

## Source Packet Two: Àbíkú

### “When the Road Waits, Famished”

Fraser, Robert. *Ben Okri: Towards the Invisible City*. Northcote, 2002.

He is a highly unusual child. To begin with, we never discover his real name. ‘Azaro’ is a nickname, a diminution of the Biblical Lazarus, described in St John’s gospel being raised from the dead by Christ.” Azaro himself is continually resurrected, not just in that early truck-avoiding scene, but throughout the cycle, and in the special and creative sense. The Yoruba

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and certain contiguous groups such as the Ijo hold that, when a mother loses several babies in succession, the same child has returned to her womb to delight and to plague her. Such ‘*abikú*’ children are both honoured and feared. At birth, rituals are performed to encourage them to stay; if they die in infancy, the corpse is scarified to discourage a reappearance (FR 4-5, 340). In the 1960s Soyinka and the Ijo writer John Pepper Clark-Bekederimo wrote poems drawing on this custom. Clark-Bekederimo’s expresses the love and apprehension of the mother,” Soyinka’s the lofty disdain of the child? ‘The Famished Road’ cycle voices both, and a lot more besides.

The reason for this versatility is that Okri has combined a local belief concerning child mortality both with the much broader conception of reincarnation espoused by several of the world’s religions and with the remote intimations of eternal blessedness to be found in Eastern and Western literature. The doctrine of the pre-existence of the soul, for example, can be found in Plato’s dialogues the *Phaedrus* and the *Apology*, while the notion that young children possess an awareness denied to adults of some prenatal bliss has a provenance reaching from the seventeenth-century mystic Thomas Traherne to Wordsworth’s ode ‘Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood’. Azaro combines these attributes, both with the precocious wisdom of someone who has lived many lives and with the naivety of a 7-year-old boy. He is at one and the same time sage and innocent, possessing both a historical long view and a delighted capacity for surprise. Much critical endeavour has been expended in attempting to locate Azaro’s voice. The truth is that he has many voices, and is both soloist and choir. [...]

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Metaphysically speaking, the sequence thus begins by positing a gulf between the world of the flesh and the world of the spirit, between which Azaro alternates and must choose. He elects for the moment to stay in the flawed but lovely land of everyday, which he interprets and conveys with the precocious insight of one who has led many lives. He cannot, however, hold ultimate truth at bay for long. In the last resort, the invisible world of the spirit barnstorms the mundane, closing the divide.

There is in this polyphonic fantasia little room for conventional characterization. A superficial reading would have it that Azaro is a spirit child isolated amongst flesh and blood mortals whom he understands with some difficulty. Look further, and *abikus* proliferate. Azaro’s best friend, the epileptic Ade, virtually his only close acquaintance in his immediate generation, is also a reincarnation: he has been ‘a falconer among the Aztecs’ and ‘a whore in Sudan’ (FR 481). Ade narrowly avoids death during a raucous celebration towards the end of volume one (FR 422-3); soon afterwards Azaro

sights him among the spirit children (FR 431); he then reappears looking fit and well (FR 447). He is eventually mown down by Madame Koto's driver in volume two (SE 195), though his presence continues to haunt the township. In the 'nation of her body' Madame Koto is herself carrying *abiku* twins (SE 58). Indeed, when Okri is writing at full stretch, his imagination conveys a general condition of what you might call 'abikuhood'. Azaro, for example, describes his struggling motherland as 'an *abiku*-nation' that 'keeps on being reborn' after much blood and many betrayals (FR 494).

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## **"Spirit Children among the Yoruba"**

Beier, H. U. "Spirit Children among the Yoruba." *African Affairs*, vol. 53, no. 213, 1954, pp. 328-331.

