

Ellis, Alfred Burdon. *The Yoruba-speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa*. 1894. N. Fagin Books, 1964.

Alfred Burdon Ellis was a colonial British officer who produced pioneering ethnographic works on West Africa in the late 19th century.

Abiku, *abi*, "that which possesses *iku*," "death"; hence, "predestined to death" is a word used to

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mean the spirits of children who die before reaching puberty, and also a class of evil spirits who cause children to die; a child who dies before twelve years of age being called an Abiku, and the spirit, or spirits, who caused the death being also called Abiku.

The general idea seems to be that the uninhabited tracts of country abound with numbers of evil spirits or demons, who suffer from hunger, thirst, and cold, since nobody offers sacrifice to them and they have no temples, and who are constantly endeavouring to improve their condition by entering the bodies of new-born babes. Only one Abiku can enter and dwell in the body of the same child, and, as there is great competition amongst the Abikus for such a position, an Abiku is only suffered by his companions to enter peaceably, and, in fact, to be recognised as having vested rights in a child, on condition of his promising them a share of the comforts he is about to obtain.

When an Abiku has entered a child he takes for his own use, and for the use of his companions, the greater part of the food that the child eats, who in consequence begins to pine away and become emaciated. If an Abiku who had entered a child were not bound to supply the wants of other Abikus who had not succeeded in obtaining human tenements, no great harm would ensue, since the sustenance taken could be made sufficient both for the child and his tenant. It is the incessant demands that are made by the hungry Abikus outside, and which the indwelling Abiku has to satisfy, that destroy the child, for the whole of his food is insufficient for their require-

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ments. When a child is peevish and fretful it is believed that the outside Abikus are hurting him in order to make the indwelling Abiku give them more to eat; for everything done to the child is felt by his Abiku. The indwelling Abiku is thus, to a great extent, identified with the child himself, and it is possible that the whole superstition may be a corruption of the Gold Coast belief in the *sisá*.

A mother who sees her child gradually wasting away without apparent cause, concludes that an Abiku has entered it, or, as the natives frequently express it, that she has given birth to an Abiku, and that it is being starved because the Abiku is stealing all its nourishment. To get rid of the indwelling Abiku, and its companions outside, the anxious mother offers a sacrifice of food; and while the Abikus are supposed to be devouring the spiritual part of the food, and to have their attention diverted, she attaches iron rings and small bells to the ankles of the child, and hangs iron chains round his neck. The jingling of the iron and the tinkling of the bells is supposed to keep the Abikus at a distance, hence the number of children that are to be seen with their feet weighed down with iron ornaments.

Sometimes the child recovers its health, and it is then believed that this procedure has been effective, and that the Abikus have been driven away. If, however, no improvement takes place, or the

child grows worse, the mother endeavours to drive out the Abiku by making small incisions in the body of the child, and putting therein green peppers or spices,

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believing that she will thereby cause pain to the Abiku and make him depart. The poor child screams with pain, but the mother hardens her heart in the belief that the Abiku is suffering equally. Should the child die it is, if buried at all, buried without any funeral ceremony, beyond the precincts of the town or village, in the bush; most other interments being made in the floors of the dwelling houses. Often the corpse is simply thrown into the bush, to punish the Abiku, say the natives. Sometimes a mother, to deter the Abiku which has destroyed her child from entering the body of any other infant she may bear in the future, will beat, pound, and mutilate the little corpse, while threatening and invoking every evil upon the Abiku which has caused the calamity. The indwelling Abiku is believed to feel the blows and wounds inflicted on the body, and to hear and be terrified by the threats and curses.

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Abiku spiritual child goddess