

An Ethnopoetic Interpretation of Ritual Acts in

Soyinka's Abiku Poem

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Abstract

Soyinka's "Abiku" is a significant counterpoint to that of Clark-Bekederemo in that, it emphasises the unbreakable nature of reincarnation while arguing that all efforts and rituals deployed in breaking the reincarnation cycle are futile. Language is integral to the construction of meaning. Equally true is the role of literary semiotics in the interpretation of sign systems in the entire process. This essay, integrative and analytic, reads rituals in Soyinka's "Abiku" in order to convey the various meanings inscribed by the ritual signs in the poem. It also establishes the main thrust of the poet's argument as it concerns the artistic deployment of ritual patterns and their significance. The essay employs textual analytic method to examine how the various ritual experiences fail to break the reincarnation cycle. The ethnopoetic

theory is used to read the poem and tease out the paradoxical implications inherent in the pervasive cycles of reincarnation and ritual acts performed to stop it. The essay identifies five main ritual acts employed by the Abiku parents to avert further reincarnations. It therefore argues that these ritual actions are ineffective in averting the above aim. The essay concludes that ritual fortification, ritual sacrifice, ritual burial, ritual identification and libations are vain methods of breaking reincarnation cycles in African worldview.

Keywords: Reincarnation, Cycle, Ritual, Signification, Fortification and Libation.

Introduction

The subject of reincarnation in modern Africa literature, as entrenched in mythology and culture, constitutes and shapes the belief systems of Africans especially their conception of the world. Poetry, being one of the genres of literature, has often been used to present the manifold nature of reincarnation. John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo blazed the trail in this respect with the poet's appeal to the spirit child to show mercy on the parents in the collection *A Reed in the Tide* (1965). It is equally intriguing to note in Soyinka's poem with similar title dwelling on reincarnation myth, but with a different focus entirely as published in *Idanre and Other Poems* (1968). Soyinka's Abiku Poem, like Clark-Bekederemo's version, is argumentative in content and structure. While the argument is conducted by the poet persona in the former, it is the Abiku child who speaks throughout in the latter. The essential argument is centred round the method of appeal which the Abiku parents use in persuading the Abiku child. The child speaker looks at the placatory rituals offered by the parents and denounces them as ineffective in breaking the reincarnation cycle. Thus the main thrust of Soyinka's poem is the futility in stopping the reincarnation cycle.

Ritual studies has expanded beyond religion and anthropology to other fields like humanities, pragmatics, management sciences, sociology, psychology and many more, giving it an interdisciplinary status. For this reason, the definition has evolved over time in line with its interdisciplinary manifestations. From the perspective of religion, ritual, according to Holy Nelson-Becker and Kimberly Gangster, repetition and time are the two defining qualities of ritual because the action thus performed conforms to a rhythm, this time, of repetition and sequences which is time bound [154]. Additionally, they explain that ritual encompasses tangible symbols, rites or actions. In most cases the rite and symbols have connotative significance as they express certain values, norms and culture. Qiao Wu defines ritual as patterns that must be observed in the expression of words and action or art [28]. Qian Liu and Hiasying Wei explain that rituals involve symbolic events, that is, events interpretable from their cultural relevance to society [25]. Inayat Ali explains that rituals involve the enactment of a cultural belief or value through a pattern of repeated actions [18]. Martin Hoondert draws attention to the formal, the stylized and the spatio-temporal elements that constitute the enactment of rituals [iv].

Literary semiotics is one of the interdisciplinary links to semiotics. It emphasizes the interpretation of literary texts by paying attention to the various meanings associated with the sign systems deployed in the text. Necat Kumral explains that semiotics involves the active engagement with the text because the reader can interact with the text on several levels of language and derive many significance from the text [32]. Additionally, Stephanie Walsh Mathews posits that the semiotic signs employed in the texts always have connections with meaning structures in the cultural and traditional domains of the society on which the text in question is based [33].

