

*The 'Abiku-Soul' Regurgitation in
Cyprain Ekwensi's Iska Narrative*

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Introduction

The novel *Iska* validates the measure of nationalist coverage in Ekwensi's creative works, sustaining the author's inclination to (re)presenting significant subject matters in the epochs of the development of Nigerian/African fiction. After his novella *When Love Whispers* was published, Ekwensi's *People of the City* had come, projecting the smooth transition from the era of Onitsha Market literature to that of the immediate post-colonial writings. With the intractable emergence of urban influences

on African morality, Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana* and its follow up *Jagua Nana's Daughter* portray measures of vulgarity implicating the wave of sudden city life. Nonetheless, with his picaresque *Survive the Peace*, and the novel *Divided We Stand*, Ekwensi had made such remarkable contribution to the literatures of the Nigeria-Biafra War of 1967 to 1970, which variously implicated the colonial experience.

Ekwensi's characterization, setting and subject matter have always been made to justify a measurable spread across the Nigerian geographical space. The *Iska* narrative which begins in Kaduna as the suggested capital of Northern Nigeria, relates this story of an Igbo girl that was born in the north, who moves back home to the East at the death of her father and then also, after the news of her Fulani-born husband's demise, chooses to relocate to Lagos. In so doing, the protagonist is made to journey across the three major regions of Nigeria bearing the *abiku* death warrant. In regurgitating *Abiku* as myth, the protagonist Filia is superficially invested with the *Abiku* 'soul'. Ekwensi employs such symbolic hypallage by which the 'soul' of *Abiku* is made to migrate from the body of Filia into the Nigerian nation-state. Ekwensi elects an Hausa-word title, *Iska*, with an Igbo-girl protagonist, Filia Enu who is saddled with a 'soul', termed in Yoruba as *Abiku*. It is in this configuration that this depiction obtains the required spread within the Nigerian society. The metaphysical surmise

our grandma might haply inhabit a bird” (Shakespeare 2010, 357). Here, Shakespeare implicates the Pythagorean philosophy not just as one unique perspective to the ‘death/soul’ inquisition, but also in the circumstance that Malvolio’s unbecoming and lunatic-seeming disposition was made more sarcastic. Jerry Obi-Okogbuo identifies how the ethical theory of Pythagoras became a derivation from the Greek mystery and morality consciousness known as ‘orphism’. Obi-Okogbuo situates ‘orphism’ within the religiosity that pertained stringently to, “metempsychosis (i.e. reincarnation or transmigration of souls or rebirth of the soul in other bodies)” (2011, 139).

Christopher Nwodo cites Aristotle in theorizing the ‘soul’ as, “non-material, non-perishable substance that forms part of the human being” (2004, 179). The literary impetus of the Abiku ‘soul’ explored in *Iska* connects with the separate ‘*Abiku*’ poems’ by both Wole Soyinka and John Pepper Clark (who later preferred to be called Clark-Bekederemo). Their submissions which first appeared in *Black Orpheus 10* at the very dawn of Nigeria’s postcolony was later published in an anthology, *A Selection of African Poetry*, edited by Kojo Senanu and Theo Vincent. In an annotation, Senanu and Vincent submit a broader space by which Abiku is implicated as, “Yoruba word for a child born to die young and to be re-born by the same woman over and over and again. Among the Igbo such a child is known as ogbanje and among

the Akan (Ghana) as *kosama*.” (Clark 1988, 205). Chinelo Eze’s appraisal of *Abiku* also provides the names in other Nigerian cultural domains—in Efik as *Mfumfum* and in Edo as *Igbakhun*.