It is customary for European writers to dwell at length on the "fears" of the African, from which only European civilisation can deliver him. Yet there is at least one kind of fear from which the Yoruba suffer rather less than Europeans: I mean fear of death. Many a Yoruba will, for example, be told the exact time of his death by a soothsayer. And

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although the date given may be very near, and the man is convinced of the truth of the prediction, he will receive the news with complete equanimity. The reason for this comparative indifference to the terrors of death is that, instead of the European's vague hopes for a life after death, the African has a very firm belief in reincarnation.

To the Yoruba, the dead are simply removed temporarily to another sphere, from where they will continue to influence the daily lives of the living. It is largely the watching eye of the ancestors-- who on certain occasions may actually appear to the people, personified by the masks of the Egungun society-- that will be the chief inducement for a man to live a righteous life.

The demarcation lines between the spheres of the living and the dead are indeed fluctuating. Frequently a dead person may be born again, by a woman of the same family, as the numerous Yoruba names with the ending *tunde* ( returned) will testify.

Immediately after the birth of a child, certain physical characteristics or gestures may indicate to the parents that such and such an ancestor of the family is reborn. It is customary to present children to the *babalawo* or, priest of the Ifa Oracle, for "identification." Apart from predicting the future, it is the most important function of the Oracle today to decide what ancestor has found reincarnation in a certain child. The most common type of reincarnation is that of the grandfather or grandmother. I know of at least one case where the grandfather was reborn while he was still alive which throws an interesting light on the time and space conception of the Yoruba.

If, however, a new-born baby is for some reason or other believed to be the reincarnation of its own father, this is taken as a bad omen and indicates that the father will die soon. Among one neighbouring tribe such a child will be "dashed to Nigeria"-- that is, exposed to die. I have never heard of this custom being observed by Yorubas; nor have I actually seen a child said to be the reincarnation of the father, although a few elderly people said they had known of such cases.

It is against this background of general reincarnation beliefs that we may understand the Yoruba conception of spirit children. As in most parts of Africa, infant mortality here is extremely high. The numerous disappointments and sufferings of the Yoruba mother are explained as being the machinations of a spirit people, who are all children and whose great ambition is to be born by a human mother. Once a member of a human family, the spirit may then persuade his parents to bring sacrifices to his *egbe* or society; and this, some people say, is one of the chief motives of the spirits for delegating some in their midst to be born as human beings.

The spirit is said to enter the womb of a pregnant woman, where he “drives out” the real child. The phrase “drives out,” however, does not actually mean what it seems to indicate at first. By further questioning it was revealed that people did not conceive of the original child to die, nor did they actually imagine it to go from the womb to some other place. The spirit child is, in fact, considered the legal child of its father, if only it can be persuaded to remain in this world. Once it has been prevented by charms from returning to the spirit world, the Yoruba do not feel that it disturbs the lineage system in any way.

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It may perhaps be said that the child is conceived of mostly as a human child possessed by the spirit, and sometimes as a human child replaced by the spirit. This “double-think” results clearly from ambivalent feelings towards the child, and it is typical that the Yoruba does not feel the necessity to solve the ambivalence by deciding to adopt the one or the other attitude.

An *eleri*<sup>1</sup> or spirit child is usually recognised soon after birth. There are some well-known signs, such as fits and cramps. Epileptics are considered *eleri* as a rule. But here, as always, the Ifa Oracle will in many cases identify the child as a spirit child.

The *eleri* dies young. It is that fact which causes the mother grief when she is told that her child is a spirit. She is willing to accept it and coax it to “stay.”

Usually the child will communicate with its *egbe* or society, and indicate to the parents when its spirit companions will want a sacrifice. A shrine may be set aside in the forest, where such offerings as kola nuts, yam, chicken or even a goat may be left. Usually the shrine consists merely of an open space in front of a tree, the entrance of which is marked with palm fronds. Some of the food left in the shrine may be eaten by smaller animals, and it will then be said that the spirits have taken it. A live goat, on the other hand, will usually be found unharmed on the same spot next day (there being hardly any leopards left in the Yoruba country). It was explained, however, that the “actual” goat had been eaten, that what we saw was only its appearance, and that its “power” had been consumed by spirits.

