The Concepts of Born To Die Children and the Fate of Victim Mothers in Nigeria

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Abstract

The born-to-die phenomenon has received much attention in Nigeria under the two popular names: Abiku in Yoruba and Ogbanje among the Ibo of Nigeria. These two names are used and known effectively by everybody both scholars and laymen. Many scholars had done extensive work on the reality and characteristics of the phenomenon. There are works on the traditional belief on born-to-die children. Health workers also approach the issue from the medical perspective and group the phenomenon among child mortality and morbidity. But this paper examines born-to-die (Abiku) and the fate of victim mothers in Nigeria. To achieve the objective of this treatise the writer adopts the historical, evaluative and phenomenological methodology. The writer discovers that the born-to-die issue put much scandal on victim mothers. Therefore the paper attempt an apology for the victim mothers since the case of Abiku (born-to-die) does not only affect the womenfolk but also men and the community at large. The paper submits instead of stigmatizing the women alone, more preventive measure should be employed to ameliorate the ugly experience. Then the paper concludes with a brief summary.

Keywords: Born-to-die, Abiku, Ogbanje, Fate and Victim mothers
Introduction

In Nigeria the need to reduce infant and child morbidity and mortality is one of the greatest challenges confronting the Federal Government. It has been estimated that the mortality rate of children below five years of age in Nigeria hovers between 97 and 120 per thousand births (UNICEF, 2002, WHO, 2004; FOS, 2005). The greatest health challenge to the Federal Government of Nigeria is to reduce this rate to the barest minimum; but despite the efforts of various successive governments to tackle the problem the results have been dismally poor. Various researchers who are interested in maternal and child health in Nigeria have identified some key factors that may be adduced to this problem and some of these factors include poverty (Owumi and Ezeogu, 2003); ignorance by mothers (Bradley and Gilles, 1984); and the lack of political will by the federal government (Iyun and Oke, 2000). For these and other similar reasons, morbidity and mortality from childhood diseases continue their debilitating effect on the health of young children. One researcher who has shown a remarkable insight into this problem is Rhode (1980) who identified beliefs as a major factor for poor response by mothers to participate actively in government health efforts. It is in this perspective that a study, from which this article is derived, was conducted. The paper discusses the general concept of ogbanje/abiku as it is conceived by various ethnic groups in western and southern Nigeria and weaves its socio cultural relevance to our understanding of infant and child morbidity and mortality in that part of the country. Overall, it is argued in the paper that belief in ogbanje, does not influence mothers’ perception towards childhood diseases, but it also builds a framework in the mental psyche of mothers, which influences their health seeking behaviour and ultimately their non-preventive measures against major childhood killer diseases. All children who die at infant stage are referred to as born-to-die having spiritual link. In traditional perspective the woman becomes the object of scandal and intimidation. It also the attempt of this paper to encourage that more preventive measure and enlightenment should be employed instead of putting pressure on women. In this paper the two local words that are popularly used in Nigeria would be interchangeably used. They are Abiku a Yoruba word and Ogbanje an Ibo word for born-to-die child.

Abiku is the Yoruba word for children believed to have come from the spirit world, who can die at will unless certain rituals are performed (Bamikale, et al., 1997). Abiku is a phenomenon that has its basis in the African cultural belief especially among the Yoruba (where it is known as Abiku), Igbo and Itshekiri (where it is called Ogbanje). Abiku is a “spirit” child that is born to die. He is a child that is not decisive about living or otherwise. He therefore, continues to move round the cycle of constant birth, death and rebirth, an Abiku is believed to belong to a band of demons, which live near or inside a big Iroko tree, As a result, pregnant women are warned against night movement around such a tree, otherwise Abiku Children will enter them. Similarly, an Abiku is said to possess power to penetrate pregnant woman when the sun is very hot during the day.
Furthermore, *Abiku children are* believed to have appointed days for them to depart from the world. Some choose to die immediately after birth, while some others wait for a while, pretending as if they come to stay. An *Abiku* child has something that attracts people’s attention to him or her. *Abiku* is either so good looking that he or she is lavishly spent upon or sickly, that his or her state of health consumes the whole household expense.