In each instance of a parallel rendition of ‘*Abiku*’ by Clark and Soyinka, there is usually an air that the personas, the mother and supposedly the daughter respectively, are engaged in a dialogue. The persona in Soyinka’s poem who is the *abiku*-child boasts of certain invincibility against the magical powers derivable in sacrificial objects—yams, goats, cowries, ash, palmoil, etc. These items for sacrifice were contrived to frustrate the *Abiku*-child’s repeated birth, death and re-birth. Soyinka’s persona, the *Abiku*-child proclaims: “In vain your bangles cast/
Charmed circles at my feet/
I am abiku calling for the first and the repeated time/
must I weep for goats and cowries/
For palmoil and sprinkled ash...”. (Soyinka 1988, 189). On the other hand, J.P. Clark elects the *Abiku*-mother as persona in his own ‘*Abiku*’ poem. It is the *Abiku*-mother who is made to passionately plead with the *Abiku*-child to stay and not to die any longer: “Then step in, step in and stay/
For her body is tired”. (Clark 1988, 204-205). Yet, the mood in both verses by Soyinka and Clark exudes the pervading aura of the implacable death-harbinger, the *Abiku*-spirit.

Douglas McCabe gives exposition to the three ways by which the *Ifa Babalawo*, known in Yoruba as “fa-

ther-of-secrets” (2002, 46), cages the *Abiku* spirit: by blocking the path to its mother’s womb or the road to its death; by revealing its secret and making its evil identity known, and lastly by disguising the *Abiku*-child so that when her evil peers (egbe) come to take her away, the child’s body becomes unidentifiable. The acquaintance with the early psychoanalysts, especially Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung implicate a resort to the speculative domains that integrate religion, philosophy and mythology into the metaphysical reality—a reality that undertakes the search for solutions with a certain shift from the empirical science procedure. Ann Dobie recognizes how Freud as neurologist in the nineteenth century “was troubled that he could not account for the complaints of many of his patients by citing any physical cause” (51). Alex Asakitikpi’s study of *Ogbanje* reveals, “how the lives of children below five hang precariously on this cultural belief” (2008). Resulting from his study of *Ogbanje*, Asakitikpi affirms that the mortality rate of children was still high in spite of the government’s measures against childhood diseases in Nigeria.

Parallelism: The Realms of the Abiku World

The symbolism which Ekwensi overlays in *Iska* appears inclined to M.A.R. Habib’s analogy that, “the psychoanalyst creates a coherent narrative about the patient within which the traumatic event can take its place and be understood” (234). Considering also that Ekwensi who

had been trained as Pharmacist became more involved in writing, it is imperative to interrogate the design as well as objective for which the author portrays the *Abiku* character in *Iska*, adopting its 'soul' as apposite symbolism for appreciating the ailments in the 'body' of Nigerian nationhood. But, it seems also that the problem of forestalling the repeated occurrence of the *Abiku*-child's death assumes a milder temperament than the 'soul' becomes in the 'body' of a nation with such myriad of ethnic and political sentiments. Ekwensi's option is considered to parallel the second approach which McCabe associates with the *Ifa Babalawo* – 'revealing its secret and making its evil identity known'.

The metaphysical reality in *Iska* yields another epistemological impetus to what obtained when the pioneers of African literature grappled with all of what came under the umbrella of 'the big issues of Africa'. In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* for instance, one may elicit two different suggestions to the health challenges that were associated with the fits of Ezinma's *Ogbanje* character. The first is the physical manifestation of *iba* (malaria), for which Okonkwo's knowledge of herbal medicine, a certain instinct of science, instructed his search for the required herbs in the bush (Achebe 1958, 60). The other, which is rather metaphysical, effuses in the search for where Ezinma's *Iyi uwa*, the speculated totem of her avowed destiny in the spiritual world, was buried. The narrative voice in *Things fall Apart* is recalled

thus: “Everyone knew then that she would live because her bond with the world of *ogbanje* had been broken” (Achebe 1958, 64). With regard to science, Christopher Nwodo observes that, “The non-Western peoples, Africans in particular, are made to feel and think that man’s marvellous achievements in science and technology are specifically Western and not human in general. . .” (2004, 312). Interestingly, the urge to respond to these ‘big issues’ in a ‘tit for tat’ attitude to Western derogation had to give way to the more (pro)active approach, that is, precluding their debilitating brunt on African art.