Most *eleries* have frequent visions of their companions. Some will associate their visions with water or trees; and nearly all will have them only when alone. Many literate adults who were *eleri* as children have told me that they used to play wonderful games with their spirit companions, and that they preferred them much to their human playmates. On the other hand, the spirits will frequently tempt the child to throw itself into the water or do other dangerous things that may result in its death.

When an *eleri* child is asked for a sacrifice by its companions, it must always comply. A woman in Lagos told me that when she was a young girl she saw her companions one day, when crossing Carter Bridge in a bus. They asked her for a gift of £1, and immediately she dropped a note into the water, much to the surprise of her fellow passengers. However, the spirits will “never demand more money than a person

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<sup>1</sup> variant of *abiku*; see Church Missionary Society. *A Dictionary of the Yoruba Language*. Lagos: Church Missionary Society Bookshop, 1913. (p. 88.)

can give.” If well served, they are believed to bring luck and wealth to a family. (Opinions vary on this point, however.)

When the time comes, usually between the ages of four and ten years, the spirits will request the child to return to them. Even though the child is very attached to its mother, it cannot resist the call of the spirits and will “go.”

The mother will often pray for the return of the child, and I know women who claimed to have born the same child seven times. The child is often identified as the previous one by a small scar that was incised on the face or body of the deceased child, and is then frequently found on exactly the same spot on the newborn. Many adults, both literate and illiterate, have shown me such scars of identification on their faces.

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In one case at least I knew about, the parents were expecting a certain mark to appear some time before the baby was born; and I was actually able to witness the scar on the exact place when the child was born.

It is a common thing to hear a man say: “I went away three times before I stayed,” or something like that. Parents of a reborn baby may refer to its previous life: “He is terrified of cars, because he had an accident last time.” Peculiarities of character may often be explained through references to the previous life.

The mother’s grief for the loss of her child is much relieved by the conviction that he will return. But she will “waste her time,” as one informant put it, and if she has to bear one child several times, she can obviously not have as many children as she was hoping for.

Among the Ibos, a mother may get impatient with a “very stubborn child who refuses to stay,” and in such cases the corpse of the baby that has “gone” may be hacked into pieces and thrown into the wind. In this way the unwanted child may be finally destroyed, and it is hoped that the next child will come to stay. I have not found this practice among the Yorubas. They will, on the other hand, “flog” the stubborn child when it has died. When the child returns, it will remember the beating and be afraid to go again.

Powerful charms will be used to prevent the child from returning to the spirits. Iron rings, prepared with special “medicine,” are worn by most *eleris* round the ankles. Sometimes “medicine” will be applied to the scars of identification on the dead baby, thus making sure that, when it returns, it cannot as easily go away.”

If the “medicine” is potent, then the child may find itself unable to follow the call of the spirits when it is time to return to the spirit world. The spirits may threaten at first; then, realising that magic is at work, they are said to desist and will henceforth leave the child alone. The child will then become quite normal and will have no more visions. Some adults can remember the exact occasion when the companions left them. In no case do the visions persist into adult life, because either the child dies (that is, returns to the spirit companions) or it becomes normal (that is, it will be given up by its companions for good).

The *eleri* is often the problem child of the Yoruba family. Many of the ones I have known combine a terrible lust for life with depressions and suicidal tendencies. They are highly temperamental and make high demands on the parents. If a wish is not being fulfilled at once they will threaten to die, and the terrified parents will put up no resistance to the child and will suffer its tyranny in the hope that it may be persuaded to live.

To avoid all these sufferings and disappointments, many mothers wear protective “medicine” in the hair or round the waist while they are pregnant. Little pieces of metal, specially prepared by the medicine man, are intended to prevent the spirit from entering the womb.

Belief in the existence of spirit children appears to be compatible with both Christianity and Islam, and with a certain amount of Western education. Many *eleries* I have met were either Christians or Muslims. Some were clerks, teachers, nurses, etc., and among the people who believed in them were persons of a high degree of European education.