Africans believe in the existence of life beyond this immediate world. This notion has gained popularity among African writers, who formally refer to it as an instance of “magical realism”. Some of these writers are Soyinka (1967), Clark (1967) and Okri (1991). It is noteworthy that Fagunwa (1968) and Tutuola (1952) among others have initially written a lot on ideas related to the supernatural, and not strictly *Abiku*. In the western world, this magical realism is known as “marvelous realism”.

Africans tend to agree that there is a link between the physical and the spiritual world. The spirit world is so powerful that it is able to determine how long children born into this world would live. This idea has been portrayed in such a way that children, who stay in the spirit world, believed that life is cruel and that the world is a dangerous place to live. They, therefore, ensure that “things” that bind them to the spirit world are hidden in secrete places, such that people of this world can hardly find them to destroy. Some of these magical charms are believed to be hidden in thick forest, under gigantic trees.

Nevertheless, knowing well that *Abiku* children aim to make every family into which they are born poor, several means to thwart their plans are adopted. The spirit offers sacrifices to these spirits. At times, feast that requires the preparation of beans and palm appease with such children. The *Abiku* child is further accoutered with charms like jingles (*Saworo*) in order to use the sound to scare away his spirit mates. Protective amulets, rings and wristlet beads are used to stop the spirit companions from forcing *Abiku* to rejoin them. If *Abiku* still dies, in spite of all these efforts, Abraham (1962) posits that:

> Its corpse is maltreated and wounds and blows believed to make indelible marks are inflicted. Sometimes, the body is hacked up and in every case, must be thrown into the “bush”: the idea is that thereby, the *Abiku* —spirit suffers and becomes incapable of entering a human body.

What is more amazing is that in most cases, as soon as the mother that had the dead *Abiku* child gives birth to another child, the inscriptions done on the former child are noticed in the later. Clark (1967) attests to this in the following:

> We know the knife scars
> Serrating down your and front
> Like beak of the sword fish,
> And both your ears notched…
> Are all relics of your first comings.
As soon as such is observed, the child is given a specific name, which is strongly believed to be capable of keeping him alive, the name could be derogatory, condemning, or appealing as it is borne out of frustration (depending on how many times the mother has lost the Abiku). Whatever may be the immediate function of the name, what it is intended is to keep the child alive. Abiku names appeal to the emotions or tarnish the images of children in such a category.

**Abiku what it means?**

Literally Abiku means: born to die, born for premature death. In life, there exist two extreme points – birth and death; same as happiness and sorrow, positive and negative. They present a one of a kind feeling for the truth because the only truth is that we are all born to die. This is logical. But it is not logical to die before our time, that we experience a tragic death, that we have a miserable life, full of suffering, sadness and worries.

We will all die some day as we all Abiku. The only difficulty here is that we do not accept and do not acknowledge a premature death. We all know that life is a big challenge; we are also aware that we are all capable of facing with the challenges of life and become the winners in life. We all have the right for happiness, joy, peace and satisfaction. The challenge to create this is how to get to it. When we talk about natural energies and manipulation of a parallel world, we use the energy so that we neutralize or completely destroy our inner enemy, which destroys our humor, our courage, our self – confidence, our passion for life, our wish for peace and pleasure in life. At the same time, this has to become a daily celebration. Things that give us good luck and happiness are firstly our ability to understand life. Some Abikus are depressive or prevent themselves from being happy. They deny themselves the right to be happy and they really are not happy.