Unfortunately, the works of Amos Tutuola—*My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954) and *The Palmwine Drinkard* (1961), which were among Africa’s earliest published narratives with magical realist tint, met with such negative criticisms as would have dissuaded the efforts of other writers in same inspiration. While the shoddy language of literary expression became the crux of the challenge against Tutuola, Achebe says: “I still believe that Tutuola’s critics in Nigeria missed the point. The beauty of his tales was fantastical expression of a form of indigenous Yoruba, therefore African, magical realism” (IWAC, 113) Perhaps, Achebe supposes that the occurrence of Tutuola’s bizarre language was requisite in portraying the giddiness of the ‘palm wine drinkard’ himself as protagonist. It could also be seen to approximate the indistinct speech patterns in the ‘bush of ghost’ locale, where the spirit characters (some multi-headed), are said to speak mostly through their noses.

But, the suggestions above may not have quashed the arguments of the African critics who contended that works of African literature, not written in African languages, were simply void of identity. Manifestly, Obiajunwa Wali's title, "The Dead End of African Literature?", was as lethal as his thesis statement that reads: "PERHAPS THE MOST IMPORTANT ACHIEVEMENT of the last conference of African writers of English Expression held in Makerere College, Kampala, in June 1962, is that African literature as now defined and understood, leads nowhere" (2007, 281). Wali's paper, represented a prominent logic by advocates of the native usage in African literature.

Achebe who looked beyond the language question also saw in the contents of magical realism, a possible adoption of their symbolisms. In Achebe's words, "Crossroads possess a certain dangerous potency. Anyone born there must wrestle with their multiheaded spirits and return to his or her people with the boon of prophetic vision, or accept, as I have, life's interminable mysteries" (TWAC, 8). Esiaba Irobi considers that theorizing culture is, "an attempt to make sense of how and why we create or make things, structures, ideas, institutions, art in a given society. Its primary functions are to encode,..." (2009, 10). Isidore Diala recognizes how the structuring of such theories have yielded "distinctive Nigerian examples of hybridity arising from conflating myths of only approximate relationships and cultural models"(2014, 196). To consider that Diala became fas-

cinated with Irobi's efforts in regenerating the creative processes in society is justified in the emerging writers of 'Afrofuturism' writers – Nnedi Okorafor, Deji Bryce Olukotun, Tochi Onyebuchi and more.

Bode Sowande considers *Abiku* as a spirit that fragments its soul, stringing it in many human lives across many centuries. With each fragment of re-presenting the *Abiku* 'soul', clearer insights of its character emerge, just as other matters in magical realism are variously expressed. Ikenna Kamalu and Ebuka Igwebuike engage a more expansive discourse of the magical realist perspectives in Ben Okri's (*Abiku*) trilogy: *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches*. Kamalu and Igwebuike cite the three vital paradigms provided for the classification of narrators by Bradford (1997): the extradiegetic narrator, autodiegetic narrator and intradiegetic narrator. Their observation is that Okri underscores the relevance of 'focalization', creating the preferred space with either measures of the distance or the closeness between his varied narrators and the reader. Kamalu and Igwebuike conclude that Okri's "unwillingness to surrender the narrative space to Azaro" (2009, 165), constitutes a weakness in his style. The *Abiku*-persona at the opening lines of Soyinka's poem is not just boastful but also intuitive in communicating its identity. The authority of the spirit-world is seen in the perspective of Soyinka's persona, to superimpose itself above the human world.

Assuming the role of the narrator, Filia reveals how her psychological disposition straddles two worlds, the 'conscious' and 'unconscious'. The narrative voice says: "my mother took me to see a fortune-teller. I was about five then. I remember. Do you know what he said? He did not mince words. You will die young. That's what he said. I cannot believe it, but sometimes I see signs that it may be true..." (2007, 35). As Filia slickly takes up the fortune-teller's voice, it is to reveal her own personality. Here, Ekwensi provokes a connection between a human-world (socio-cultural) identity for his protagonist and a more intricate posture of the (super)natural that becomes somewhat intangible. Sowande affirmation regarding Okri's *The Famished Road* is that "The gods have their pantheon, the dead their world, the unborn their void, the spirits of all the elements the space which they share or contest with humans" (2007, 73). Filia is simply made to reveal how she attains the realization that her human identity as is subordinated by a more forceful and even malicious investment of the *abiku* 'soul'. Deeper still, Filia grows to discover how her entire life and existence are constrained in a world where the virtues of humanism are also subordinated. It becomes pertinent to appreciate how the transmigration of the 'soul' into the 'body' of Filia Enu as protagonist of *Iska* evokes pertinent symbols that also connect with the myths in the Soyinka/Clark 'Abiku' poems.