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## **“Yoruba Responses to the Fear of Death”**

Morton-Williams, Peter. “Yoruba Responses to the Fear of Death.” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, vol. 30, no. 1, 1960, pp. 34-40.

Death can, of course, befall one at any age, and the Yoruba are constantly on guard against it, using both magical and religious means to help in escaping it. They make sacrifices to the gods to gain their protection and to avoid their wrath. There are several hundred gods, far too many for a single individual to worship. But, fortunately, the number directly concerned with him, as distinct from the community as a whole, is small. He worships the one proper to members of his lineage, and perhaps another through whose agency he was born, or who gave him his own children. He may also serve yet another after discovering through the help of a diviner that he has been called to its service. A woman also participates in the observances her husband makes.

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The gods not only shield their worshippers, they also give them the blessings Yoruba most value: long life, increasing prosperity, and, above all, children. Yet it may happen that a child, begotten only after repeated sacrifices to a god, dies. Still today in some communities as many as 40 per cent of infants die in their first two years. Some women may suffer a long series of still-born children, or of infants who survive only a few months. The Yoruba distinguish between this sort of series and the child who dies while its siblings live. The death of the latter is believed to be due generally to witchcraft-- a topic we shall return to. But a series of dying infants is held to be qualitatively different from ordinary children, and to be indeed the same child born again and again. There is a name for them, *abiku*, meaning ‘born to die’. It is believed that an *abiku* is a child unwilling to leave its spirit playmates (*ara orun*) and to live on earth. Rites are performed to break its attachment to them. It is commonly vilely dressed and, so I have been told, may even be disfigured, to make it unattractive to them; it usually bears chains or a fetter as a charm to bind it to earthly life, or a rattle to frighten away its spirit companions. It is given one of a set of distinctive names, of which *Durosinmi* (‘Stay and bury me’) is a noteworthy example. Showing further that it is not considered a real child, its circumcision and the cutting of lineage marks on its face may be postponed until its parents are convinced that it is going to remain in the world, and so may be admitted into social life. [...]

The Yoruba admit that they fear witchcraft more than anything else. This is because it is believed to be the most frequent cause of death. When witchcraft strikes children it threatens the parents with ultimate social extinction. They hate it too because, like sorcery, it works in secret and neither the witchcraft nor the witch may be discovered until it is too late.

Every house whose inmates cling to the old religion (and many others too) contains charms to ward off, to neutralize, or to return upon the head of the sender, both witchcraft and sorcery. Most of the amulets

and rings worn by individuals have a similar purpose. Sudden death, called by the Yoruba *iku ojiji*, is dreaded because there is no threat which gives warning and the possibility of its avoidance. It can be

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caused by witchcraft and sorcery as effectively as by Sango's thunderbolts. The witch may attack not because of personal enmity against the victim, but because she is full of hate and must express her hatred by killing, and so directs her enmity against her own kin, against her co-wives and their children, or against any young and vigorous persons who happen to attract her malevolence by some petty act. Likewise, a sorcerer may strike down an enemy's son, because the enemy himself is too powerfully protected to be more directly vulnerable to his sorcery.

A victim may succumb to more slowly acting forms of death through witchcraft or sorcery; but the fear aroused by a sign of the attack may be enough to prompt the victim, if young and comparatively weak, to perform placatory acts-- perhaps ritual, perhaps giving gifts to those whose hostility he thinks he has aroused. A common experience of the overwhelming fear of death is the nightmare, which the Yoruba interpret as a visitation by a suffocating spirit (*Şigidi* or *Şugudu*) sent by a sorcerer. A young person who has had a nightmare may, perhaps with the aid of an elder in the compound or of a diviner, be able to trace the immediate cause of this attack of acute anxiety and

take effective action. Whether the action will be placatory or hostile depends both upon the personalities involved and upon the social situation.