This essay employs ethnopoetics to read the different ways the poet exposes the futility in breaking the reincarnation cycle in

the chosen poem. Ethnopoetics in the words of Ezekiel Alembi, refers to “the aesthetic and poetic structuring of oral art” [19]. Viewed from this angle, it is used in reading works which contain oral poetics whether in oral or written discourses. Also, it is applied to texts when the aesthetics and structure of orature are being studied. Dell Hymes and Dennis Tedlock are two notable proponents of this theory. Others include Pertti Antonen and Lauri Harvilahti. Two schools of thought have piloted the theory: the American and the Finnish respectively. John Miles Foley also provides another insight into the cultural approach to ethnopoetics. Foley asserts that the theory requires the incorporation of cultured tradition which are also noted with the performer and audience. Foley emphasises the context of performance as the primary domain of meaning. He warns against disregarding the domain of performance as it has the capacity to eliminate the dependence on the denotative meaning rather than the connotative (9). Also inferable from Foley's argument is that metonymy and utterance in the text can only convey meaning when the auditor is present at the arena where the verbal art is performed. In the context of this essay, Hervilahti's methodological model is applied because it takes into consideration the implication of culture in understanding the Abiku myth which underpins Soyinka's perspective on reincarnation.

Repudiation of Ritual Acts

Soyinka's Abiku poem repudiates ritual acts carried out to break the reincarnation cycle. In the poet's view, all such acts are “vain”, meaning impotent, ineffective and profitless. Five main ritual acts are explored in this section in order to show how the poet repudiates them. These acts include ritual fortification, ritual sacrifice, ritual identification, ritual burial and ritual libation.

The poem opens with a firm repudiation of ritual fortification, done with the intention of breaking the reincarnation

cycle:

In vain your bangles cast
Charmed circles at my feet
I am Abiku, calling for the first
And the repeated time. (IOP, 28)

In strict ethnopoetic sense, the cultural context of this poem is an asset as it enriches the interpretation of words and objects. For example, words like “cast” and “circles” are symbolic, just as “bangles” and “charms” are culturally circumscribed. These objects are believed to be potent weapons of interrupting the mischievous cycle of birth, death, burial and rebirth, otherwise described as reincarnation. The act of casting bangles and releasing circles of charms represent the act of spiritual fortification to which the newly born Abiku child is subjected in order to hinder him from tormenting the family. The Yoruba cultural mythology believes that such a fortification will help the child stay alive or defy the powers that set the reincarnation in motion. Hence, the cultural context of this poem is helpful in arriving at an accurate interpretation of the various ritual acts in the poem.

The “bangles” are tangible chains that are expected to bind the Abiku child to the family. It however evokes a spiritual reality in that it suggests a spiritual chain or power that ties the hands and feet of the child. In other words, these bangles are the powers that are believed to have potency and expected to hold the child in a kind of restriction. Although the parents, like several members of the Yoruba society, believe in the efficacy of these bangles to keep the Abiku from tormenting the family, however, the child speaker does not think so. He actually rebukes their effrontery and derides their effort at binding him. The child speaker's voice is strident in the condemnation of ritual activities connected with stopping the Abiku child from reincarnating. This vision is sustained as the speaker derides the ritual of casting “bangles” and “charmed circles” at the feet of the Abiku child. The significance of this ritual

act pales into irrelevance when the child speaker describes all such casting of bangles as “vain”. Thus, the child persona presents the picture of an impetuous power which is capable of overthrowing any effort at defying the re-incarnation process. This fact is reinforced by the child speaker's envisaging of the reincarnation as an inviolable experience within the traditional African religion and tradition.

The above is contextualised by the following lines: “I am Abiku, calling for the first/and the repeated time”. The word, “calling” is a euphemism for birth and “the repeated time”, evokes several other inter-related experiences of death, burial and rebirth. The child speaker seems to be mocking his parents who fortify him in order to break the reincarnation cycle to desist from it, noting that such an effort will not yield any positive result. As for the speaker, he will always be reborn to outlive his unvanquishable existence and power over all schemes contrived to fortify the Abiku. That the child has been calling on the same household shows that reincarnation is well and alive and it explains the child's invincibility as well as confirms the vanity in breaking the vicious cycle of birth, death, burial and rebirth.

The repudiation flows from the exultant language of the poem anchored on the tone of defiance and self-assurance. The choice of words, especially “vain”, operates on a symbolic level. Even though the speaker has in mind the ineffectuality of ritual fortification, it however assumes an overriding thematic preoccupation. Without repeating this word, it echoes throughout the entire poem, as impossible, worthless, void, baseless, fruitless and profitless. Thus, this dominant idea of vanity is meant to discourage those who are still bent on breaking the reincarnation cycle. He summons them indirectly to give up the idea. The vision being articulated in this poem is that the Abiku child is a difficult phenomenon to deal with.

