



## ABIKU PHENOMENON: MYTH OR REALITY IN THE LIGHT OF SOYINKA'S POEM 'ABIKU'

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### Abstract

The natives of Africa who are well aware from the social, political, and cultural issues of African country, wrote African literature. Most of the African literature was written in European language. Through the European language, they expressed the local cultural issues and tradition of African world. Among these local issues, the most famous issue is the myth of Abiku phenomenon. It took place almost in the works of every African author and poet. Wole Soyinka, Ben Okri and J. P Clark, the most famous writers of African literature also portrayed the myth of Abiku in their literary works. Wole Soyinka, a Nigerian author wrote a poem entitled "Abiku" and in it, he told about this spiritual child Abiku. As people are getting the education, they are coming out from their blind faiths that is why a number of questions and doubts are taking place in their minds. Now they think that this Abiku phenomenon, which dominated the mind of millions of people for a long time, is a reality or simply a myth. The present paper focuses on this thing and tries to give the answer of these questions that what it is in reality.

**Keywords-** Cultural issues, Abiku phenomenon, African culture, Myths, Traditions

### Introduction

Wole Soyinka, a versatile genius and most popular writer of African literature was awarded Nobel Prize in 1986. His complete name is AkinwadeOluwole Soyinka. He is famous as a Nigerian author, and poet. However, his fame mainly lies in poetry. He had been the recipient of several national and international awards and had been shortlisted for international prizes as well. He left Nigeria in 1954 after completing his education. Osakwe(1995) in her comment on Soyinka's poetry says:

"The poet's personality: a multifaceted literary colossus; a man of the world stepped in Yoruba culture, washed in western culture

and rinsed in the culture of the modern world...in his broad vocabulary spectrum as well as the way lexical items are granted freedom of occurrence and co-occurrence." (p.xvii)

In the African literature, myths have the important place. Now the question that comes in mind of everyone is that what the importance of myth in today's world is. Myths are narrative and told in storytelling form. Through these myths the values and traditions of one generation is transferred to another generation. These myths help in knowing that what the culture of ancient people was. All people believe in these myths without questioning. Some myths give the valuable information, leave a positive impact on the mind of

people while others show the blind faiths of people, and continue to have a negative impact. In a research article the writer, MouniraSoliman writes about the Abiku as:

“The abiku phenomenon is quite popular in the West Africa oral tradition especially among the different ethnic groups of Nigeria particularly the Yorubas, the Igbos and the Ijos. Due to its popularity, many Nigerian and other West African writers have drawn on this rich cultural resource as a way to express their national identities.” (Soliman, 10)

### Discussion

Wole Soyinka used the Yoruba mythology as the background of his literary works. Anyone who is interested in the works of Wole Soyinka must be well versed in the African mythology or especially Yoruba mythology. Yoruba mythology comprises the religious and traditional practices of Yoruba people. Yoruba people are an African ethnic group who reside in the western part of Africa, especially Nigeria and Benin. Although this myth took place in Nigeria but later, it spread other parts of the world. In Yoruba culture, it is referred as “abiku” while in Ibo culture it is referred as “ogbanje” as it can be seen in the works of Chinua Achebe. The phenomenon of Abiku is referred by different name in the different parts of the world where this myth exists.

According to Yoruba mythology, Abiku is a spiritual child who comes from spiritual world. He dies many times before reaching the puberty. It means he is ‘predestined to death.’ African people believe in the existence of spirits and reincarnation. They believe that Abiku is a reincarnating female child who dies to be born again by the same mother. In Yoruba land, it is believed that this child takes birth on the earth with a purpose and when the purpose is fulfilled, she returns her spiritual world. Now the question that comes in the mind of everyone is that for which purpose Abiku child takes birth in physical world. These Abiku spirits come on the earth to take revenge. These spirits may have families in spiritual world but no one offers them food and sacrifices. In anger, they come

on the earth. When the child comes on the earth, the people of earthly world celebrate and offer food to earthly people. Among these earthly people, spirits also enter the ceremony and satisfy the hunger of their belly. By taking the birth on the earth these Abiku baby provide the food to their fellow spirits. These spirits are called fellow spirits because they accompanied her to this earthly world. These spirits guide the Abiku child and direct her all activities. When the happiness of family is on peak, Abiku child dies and departs from this world with her fellow spirits. Abiku child does not take this decision herself rather her fellow spirits would order her to go back to the spiritual world where she is treated like a queen. His departure inflicts pain and sorrow upon her earthly parents especially her mother because she bears the pain of her birth every time. This belief cuts across Africa and Yoruba people believe in it. Soliman in her article defines the term abiku as:

“An individual who goes through a continuous circle of birth and death as a result of Primeval oath...taken in the spirit world in the presence of the creator and binding on the living. The oath is believed to be binding on the one who has taken it; the individual has to live in a particular manner throughout his or her usually short span of life. The object of the oath is hidden away from ordinary human sight and usually buried under a huge tree, in the person’s palm or in other impressive places.” (Soliman, 15)