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## **“The Concept of Abiku”**

Mobolade, Timothy. “The Concept of Abiku.” *African Arts*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1973, pp. 62-64.

According to the custom of the Yorubas, an *Abiku* is any child who dies and is reborn several times into the same family; hence, the life-span of an *Abiku* is characteristically very short indeed.

Owing to the ephemeral nature of its life, an *Abiku* completes several consecutive life-cycles with one mother. Practically every attempt of the parents to prevent the *Abiku*'s death proves abortive because, by its nature, the *Abiku* is shrouded in mystery. By means of its occult powers the *Abiku* destroys itself, leaving the parents dejected and frustrated. If the *Abiku* child is a mother's first-born, it is not impossible nor is it uncommon-that she eventually becomes childless in life should the *Abiku* prove implacable, as is common among this peculiar class of children. Moreover, it is part of the Yoruba belief that no *Abiku* ever pledges to stay put in life, which explains why the *Abiku* is indifferent to the plight of its mother and her grief at leading a childless life.

In life, an *Abiku* may even have several mothers one after the other. Once a mother has reached her menopause, the *Abiku* dies and proceeds to pounce on another unsuspecting pregnant woman. Some time ago, I witnessed the case of a woman who stood up amidst a very large congregation in a religious campaign at Ibadan and proclaimed she was an *Abiku*. She went on to inform the gaping spellbound audience that she had been living since the flood and had had several mothers in the process. An aunt of mine, now a mother of six, is also a self-confessed *Abiku*. This aunt takes delight in narrating to her mother

and other relations how much she used to enjoy seeing her mother weeping and sorrowing each time she died.

The Yorubas believe that the *Abikus* form a species of spirit by themselves. As spirits, their places of abode are restricted to secluded and obscure corners of towns and villages, to the inside of the jungles and to road-sides and foot paths in suburban areas. It is believed that *Abiku* spirits are fairly common inside trees, especially large and deified trees like the iroko, baobab and silk-cotton; they also congregate in ant-hills and are believed to loiter about on dung hills as well. If a pregnant woman is to avoid encounters with an *Abiku* spirit, she must not only know where they congregate, but when. It is believed that the *Abiku* spirits love to make the rounds at odd times: shortly before dawn, on hot sunny afternoons, and on dark and gloomy nights. Any pregnant woman who knows this would bide her time and would be wary in her movements so as to avoid coming across an *Abiku* spirit. If a pregnant woman is so luckless that she happens to come across an *Abiku* spirit, the spirit would follow her home, drive away the foetus in her womb, and replace the foetus with itself.

It is the intention of every *Abiku*, the Yorubas believe, to return affluent to its abode after having turned its parents into a wretched couple. The parents would naturally sacrifice anything to make certain the child stays with them; they might even sell almost all their property, becoming poverty-stricken in the process. The wealth which the parents lose in this way is believed to have gone into the coffers of the *Abiku*.

Because of their impish character, these fiendish *Abiku* children are happiest when their mothers are "like Niobe, all tears" at their deaths. It is universally believed among the Yoruba people that a bereaved mother's tears are highly valued in the assembly of the *Abiku* spirits. After each death, the *Abiku* makes a great deal of money from the sale of the tears of the grief-stricken mother. Many bereaved mothers of *Abiku* have refused to weep at the death of their children owing to their knowledge of *Abiku*'s callous character. The dread the Yoruba have for these mysterious children is indicated in the following phrase from the prayer for a new bride: *O ko ni pade Abiku* (May you never come across an *Abiku* child).

Before entering the womb of any mother, the *Abiku* must make a certain pledge concerning the duration or span of its life, and it is significant that no *Abiku* ever pledges longevity. The mother and family are never able to foretell the exact time or day when the life of their *Abiku* child will expire. Prior to their births, some *Abikus* decide to remain alive for as short a period as one day to three months. Some even wait until they have reached the age where they are about to marry before they die; while others choose to die some days after marriage or immediately after the birth of their first child. Those *Abikus* who die in their teens or after reaching adulthood are generally known as *Abiku Abiku*: *O ko ni ri Abiku-Agba* (May your children never suffer death at their youth and adolescence).