Another ritual act which the Abiku child speaker repudiates is the ritual of sacrifice. The speaker presents these

items through a rhetorical question:

Must I weep for goats and cowries
For palm oil and the sprinkled ash:
Yams do not sprout in amulets
To earth Abiku's limbs. (IOP, 29)

The statement which the child appears to be making is that goats and cowries, palm oil and the sprinkled ash are symbolic of ritual sacrificial items and they are always presented as means of warding off the Abiku child and by extension, breaking the reincarnation cycle. In the speaker's opinion, these items are presented in vain because as things stand, they will be inadequate to stop the child from reincarnating. The entire sacrifice has one purpose: “To earth Abiku's limbs”. This means to keep the child alive on earth and in the process, end the reign of reincarnation. According to the speaker, “Yams do not sprout in amulets”. As yams do not survive in amulets, so is the Abiku child not expected to thrive on earth. This is a metaphorical expression that underscores the glaring sense of impossibility. Therefore, it is impossible to achieve the purpose of keeping the Abiku on earth. This proverb is highly communicative. It amplifies the vanity in breaking the reincarnation cycle. Thus, this proverb reinforces the invincibility of the Abiku child.

Leaving the ritual sacrifice, there is the focus on ritual identification. The poem abounds with ritual identification carried out by the parents of the Abiku child to discourage and prevent the reincarnation. Like the ones before it, the speaker believes that this ritual will end up in vain. Hence, the child boasts:

So when the snail is burnt in his shell,
Whet the heated fragment, brand me
Deeply on the breast. You must know him
When Abiku calls again. (29)

The branding of the Abiku child at death is supposed to aid the parents of the child to recognise him when he is reborn. The cycle of ritual identification subsists as long as the child's

reincarnation remains unbroken. As for the speaker, when the Abiku child dies, the ritual identification is conducted sequel to the child's burial. As a way of mocking their effort, the child repudiates their ritual of identification through sarcastic language charged with ridicule. The child dares the parents to brand him "deeply on the breast" and that it will yet be unable to deter his reincarnation. Thus, the Abiku child is invincible to such a ritual conducted to hinder him from reincarnating to the same family.

The significance of ritual identification is that it draws attention to the antics of the Abiku child. It appears that the Abiku enjoys illusive existence, and as such, prefers to operate without being known. When one takes this nature of the Abiku into consideration, it becomes easy to appreciate the depth of details that goes into the process of ritual identification in the poem. The snail is an important object for the ritual. Notice the evocation of the olfactory imagery when the speaker recommends the burning of the snail in order to "whet the heated fragment". This act is a form of offering to the spirit world to put a seal on the existence of the dead child. It marks a significant end to the bond between the living and the dead. Hence, this snail, with its steaming hotness, is used to "brand" the Abiku child "on the breast" as deep as possible. The aim as the speaker reveals, is to make the parents to identify the Abiku child when next he is reborn.

A closer attention to the language especially the linguistic signs will help improve the reader's understanding of the poem. The linguistic sign "calls" in the closing line of the above stanza functions as a metaphor. It compares the way a visitor comes to one's home to the way the Abiku child is born to a particular family. Every visitor is expected to return to their respective homes after the visit. Similarly, the Abiku child operates like a visitor. The visitor image emphasises the child's brief life span on earth. On a symbolic level, this sense of calling is a reincarnative experience. Paradoxically, the Abiku child is a visitor, who after a brief stay, is bound to return home (the spirit world). This aligns

with the traditional Yoruba cultural worldview on the mystery of death as a kind of return back home.

The burning of the snail releases the appealing aroma which offers a seal to those who live beyond. Secondly, it increases the branding power of the shell. The breast is an important part of ritual identification. It is the cultural site for such a ritual process. At death, the child when suspected to be an Abiku, gets a ritual identification ceremony done immediately to expose the duplicity of the child and bid him a permanent goodbye to that family. This process is said to break reincarnation. As a twist of irony, the child speaker laughs at such a ritual process because the child believes ritual identification is ineffective to prevent the tormentor child from returning to the family. Hence, Soyinka seems to repudiate this age long held belief.

Soyinka introduces another type of ritual this time, it is the ritual burial. This involves the repetitive process of burying the dead Abiku child. This ritual is amplified through the squirrel teeth and the riddle of the palm metaphors. Here is an excerpt from the poem:

I am the squirrel teeth, cracked
The riddle of the palm. Remember
This, and dig me deeper still into
The god's swollen foot. (IOP, 29)