Ekwensi's choice of *Iska* as title, is not a mere tangential recollection of the word 'wind'(2007, 5), which the enchantments of the mallam-fortune teller associates with the protagonist, Filia Enu, but an evocation of a peculiar world of alternating reality. In Filia's mother's voice, much more is revealed:

My daughter...Filia...I do not understand...Her actions fill me with fear...I tell you, she acts in a way to confuse anyone. Ever since she was born it's been like that, Delicate. Yet having her own way. Lovable...her father always let her be: He said she is an Ogbanje... one who comes to this world again and again. Her life is like wind"(Ekwensi 2007, 210).

These revelations of Filia's character which situate her spirit-human identity, also realize the already obliterated boundaries in the geographical space between the spirit and human worlds. It therefore seems as though the reference to Filia's Igbo village Ogbu, and the northern city of Kaduna obtain the human world geographical space while the nomenclature 'Nigeria' becomes the invisible spirit world, indeed a world whose humanity has been invalidated by the more death-borne tribal sentiments. These are the same tribal sentiments that led to the death of Dan Kaybi, Filia's illegitimately married husband, Filia's brother and also Filia's father, Uzodike Enu.

The reader learns from Filia that Dan Kaybi does not really belong to the world of the northerners: “Dan Kaybi does not care where you come from! To him, you are a man and he judges you by what you do, not what part of Africa you come from. He does not care a thing about tribe,” (Ekwensi 2007, 66). It is the same with Filia’s father, Uzodike. In Filia’s memory, it is revealed that, “Papa left here over thirty years ago and settled in Northern Nigeria among Hausas and Fulanis and Kanuris. He brought us up to like people, not their tribes!”(Ekwensi 2007, 66). Both men who are re-presented as belonging to Filia’s ‘choice’ world, are made to possess the enchanting kind of spirit which their generation lacks. Filia’s mother observes about Filia that, “some of the things you do and say make me think that you have more wisdom than your age entitles you to have”(Ekwensi 2007, 137). And about Dan Kaybi whose father expressed similar stupefaction, Filia says: “He came from Nupe and Fulani parents but he thought in terms of the humanity of the nation. He listens to the other man’s opinion and judged every issue on its own particular merits”(Ekwensi 2007, 77).

Intriguingly too, Ekwensi configures a symbolic relationship between Filia and the three characters whose deaths come off the inhuman sentiments associated with tribal obsession in the country. While it is only through a flashback that the death incidences of Filia’s father and her brother are recounted, the mystery in Uzodike’s death is

explained as a machination of the human world where evil prevails. The death of her husband Dan Kaybi comes in Nida's report: "He went to drink in his bar... The service girl went to take the order, the Hausa boys refused, called her back. The Ibo boys got angry... That was it. Clash! Dan Kaybi—you know him for that—tried to intervene. They knifed him"(Ekwensi 2007, 68-69). Nida's story certifies the gloomy mood of the postcolony expressed in the feelings of tribal superiority. The voice of Dan Kaybi's father reads that, "You are my son; and we come from Nupe land. Our kingdom was founded by Tsoede. We are masters of the River Niger"(Ekwensi 2007, 31). On the other hand, there is the tribal sentiment expressed by the Igbo: "At that time, if an Ibo man went to Northern Nigeria to live, the Ibos counted him as a lost man. To the people of Ogabu your father was a dead man"(Ekwensi 2007, 53). Iska resonates the cumulative views that have continued to raise questions on the survival of Nigeria's nationhood, as it is with the survival of the Abiku-child.