Physically most *Abikus* are usually very attractive. However, their beauty must not be referred to, for if such compliments are paid to *Abikus* they will definitely die (and more quickly, too). This belief is supported by the fact that most *Abikus* die at the time their parents begin to admire and cherish them, in the hope that these children grow to survive the parents as heirs.

The *Abiku* infant regularly attends *Abiku* meetings which take place in the dead of night, when almost everyone is in a sound slumber, especially their mothers. At the appropriate time, the *Abiku* infant, as he lies on the bed beside the mother, is suddenly transformed into a grown-up man or woman. In this disguise, it goes to the meeting. On returning, the *Abiku* lies quietly by the side of the mother, changes into an infant again and, in the twinkling of an eye, falls into an apparently innocent childlike sleep, while the mother sleeps on, quite unaware of the whole situation.

It is a continuously difficult task to prevent such children from dying. In spite of this, however, all possible efforts are usually made to ensure that these uncanny children remain alive. In this context, the role of the *Babalawo*, the fetish priest, is particularly important. *Abiku* children have no respect for the *Babalawos*, considering them to be so much “mumbo jumbo.” As a rule, the *Abiku* circumvents the *Babalawo*, disgracing him by making him useless to the desperate

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parents. Despite this fact, the *Babalawo* is nearly always the first man to be sought out by the parents for help. If the *Babalawo* is to be patronised, his reputation must be solidly based on decades of experience and practice. At first, it usually seems that the *Babalawo*'s juju is working well, but almost inevitably the table turns, the potion begins to fail, and some very valuable charms may even unexplainably disappear. The *Babalawo* is mortified at seeing all of his efforts thwarted. But before long, the *Abiku* is back in its old abode, being ceremoniously welcomed by its fiendish spirit-friends “in the region beyond.” It is therefore universally accepted that the devices, efforts, boastings, assurances, and reassurances of the *Babalawo* are all worthless; hence, the saying *Abiku sologun deke* (*Abiku* belies the juju-man's fetishes and gives the jujuman the lie) is proved to be true.

Upon learning that the *Babalawo* is of little or no help, the parents of the *Abiku* will often resort to appeasing, begging, or coaxing the child with names they believe will persuade it to stay. Some of these are: *Durojaiye* (Wait and enjoy life); *Pakuti* (Shun death and stop dying); *Rotimi* (Stay and put up with me); *Omolelebe* (the child should be appeased); and *Eloe* (Appeal). Naming may also express the hope that the *Abiku* will be merciful and refrain from dying. Such names include: *Igbekoyi* (Bush [the popular cemetery for the *Abikus*] has rejected this [*Abiku* child]); *Kokumo* (It does [or will] not die again); *Ajitoni* (It wakes up [and is alive] today, and therefore we wish it many happy returns); *Ajeigbe* (Monetary expenses are never a waste [as our expenses on you shall be no waste]). In other cases, naming may take the form of complaints about the sorrows the child's several deaths have caused them and their neighbors. They believe that perhaps the child will be moved by this to relent and stay with them. Under this class of names are: *Kosoko* (No more hoe is available [to dig any grave]); *Jolokoosimi* (Let the owner of the hoe take a rest); *Anwoko* (We are yet to find a hoe [to dig a grave]). If at the last the above types of naming fail to restrain the child from dying, on the reappearance of such an *Abiku* child the parents will rename it with contemptible names. Expressive of disgust, these are calculated to disgrace the child into a change of heart. Such are: *Kilanko* (Wherefore should the naming be ceremonious?); *Oku* (The dead, the deceased); *Aja* (A common dog); *Omonife* (It cannot be known by any better name than the mere one of a 'child'); and *Tepontan* (No longer feared, respected and cherished).

