and cities as strictly determined by endemic socio-economic factors. Nigeria is, according to Soyinka, a nation that suffers from ‘institutionalised politics of violence, manipulation, and disrespect for the law’.¹⁵ Following Soyinka, the idea of ‘Abiku jinx’ of Nigeria is widely applied in the popular imagination as what underscores ‘the problem’ of Nigeria. This so-called ‘Abiku jinx’ of Nigeria primarily focuses on grievous complaints about the chronic lack of basic infrastructure, such as water and electricity, and the instability of the government.

What Soyinka and popular culture fail to admit is the Abikuisms of the Nigerian psyche. A nation, its governments and infrastructures (or lack thereof), cannot be completely independent of the spirit – whether good or bad – of its people. Nor can it be devoid of possible mythic undercurrents running the collective psyche handed down from ancestral pasts. It serves no one if we continue to act as if Nigeria, the people, began in 1960 (or January 1 1901, being the start of its official colonisation by a foreign military and trading force). There are myriad diverse, possible, mythic areas to plumb. The myth of Abiku is deeply imprinted in the collective imaginative. Seduction and imprint earns prevalence. If Abiku or Ogbanje continues to be indentified as ‘actual persons’ possessed by ancestral errant-spirits, it is because of the continued prevalence of errancies and anomalies in the larger society. The myth of the ancestral vagrant has been retained because the problem, in all its lesser terror and ready seduction, remains. Further reaches and dynamics of Abiku mysteries must be reconsidered, but the myth is neither understood nor appreciated.

Nigeria manifests inchoate errancies of disorganisation and frenetic social, political, economic and personal relations directed by the excessive ‘I’. Although this ‘I’ has its advantages in the lives of a people with much to face, the logic of Abikuisms, its rationale in simultaneous demonisation and fear of death and its concomitant desire to take on the face of death – supports an alarming attitude of permission and claim. As the artificial embodiment of an unnecessary problem where original solutions may not hold, Abikuisms is an affliction, whose only release is in the group emotionalism of disorganisation and violence, manipulation and disrespect, which, as Soyinka puts it, has been ‘institutionalised’. But we fail to ask, why? Meanwhile, the roaring present continues where no questions are asked; a roaring present of sheer survival and hardships in the lives of a people embroiled in heartbreaking mutual mistreatment and mutual disregard for common human dignity.

Yet, even as the myth is revealed here as ultimately a tool for the continued normative order of things, Abiku is also organised on the idea of a *road* necessary to the larger scheme of Death as Life: the possibility of personal growth beyond vapid materialism. This is evidenced in the Odus if we only listen, not to the babalawos or popular wisdom, but to the texts, the deeper reaches of what the organising spirit of certain age-old myths attempt to offer us. In a society supposedly based on the homogeneity of will and continuity of hierarchy and the status quo, Abiku *road* is a declaration of difference and death and something in the ancestral supports this. The family/society/law understands death as a diagnosis of worrisome individuality, but from the perspective of the individual, the self seeks Death as ‘I’ – as the fulfillment of existence – in

15 <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Soyinka:+Obasanjo+and+me+%3B+Control+and+Prof+Wole+Soyinka+are...-a0171687366>

the unfettering of the spirit at the crossroads of self-knowledge; the beauty and the terror of knowing something of emptiness, that certain self-revelation that, after all the heaving, all the pain and suffering of humans, there is no point other than the point of a return to dust.

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