In Yoruba land, the Abiku child is taken as an evil or devil child because she takes relish by inflicting pain and sorrow upon others. When the Abiku child dies and her mother cries out of pain she enjoys this cry and thinks that her revenge is over now. By taking birth repeatedly, she torments her host parents so earthly parents apply a number of superstitions beliefs to prevent her. She mocks on the objects, which are used to confine her to earth, and addresses her parents in a very boastful tone:

In vain your bangles cast

Charming circles at my feet

I am Abiku, caling for the first

And repeated time. (L.1-4)

In these lines, Abiku addresses her supposed parents in a challenging tone and says that no one can stop her from the cycle of coming and going in this world. She compares herself with death. She says that as the human beings cannot escape from death in the same way she cannot stay in this physical world. All the efforts of human beings, which are made to prevent death, are vain and useless because death is inevitable. Nobody can escape from the claw of death. In the same way all the superstitions beliefs, which are used by the African people to make her stay in this physical world, are futile for she is an Abiku child. She will come repeatedly. In the next stanza, she says:

Must I weep for goats and cowries

For palm oil and sprinkled ask?

Yams do not sprout amulets

To earth Abiku's limbs. (L.4-8)

In this stanza Abiku child says that earthly parents use the amulets and magical power to make her free from the endless cycle of coming and going. They do a number of things to break her connection from the spiritual world so that offer beautiful and lavish gifts to prevent her return to the realm of the spiritual world. They try to persuade the child by offering the sacrifices. Not all these attempts mollifies Abiku child. She says that why should she weep for the money and appease of goats. Further, she speaks in boastful tone and says that crops do not grow amulets, and which amulets they will use to prevent her birth. In the next stanza, she says:

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. (L.8-12)

She compares herself with a snail and says that as a snail stays only for a little period whether it is life or death, so does she. In Yoruba land people, make some marks on the chest of Abiku child when they bury her. They do this thing so in the future if the

same child takes birth, they will be able to recognize her. Abiku child herself suggests them to brand her chest with a mark because through it, they will be able to know the Abiku child when it appears again. African people torture Abiku child by mutilating her dead body. In spite of it, Abiku child is not ready to yield. She is stubborn and arrogant. With each scars she becomes stronger than before. She says that she is like a riddle as much as the people try to solve it they entangle in it. She says that as no one can know the mystery of life or death in the same way no one can know about her mystery. In the next stanza, she says:

Once and the repeated times, ageless

Though I puke, and when you pour

Libations, each finger points me near

The way I came, where (L.17-20)

Abiku child says to her earthly parents that they can do anything but still they will not be able to get rid of her. She will appear in all the ages. She says that the magical power which peoples use draw her near her goal. The birth of Abiku child is a mystery in itself because no one knows that from which land she comes. Through her activities as she tortures her mother it can be assumed that she belongs to evil and mysterious land. Abiku child also describes the earthly world and says:

The ground is wet with mourning

White dew suckles flesh-birds

Evening befriends the spider, trapping

Flies in wine-forth (L.21-24)

Through these lines, Wole Soyinka gives the description of his country and with it, he tells that in which state people are living. They are facing many problems. They suffer and shed tears on their condition. The land is wet because of their tears. Here the sufferings of the people can be taken in two ways. First, it may be that they are sad because Abiku child tortures them by her coming and going. They are making many efforts but still they are not able to hold it back to life. Second, it may be that the government of his country does not pay

attention on the problems of people and the result comes out in the form of suffering.

When this Abiku phenomenon overlapped the minds of the people at that time, a number of reasons were responsible. The people were not educated. There was lack of scientific development and medical science. The science was not so developed that is why people were ignorant. They tried to link everything with superstitions beliefs. Lack of education was already there so blind faiths easily gripped the minds of people. Some nationalist writers were also responsible to create the Abiku phenomenon in the mind of the people. They used it as the background of their literary works. They tried to mould this myth in the form of reality. Gradually a shift came in the Nigerian society regarding the Abiku phenomenon. The people who were ignorant till that now they became aware. This awareness came because of the influence of education and medical research. After getting the education, the mind of the people became broad, and they came out from their narrow shell in which they were living from a long time. Education helped them to remove this deeply rooted phenomenon. Now they started to associate the death of the infants with medical science.

### Conclusion

Now on the basis of above points it can be said that Abiku phenomenon remains a vague belief in the tradition of ancient African culture and mythology but no longer relevant in modern African literature. For a number of decades it dominated the mind of the people. It remained the very part of Nigerian society, but now it has ended. Education has changed the world-view and perspective of people. They look at it like a myth and never try to associate it with reality. In simple words, it can be said that Abiku is a mere psycho manipulation of a culture that took the advantage of ignorant society for a long time.

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### Author's Profile

Miss Rakhi Chauhan belongs to a small village of District Hapur. She is UGC NET-JRF and has completed her M.A. and M.phil in English Literature from C.C.S University Campus Meerut. She enrolled in research work in 2017 and currently pursuing PhD from CCSU Campus Meerut on the poetry of a Spanish poet Pablo Neruda. The topic of research is "Journey from Love to Isolation in the Select Poetic Works of Pablo Neruda." She has published four papers in international and Peer Reviewed Journals and presented three papers in national and international seminars.