It may appear for some time that the *Abiku* is relenting as a result of the parents' naming devices. Very soon after their hopes are raised, however, the ineffectuality of the names becomes evident as eventually the *Abiku* callously dies. The bereaved parents may thus become so frustrated and demoralized that they resort to punishing or torturing the corpse in such a way as to leave definitive, visible signs of physical punishment or torture on the body. Actions of this sort are not merely acts of despair, however. The Yorubas believe that the *Abiku* will be excommunicated from the assembly of its spirit-comrades should it appear to them with any of those marks of ordeal over its body, and that therefore when it is reborn, it must necessarily stay alive, having been ostracized by its fiendish colleagues of “the region beyond.” The most outstanding proof of this concept is the fact that those *Abikus* whose corpses had been tortured are reborn with the evident corresponding marks and signs all over their bodies. Thus, the corpse whose fingers were cut comes back as a child with very stumpy fingers; the one burnt black is as black as a witch's cat upon

reappearance; the one lacerated appears again with the scar stripes. Very unfortunately, however, although some recalcitrant *Abikus* are kept living by this method, such children generally turn out to be idiots and lunatics. They are thus a liability and a blemish in families that would otherwise be noble, reputable and dignified.

Skeptics and critics may question why parents do not refuse to rear *Abiku* children. The answer is simply that such a refusal is impossible and impractical among a people who believe that children are the most important and sacred byproducts of the union of a couple and that childlessness is a curse and a blemish-- in fact an indelible stain-- and therefore a constant source of sorrow in any home. Childlessness is one of the chief causes of broken homes: the husband takes on another wife or divorces the first one; the woman on her own part may also divorce or may be tempted to have clandestine affairs with many men hoping that things may change for the better.

Owing to their recalcitrant, callous and inexorable nature, *Abikus* are generally feared in all Yorubaland. They are shrouded in evil and mystery; a dire curse on any home they enter; an ephemeral yet perennial source of sorrow.

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## **“Mothers’ management of childhood diseases in Yorubaland”**

Feyisetan, Bamikale J., Sola Asa, and Joshua A. Ebigbola. “Mothers’ management of childhood diseases in Yorubaland: the influence of cultural beliefs.” *Health Transition Review*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1997, pp. 221-234.

### **Belief in *abiku* and the effect of this belief on disease management**

In addition to disease-specific questions, the respondents were also asked to indicate whether they believed that there are *abiku* children. Panel 1 of Table 4 suggests that the majority of the women believe in *abiku* children. While 56.2 per cent of the women believed in *abiku* children, 30.6 per cent did not share this belief and 13.2 per cent were unsure of their feelings. Asked how an *abiku* can be identified, mothers who believed in *abiku* gave such responses as repeated deaths; evidence of deformity from past deaths; frequent indisposition; non-responsiveness of their illnesses to modern medical care; and verification from traditional healers or soothsayers. Both the focus-group discussions and in-depth interviews point to high mortality rates among *abiku* children. In a focus-group discussion among women aged 40 years and above in Ijero, a participant exclaimed:

Why do you think we call them *abiku*? It is because they die at will... they really don't have to be sick for long before they die.

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**Table 4**  
**Percentages of women believing in *abiku*<sup>a</sup>**

<b>Factors</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>N of cases</b>
I. All women	56.2 (13.2)	1502
II. Education		
None	61.5 (14.1)	455
Primary	57.2 (12.2)	540
Secondary & higher	50.3 (13.4)	507
III. Age (years)		
15-24	48.6 (15.9)	276
25-29	53.1 (15.6)	307
30-34	56.3 (12.0)	300
35-39	55.6 (10.1)	248
40-49	62.6 (13.1)	321
Age unknown	78.0 (6.0)	50
IV. Rural-urban residence		
Rural	55.0 (12.7)	724
Urban	57.3 (13.6)	778
V. Religion		
Catholic	54.1 (12.4)	218
Protestant	51.0 (16.4)	781
Other Christian	69.3 (8.9)	358
Islam	55.2 (7.6)	145

<sup>a</sup> Percentages of 'don't know' responses in parentheses

Table 4 also shows that education is significantly negatively correlated with the percentage of women who believe in *abiku* (panel II); age is positively correlated with the likelihood that a woman will believe in *abiku* (panel III); urban-rural residence is not related to the belief in *abiku* (panel IV); and 'Other Christian' mothers are more likely than any other religious group to believe in *abiku* (panel V).