When a child is born to a “normal” family; in a healthy family birth represents a moment of joy, presents something we can call a demonstration of love. A child is born, everyone is happy and satisfied. Although often we make mistakes as we do not detach ourselves from the joy and satisfaction. The child grows and starts to disturb us, the severity is based on the level of our understanding. They begin to show their individuality. At this point grown-ups start to restrict them. And so it happens that with time we persistently destroy the child’s personality, because the word “No” is the word that the child hears most often. When we grow up the reality of life is still telling us: “No, no and no”. As if we actually do not have the right to a life, as if we do not have the right to make mistakes, to risk. The word “No” nests itself deep into our personality, definitely to the extent where none of us want to hear the word no. we always want to achieve our dreams; we want our dreams to become reality. We are not prepared to hear the word “No” and do not even try at least a bit to understand its meaning. When our partners tell say “No” – that is a problem; when our boss says it – also a problem. This is the systematic destruction of a persons’ personality.
A child that is not a “radical” Abiku is born normally after 9 months of pregnancy. If it belongs to the “real” Abikus which do not want to be born, it will be born before time, before the end of normal pregnancy (after 6-8 months). After the birth of the child many things start happening; the forming of its character, its personality. In this period of growth the child recognizes the people who love it and reject it. But it begins to understand the definition of its life. It begins to distance itself from people and begins to fear the life. When we look at a person within our family or among our friends we sometimes fear for him- what is their life going to be like in the future? Will this person even live long? We know people who get ill from different diseases every six months and it is normal that we ask ourselves this question at that time. What is that thing, which makes some people get ill over and over again while others do not? Why do some people like risking and yet others never want to risk anything in their life? What is it that leads people into tragic experiences on special dates or in special cycles in life (just before graduation, marriage, on honeymoon)? Why in this period and not in another? All this is what creates the universe of Abiku.

If we go back to pregnancy and birth: some experiences of spontaneous abortion, premature death, constant illness or mothers decision to make an abortion – these are all actions that only Abiku can afford.

There are Abiku actions that are called Emere. Emere is a child with a hidden behavior: at times very stubborn, rebellious, disobedient, with a passion for accidents, bold, constantly provocative, takes risks, a child who loves revenge, often gets ill (always with a high temperature or hypothermia), often cries without reason, always talks with itself, plays alone or simply does not want to play with other children.

Sometimes Emere (another local name for Abiku) creates a stage for himself and also plays all the roles himself. Those who have this sort of energy often talk to their imaginary friends, complain to them and fight with them. Such manifestations are possible. When they reach the school age most of the time they do not have a traditional way of life. They stand out of the time they do not have a traditional way of life. They stand out of the traditional system. That is why we say they are stubborn, rebellious. It is not true, however, that they are rebellious only out of malice, because Abiku loves to be different than his peers. At the same time Abiku presents a set of many positive characteristics. We need to understand the following: what counts is not what we have, but what we make with what we have. That is the problem of Abiku. Those who have this energy, which we consider supernatural, need a spiritual grip so that they could turn this energy to their own advantage. Abiku is highly intuitive and the question is how to prevent him from using this intuition for self – destruction? When some has too much energy, too much power, it is not good because he comes to the point when he does not know what to do with all these resources.
Abiku Phenomenon and their society called Egbe among the Yoruba

There exists a society of Abiku, the universe of Abiku actually. One of the most dangerous Abiku aspects is the one that Abikus are always highly connected with the spiritual world. They are in the visible and invisible world at the same time. They live in both these worlds at the same time. They have nightmares, some always sleep with their eyes open, they can sleepwalk, can go to the kitchen in the middle of the night to drink water …etc.

At night Abiku can manifest itself in a way similar to a dream, but in their being they do not dream anymore, they actually travel into another world where they meet their friends. Sometimes when they return into this world, they remember this when they wake up, but they also often do not. Sometimes they have many confused information about what happens to them at night. But that actually are not dreams but rather Abiku transformations, because Abiku always lives a parallel life. Sometimes they have many confused information about what happens to them at night. But that actually are not dreams but Abiku transformations, because Abiku always lives a parallel life: Sometimes they wake up on the other side of the bed, sometimes they even keep falling off the bed. Abiku is in both worlds at all times. Just like children, adult Abikus can also wet their bed.

There are many nightly and daily manifestations, that is why we call them Emere which means supernatural relationship – simultaneous communicating with the visible and invisible worlds. That is a positive peculiarity in a being although there are always difficulties about what Abiku does with his energy. If we do not support Abiku with enough energy, with a resource of knowledge big enough, it can come to the abuse of his abilities. That is why we try our best to understand the Abikus. Theoretically speaking there exist two groups of Abiku and they are both members of Egbe, because Abiku is the physical aspect of the Egbe phenomenon. People who are born with tendency towards fear, challenges, supernatural energies, mysterious energies, which have a mysterious, different relation towards the world, some sort of mysterious forms of life, are not like that because of everything that is happening in their lives. A group of this kind of people from a society called Egbe. Abikus always have some sort of agreement with their families. Some of them have a pact so strong that they actually already have a date set for their death, the leaving from this world and returning to the universe of Egbe.