Ekwensi portrays how the *Abiku* character is often constrained within the feminine 'body' and how the fury with which it beckons on its 'soul' also implicates a certain regard for (wo)manhood. Without doubt, the *Ogbanje* spirit as known among the Igbo is hardly ever given a masculine personality. In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Ezinma suffers *Ogbanje* fits while it is Chielo the priestess that exorcises her malevolent spirit. Catherine Bick-

nell says: “When Chielo is speaking for the Oracle of the Hills and Caves, there is no male in the community, no matter what his status, who can dispute her authority” (267). In *Iska*, Ekwensi succeeds in accomplishing a prominent design that is adjudged to enforce the survival of the African writer’s art by presenting the femininity of Filia in a more adorable stance than the Jagua Nanas, subscribing to the era in the wake of African feminism when the view of (wo)manity began to acquire a more endearing outlook among male writers. For instance, in Achebe’s last novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*, there is a marked shift in what had been conceived as the disparaging instinct of male-narratives against women.

Grace Okereke affirming about Beatrice in *Anthills*, says that, “She resents the male assumption that woman is man’s property to be ordered about as tradition would have us believe” (1996, 306). Ekwensi’s proclivity to re-shaping the prostitute-image in his earlier works is substantiated in the ostensibly delightful kind of stubbornness that Filia represents. It is such image of a woman, unlike the prostitute, who prefers to guard her honour and personality by rejecting the obsessions of material possessions. Filia condemns Nafotim’s gifts in the manner that Soyinka’s *Abiku*-child denounces the potency in the items of sacrifice—goats and cowries. She says: “I like men who are elegant and civilized, not just those who think their money can buy me” (Ekwensi 2007, 65). And, in another instance Filia recounts, “He

called there ten times a day, making all kinds of attractive offers, leaving behind gifts of money and food” (Ekwensi 2007, 70). Another serious point is raised by Filia’s friend Remi: “A girl may have a lot of men friends when she is well and beautiful. But when she is very ill, it’s different” (Ekwensi 2007, 115). Speaking to her mother, Filia emphasizes that, “I hate to have men hang over me like flies... just because they want something out of me and nothing else. Something to play with and forget...” (Ekwensi 2007, 161). Filia’s rejection of the gifts recollects the voice of *Abiku* in Soyinka’s line: “in vain your bangles cast...” (Ekwensi 2007, 189).

The manner in which Ekwensi undertakes an emasculation of the male characters, justifies how the potency of the *Ogbanje/Abiku* ‘spirit’ could unleash impotency on its victims. Without an earlier indication in the novel that Gadson Salifas was impotent until the encounter with Filia, Ekwensi proverbially observes: “He could not rise to meet the occasion. He was like a hungry man who is offered the choicest dish and suddenly his appetite vanishes” (Ekwensi 2007, 124). Gadson confesses that he hadn’t experienced such in his manhood before. In the same vein, the *Ogbanje/Abiku* spirit which supposedly pushes Abigel, Gadson’s wife to run to the beach-side prophet, might as well be held responsible for the eventual death of the prophet, Piska Dabra. The mystery in Dabra’s death gives another clue to a more terrible emasculation of Piska Dabra, along with his religion. This

sustains the *Ogbanje/Abiku* authority in a compelling tenacity that frees the 'soul' from being caged in the world of man's inhumanity to man.

Ekwensi is inclined to portraying Dabra's religion in the enforcements of religious promiscuity. It comes as a philosophy which ridicules acts where the world of reality is abandoned for vain fantasies. The politician Nafotim, whose gifts Filia had rejected, was unrelenting. He kept persuading her into illicit affairs even with the gift of a rented apartment. That Filia threw away the key to that apartment into the lagoon is symbolic of the *Abiku* obstinacy. While there are instances of brazen extra-marital affairs in offices involving the boss and his secretary and the type in clubs Ekwensi yields Remi this derisive tone: "Just imagine! They come with their husbands but they don't know their rivals. Half of the men here I have seen naked"(Ekwensi 2007, 98). It is even so with Abigel, who refuses to return to her own family as she tastes this fruit of promiscuity. It was imperative to free Abigel from sustaining the posture of an apostle of Dabra's promiscuity: "In no time at all Abigel had merged with the anonymous hordes, the hundreds of thousands of women who have left their husbands...(Ekwensi 2007, 158). Thus, this represents another kind of divorce, analogous indeed to cases of *Abiku* children who at the point of their death, are said to prefer the 'other' world – the spirit world from where the soul is believed to have migrated.