The squirrel teeth and the riddle of the palm are two metaphorical constructions with which Soyinka advances the sense of triumph over human efforts to defeat or break the vicious cycle of reincarnation. For the speaker, the "squirrel teeth" represents the child's potent power, sharp and unrelenting in its ability to crack any hard shell. With this dental weapon, the speaker is able to break any barrier erected against the child. No matter how hard the people contrive, the Abiku is the squirrel teeth to destroy it. Hence, Soyinka employs these metaphors to explain how vain the effort to bind the Abiku and stop the reincarnation. For this reason, the child suggests, to those preparing to bury him,

that they “dig” the grave as deep as possible and bury him and that despite the depth of the grave, the child is sure to surmount the barrier of the grave and carry out his reincarnation. Again, this demonstrates the vanity of ritual burial as a way of ending the cycle of reincarnation. It is important at this juncture to add that the semiotic sign (“foot”) in the expression “The god's swollen foot” is a euphemism for grave. This expression is a pleasant way of conveying the sense of death and burial in order to avoid offending public sensitivity. Notice the clever metaphorical recreation of the burial ground. The grave is compared to a swollen foot. This evokes the visual imagery of a heap of sand. That it is a foot, suggests the earth, which is the home of all dead persons. This visual power is to graphically depict the picture of a burial ground. This is done with astonishing adroitness. This poem may seem to sacrifice narrative presentation to suggestive evocation, but given its basic purpose, this is to its advantage.

Soyinka's use of language is consistent especially with presenting the child speaker's abjurate posture to the various ritual acts constructed to break the Abiku reincarnation cycle. The metaphorical equation of the Abiku child to both the squirrel teeth and the riddle of the palm represents the impossibility or the vanity of breaking the reincarnation cycle. The language also fuses with the tone to express the sense of defiance, ridicule and condemnation of those who feel that by burying the dead child in a deep grave, they will be able to curtail the operation of the Abiku child's reincarnation.

In African cultural society, ritual libation is a common way of connecting with the dead. In Soyinka's poem, this ritual is presented ironically as a catalyst of reincarnation and not a means of ending it. This is the main preoccupation of the fifth stanza, and of course, the opening line of the sixth stanza:

Once and the repeated time, ageless
Though I puke, and when you pour
Libations, each finger points me near

The way I came, where
The ground is wet with mourning. (29)

Before examining the treatment of ritual libation, it is important to explain its ethnopoetic socio-cultural significance. Firstly, ritual libation functions as a medium through which the living affirms their attachment to the dead. Secondly, it reassures the dead that their death is not in vain or that they are not forgotten. Therefore, each libation shows the affinity of the living with the dead. Thirdly, it is a medium through which the living pacifies the dead. It is against this fact that the ritual libation, which the parents of the Abiku child performs becomes meaningful. In their attempt to avert the vicious cycle of reincarnation, they offer libation to the dead. Instead of becoming an action of pacification, the libation becomes an act of provocation. The Abiku child says each libation points him to where he came, that is, where the parents mourn. This is a clever irony as the expectation of the parents to stop the reincarnation fails to materialize.

There is a link between the sense of repetition of the rebirth and the sense of death associated with the child. Each experience seems to extenuate the other. Just as the child keeps being reborn thus embodying the reincarnation process similarly, the ritual of pouring libation exacerbates the death of the child. Thus, each act of libation “points” the Abiku child “near” the grave. The act of pouring libation functions as a paradox. The libation ought to serve as a means of pacification, but as things have turned out, it has become a way of quickening the process of death for the Abiku child. For this reason, the image of wetness generated by the “mourning” parents underscores their helplessness in the entire process of averting the reincarnation. The message being canvassed is that even the ritual libation is inadequate to avert the reincarnation which appears to have rendered the child “ageless”, a clear euphemism for the several years of reincarnation. Ritual fortification, ritual identification and ritual libation deployed to stem, the Abiku child's reincarnation cycle, are ineffectual. This

essay demonstrates that ritual fortification, identification and libation are impotent in breaking the reincarnation cycle.

Conclusion

This essay has accounted for the futility in breaking the reincarnation cycle and in this regard, it has explored five main ritual acts which undergird this futility. The futility is as a result of fortification because charms and sacrifices employed by the Abiku parents have failed to outwit the cycle of reincarnation. It proceeds to examine the second reason, which anchors on the vanity of ritual identification as a way of breaking the cycle of reincarnation. Thus, the third posits that breaking the reincarnation cycle has been impossible owing to the inefficaciousness of ritual libation deployed by the Abiku parents. These reasons help to affirm the invincibility of the Abiku child while emphasizing the futility in breaking the vicious cycle of reincarnation. Soyinka's poem repudiates ritual acts deployed in breaking reincarnation cycle. As the poem has affirmed, ritual symbolism especially its various manifestations are ineffective in the task of stopping reincarnation process.

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