If we look at a circle of our friends when some have died, especially if they died young, we will see that a tragic death is in question; sometimes they left this world too early. Sometimes they do not die but live with the consequences of the moment that should have taken them to the other world. Abikus very often tend to have signs on their bodies and it is common that children like this are born with a lot of birthmarks on their bodies. Some get the marks on their bodies only after an accident has occurred.
Abiku experiences periods where negative experiences are more intensive. In most cases this happens during important periods of an Abiku’s life. Imagine that someone dies the night before his wedding, graduation, moving into a new house, on some important date. All this happens with the intention to prevent happiness in the life of the Abiku and all the people around him. Abiku’s age is a very decisive factor. Before the Abiku is even born, he accepts his fate or chooses it. Before he is born he somehow separates himself from his family that is somewhere else, in another universe.

Abikus have a pact, an agreement with their families, that they will in a certain period bring suffering into the lives of their parents in the visible world, have an accident, fall ill, disappoint them, commit suicide or die from some disease. At the same time they have an agreement to be in constant contact with the spiritual friends in their families. Egbe is a society of spiritual friends and the Abikus are always in their debt.

But only those who do not care about life can be Abikus. Abikus wake up in the morning and say: “Today, I am not leaving the house”. This way they deny themselves the possibility of life. Abikus are only those who deny themselves the possibility of life. Imagine someone who punishes himself, condemns himself, who says “no” before he even heard the end of the sentence, will not do it, even though he knows that it would bring him joy, happiness and satisfaction. He accuses himself and condemns himself. Abiiku is capable of this. They deny themselves the right for joy and happiness. He is capable of destroying anything that is good and if he does not have a problem, he creates one. If there is no unpleasant situation, he will create one. When something good is happening, like a celebration, he will prevent it or avoid it. Abikus tends to be revengeful. If someone loves to revenge, likes to make fun of it. It is different from a mere joke, it is cynicism.

All of these are possible forms of Abiku, the Abiku energy manifests itself this way. That is how we spot we spot them; and it is important that we cut roots by changing their energy, that we cut the pact before it is too late. Fact is that parents can devote time to an Abiku while still a small child, but when he grows up with all his abilities that are not used correctly he will be regarded as problematic. People do not have the knowledge to understand and to point the right direction to someone who has this energy.

The Characteristics and Operation of Abiku

When we treat an Abiku we must also treat the parents and the entire society, otherwise there will be no results. Abiku has his way that can lead to many unpleasant occurrences because of the pact, which he has with the spiritual world. This pact can be broken.
At the same time people have a lot of understanding toward destruction. We believe that destruction is something normal, although it is not. Spirituality, it is the only way to protect the bad actions of an Abiku. Abiku is someone who is very faithful and loyal to his group that is called Egbe. Egbe is a spiritual community, they are his spiritual friends. Abiku has an agreement with Egbe about what he will do in his life, about everything that will provoke in his life, about the cycle of life – how he will begin it, live it and how he will end it. We know that death is something that awaits everyone. If someone decides to die today, he can do so. And if he fails, he will not succeed just because it was badly executed. To gain the courage to commit suicide is nothing more than to lose fear of it. If a person keeps saying how we would like to die and we do not do anything about it, one day he will wake up and that day will seem like perfect one to die, especially if that person is emotionally unstable. This is part of what Abikus love to do. Only an Abiku laments by saying that he got sick of everything. At the same time we need to be careful with another Abiku action: those who commit suicide and survive have their lives devalued by their beings. They did not commit suicide physically but in a way that they stopped living. They have no ambitions, no dreams whatsoever, no challenges, no risk – they are dead although they are still alive. They only breathe. To be a living dead means to be active without caring about results or achievements. Some kill themselves despite fear, not caring that they will also kill themselves physically.

Our life is full of expectations. While we are still children the expectations from the universe towards us are still minimal. The risk of the Abiku energy to show itself is minimal. A small child still has not been inducted to a single challenge. The only risk it faces is illnesses to which the child is prone to, if by chance it is an Abiku. Afterwards there are the so-called home accidents: falling over, collisions and such which are dangerous for children. The child’s energy is the one that leads to accidents.