Just as the *Abiku/Ogbanje* child is known to be enchantingly accepted within their families of birth, Ekwensi's protagonist Filia Enu obtains such posture. After a period of her sojourn in Lagos, it seemed that Filia was to be overwhelmed in a flagrant embrace of the same kind of city life into which Jagua Nana and her daughters whom Nwahunanya regarded, were inundated. But then, Filia proves to be different from Nwahunanya's observation about women, "who choose prostitution consciously to meet family obligations... to fend for themselves and their families"(Ekwensi 2007, 347). Even in her own depravity, Abigel Salifas is not exactly placed in such ignoble image of the 'sex worker'.

Rather, it seems that the author permits Filia to blossom in her beauty, as a model, loved and cherished by all who are acquainted with her, so that the sorrows at her death become more emotive. Her character recalls the line in Soyinka's poem 'Abiku': "The ripest fruit was saddest" (190). Just before Filia's death, Dapo Ladele and Nafotim demonstrate how much her beauty needed to be acclaimed. Dapo's grief is captured thus: "He moaned and groaned and was no longer man enough to take it. He thought of all the unfulfilled promises her life held out and he wanted to kill himself (Ekwensi 2007, 216). That Filia, bearing the *Abiku* 'soul', eventually dies after growing up into maturity, may also be made to suggest that the spirit of death, that could terminate the existence of a human being or a nation, may indeed be more enduring than it is supposed to be.

Conclusion

This work has examined how Ekwensi characterizes the nationhood of Nigeria in the likeness of the *Abiku*-child. With the socio-political upheavals in Nigeria, portrayed in the evil machinations of the *Abiku* spirit, it is considered as an ironical figuration of hypallage. It is one in which the disunited Nigeria becomes as formless as the invisible spirit world. Also, the agents of death represent the *Abiku* 'spirit' operating in the provinces chosen as the Iska locale. With the said substitution, Filia's husband Dan Kaybi and her father Uzodike Enu, are invested with peculiarly beautiful character. It figures the physical *Abiku* appearance for which the parents and relatives of the *Abiku*-child continue to make sacrifices to ensure it does not die even in spite of recognizing the evil 'soul' it bears. That the death of Uzodike and Dan Kaybi happen early in the novel and that of Filia occurs later, is most crucial in the symbolism that the author employs. Not only does he portray death as the agent that divorces the 'soul' from the 'body', his narrative substantiates the incongruity of touted national unity and the lack of an enabling environment for sustained nationhood. The impossibility of remediating the relationship between Dapo and his estranged wife, Barbara is cast thus: "It would never work. Both of them were too temperamentally unsuited to each other to make a success of it" (Ekwensi 2007, 221).

As it occurs in the novel, the several unsuited temperaments indict the structuring of the socio-political system in Nigeria's postcolony. These result from the reverse patriotism/statesmanship of the political class who happen to patronize the kind of rascality that thrives in a nation where the security system is either deliberately rendered non-functional or compelled to malfunction. In *Iska*, the often shift in the narrative perspective to the first person point of view, tilting more to a monologue than a dialogue, explains how Ekwensi purposefully harmonizes the spirit-to-human communication in the revelations that effuse. Dapo's monologue closes the narrative thus: "...thinking of Filia Enu, her plight, his total personal loss in every direction... and bound up with it all was his love for Nigeria, his belief in Africa, his frustration with the endless dissipation all about him of useful energy, talent and human power" (Ekwensi 2007, 222). Indeed, Dapo's reference to Filia's 'plight' implicates the *Abiku* 'soul' which is pertinently made to symbolize the ailing nationhood of Nigeria.

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