We are talking about human destruction at this point, about the illogical aspect of life, about surprises in life. These are situations where many negative things happen to someone who is Abiku. This always has leads to suffering and illness. The less we understand spiritually, the more we suffer.

Abiku IS Always active. Abiku Agba always has critical moments in life and makes sure that these critical events occur exactly in the important moments of our lives, often on our birthdays, just a bit before the birthday or a bit after, on graduation, on weddings, at some important achievement, maybe at birth; most commonly when it is about some kind of social event: in Short, at the most important moments of our lives.

With Abikus it is important to understand their struggles for life. Some people renounce themselves from life, they do not want it. They will find some sort of excuse, be it depression, nervousness or something else. When we have such an excuse we do not have to do anything, we do not have to trouble ourselves. I am not taking about natural restrictions. Sometimes
depression and nervousness are something natural, a biological phenomenon, sometimes these terms are mistaken for foolishness. It is easier to being someone into balance that has a true mental problem than those who are incapable of having a good attitude toward them.

Abiku destruction has many faces, many aspects. Wherever there is a tendency toward destruction we can find the Abiku energy. The only difficulty is that Sola .there is no scale to measure the level of destruction. In many cases we cannot do anything by ourselves, but we need someone who will show us the reality, someone who will keep us under control. We can only do this with love and patience. Otherwise we cannot comprehend that which is difficult for us.

With Abikus it happen every often that something similar depression appears – lack of taste and passion for the things they do in life. Sometimes they have a wonderful home, A house, from a material point of view they have everything they need to lead a good life, but they are not happy, and we call it “depression”. Abikus are often tagged like this, although it is a depression. It is a fact that if someone wants to deny everything good he has in his life, he needs some sort of excuse and depression is a very convenient excuse in times in times like this. In certain cases, if we are on the opposite side towards the interests of an Abiku, we have to know that Abikus have a very determined mind. Most of them are very determined people. That is where Abikus get their good qualities from. It is good to have a strong personality, because it builds up our self confidence. Most Abikus are very confident, that is why they risk too much. Because their confidence is too big, they often forget about restrictions and that leads them to risk.

The next Abiku quality is intuition. Abikus know when they will have an accident, they often know that they will break their aims and legs before it even happens, they know they will die, some of them can tell the exact date of their death. They have unusual qualities that give them the possibility to manipulate life. Because of that, most inventors or people that achieved something very special in their lives are Abikus. Some of them have the blessing, the ability to compensate for too short of a period of life through achievements that they reach very quickly, and in relatively short time achieve a lot, as if they would actually live too fast. The characteristic of an Abiku is that if he wants, he can punish you or bless you. They can wish you good or bad, you can believe anything you want, it will happen.

Ogbanje and Child Mortality in Nigeria

Mikhail, 1981; Igun, 1982; Rosenstock and Becker, 1988 assume that people’s actions toward health preventive measures are based on their beliefs and attitudes. It also acknowledges that beliefs and attitudes are not spontaneous; rather, they are a function of the processual experience of the individual. Hence, in a general sense, the model does not only look at the individual as a unit of analysis but also considers the socio – cultural environment, which conditions the individual to adhere to certain beliefs and predisposes him or her towards
behaving in a defined and culturally prescribed manner. Human behaviours that may be rational or irrational (depending on the context) are influenced by different variables and are imbibed through the mechanisms of the learning process that are available to the individual.

The theory assumes the principal mechanisms to include the definition of the phenomenon (which is culturally defined), and the cognitive perception of the consequence of the ailment (which is both socially and culturally influenced). These mechanisms present favourable or unfavourable contexts which function as discriminative (cue) stimuli for health seeking behavior. Hence, if parents evaluate ogbanje as undesirable, they would engage in culturally defined methods of preventing the occurrence of the phenomenon. Indeed mothers do engage in some preventive measures against the sick child or in preventing the birth of an ogbanje but the danger in engaging in such preventive measures (which are mostly spiritual) is manifest in their neglect of themselves and their immediate environment, which run contrary to modern preventive measures. As is commonly practiced, when a woman becomes pregnant she deliberately keeps herself and her environment untidy, with the belief that the filth would discourage an ogbanje from coming into the family. Such belief is antithetical to modern preventive measures because rather than promote personal hygiene, it creates an environment that is conducive for the breeding of germs awaiting the arrival of the baby. The inflection of the child, especially during the weaning process and at the age of crawling, could lead to the death of the child and the cycle would continue. For successful intervention programmes, therefore, this fact must be taken into consideration so that mothers are properly educated on the relationship between dirt and death among children. It follows from the foregoing that perception as a psychological process affects individuals’ expectations by the physical capacity of their sensory apparatus. In other words, a society can construct perceived reality to the extent that its culturally constructed beliefs will shape members expectations, perception and attitude. The cultural definition of Ogbanje and the inherent power conferred on the baby influence people’s attitudes toward the manifestation of that phenomenon and, ultimately, the health seeking behavior of mothers and the entire household. With such stereotyped belief a child that is suspected to be an Ogbanje would not be taken to an appropriate health centre but to a traditional medicine man, thereby foreclosing alternative medical therapy. This monolithic help seeking behavior in relation to the Ogbanje phenomenon is significant, at least in part, in understanding infant and child mortality in southern Nigeria, because, in area where the belief is still rife, children who are suffering from other childhood diseases may be taken to a traditional medicine man by the parents who should rather have sought appropriate and proper medical attention in health centers.

**Ogbanje Phenomenon: The Fate of Victim Mother**

The effect of barrenness and infertile in marriage put more pressure on the woman more than the man. If the woman is able to give birth to a bouncing baby she frees from stigmatization and derogation. In the case of inability to do so the woman is the chief suspect. She undergoes
much social derogation which put her in a psychological trauma. In the same vein the 
Egbakhaian (Ogbanje) phenomenon projects the woman (mother) as Ozu Kwomon kholo (evil head) or possessed of evil spirits.

The Ogbanje (born to die child) is seen as child of calamity and deceit. Hence the Edo name elumenle means a cheat. Ogbanje, Abiku or Egbakhnan as born – to – die child is referred to among the Yoruba Ibo and Edo represents the worst thing that could happen to a family. The birth of a child supposes to be of source joy and happiness but the birth of Ogbanje brings woes and stress to the family most especially to the mother who is always the chief suspect. The issue at stake is that the mother of such child is made to face untold trauma. She is sometimes seen as the possessed woman who attracted such evil child. The victim mother’s case is worsened when such situation repeats itself, two or more times. In some situation it could lead to divorce. The question here is that why women are often punished for some experience when they ought to be pitied and cared for. The woman is the one who carries pregnancy for nine or ten months, eventually she finds herself in such a terrible experience. Unfortunately she is still labeled with derogative names and sometime pushed out of the family home. This calls for scholarly examination.

Conclusion

The belief ogbanje and what characterizes it has various theoretical implications not only for mothers and other care-givers but also for health workers who are saddled with the onerous task of planning and implementing health intervention programs. We may never be able to give satisfactory answers to the myriad of questions that inevitably arise from the ogbanje phenomenon, but one thing stands clear; the belief in the phenomenon has profound influence on mothers’ responses towards modern preventive action, as well as their treatment behavior. Delimiting our discussion to mothers’ preventive measures and their health seeking behavior within the health belief model does not in any way exhaust all the possible implications of the ogbanje phenomenon. The analysis discussion made here is grounded only in one premise and that is, not all deaths that ascribed to the ogbanje phenomenon are correct. Some of the deaths that are associated with the phenomenon could have been easily prevented if mothers were to engage in simple personal hygiene and take advantage of the advances in medical knowledge. For an effective intervention programme to reduce child mortality in Nigeria therefore, health workers must consider various traditional beliefs that may negatively influence mothers’ attitude and perception toward modern advances in medical knowledge. Health workers would only succeed if ethnographic studies are encouraged and appropriate campaign strategies are designed to enlighten mothers and significant members in households on the relationship between other forms of preventive measures and child survival.

Besides, the paper further discussed that the challenge of ogbanje phenomenon should not be seen as an issue bordering on the women alone if objective preventive measure may be
employed to remove the ugly experience. The phenomenon should be given a holistic approach that is viewing the scenario as a threat evading the entire human race. This will give the fight against the ogbanje/abiku syndrome a better preventive approach.
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