To determine the net effect of these characteristics, we estimated a logistic regression model that relates the likelihood of believing in *abiku* to the socio-economic factors. The coefficients of the model which are presented in Table 5 indicate that education has no significant impact on the belief in *abiku* once other variables are controlled; mothers between 15 and 24 years of age are less likely than older mothers to believe in *abiku*, and mothers over 24 are equally likely to share this belief; the belief in *abiku* is equally strong in both the rural and urban areas; and religion has an effect on this belief with the 'Other Christian' women still ore likely than any other religious group to retain this belief.

## “Oral Yoruba Àbíké Texts”

McCabe, Douglas. “Histories of Errancy: Oral Yoruba ‘Àbíké’ Texts and Soyinka’s ‘Abiku.’”  
*Research in African Literatures*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2002, pp. 45-74.

Àbíké literally means “one who is born, dies”-- though the compact “born to die,” with its implication of a fated or deliberately planned death, has become the standard translation. *Ifá babaláwo* apply the term to children who have secret plans to die at a certain time in their upbringing, only to be born again soon afterwards, repeating this itinerary of death and birth until they are spiritually “fettered” (*dè*) by their parents and forced to stay in the world. At present, the term *àbíké* enjoys a hegemony in Yoruba cultural discourse over other extant and current terms used by the Yoruba for the same phenomenon, such as *èré*, *emèrè*, *ẹléré*, *ẹgbẹ*, *òrun*, *ẹlẹgbẹ*, *l’olówó-omọ*, *abáfẹfẹrin*, *ẹlẹmìíkẹmìí*, and *ẹjínuwọn*.

According to Babalola Ifatoogun, a senior *Ifá* diviner from the Oyo- Yoruba town of Ilobu, *àbíké* are “thieves from heaven...They come from heaven to steal on earth” (*Àwọn sì lolè òrun... Àwọn yíí ló wá jalè láyè làtòrun*). More precisely, *àbíké* are an *ẹgbẹ ará òrun*, a “club” (*ẹgbẹ*) of “heaven-people” (*ará òrun*) whose founding purpose is to siphon off riches from *ilé aráyé*, the “houses” (*ilé*) of the “world-people” (*ará-ayé*). *Àbíké* further the aims of their robber-band by using children as a cover for their criminal operation. Each *àbíké* is born into an *ilé* and poses as a child that is either sweet-natured and beautiful (and therefore likely to be lavished with good things) or sickly and disturbed (and therefore likely to be the beneficiary of expensive sacrifices). In such a way, the *àbíké* quickly accumulates money, cloth, food, and livestock. Then, at a certain time and by a certain method prearranged secretly with its *ẹgbẹ*, the *àbíké* dies and takes the spiritual portion of its loot back to heaven. After dividing the spoils with its *ẹgbẹ*, it prepares to re-enter the world and fleece the same or another *ilé*.

The only way for an *ilé* to stop being robbed by an *àbíké* is to “fetter” (*dè*) it spiritually, just as one physically fetters a thief or similar low-life, such as a goat or a slave. To fetter an *àbíké*, the *ilé* must first discover its “sealed words” (*àdẹ ohùn*), namely, the binding and top-secret (*àdẹ*) oaths it swore to its *ẹgbẹ* regarding the specific time, circumstance, and method of its return to heaven. Because these contractual statements are “secrets” (*àşírí*), only an *Ifá* “father-of-secrets” (*babaláwo*) can “hear” (*gbígbọ*) them and “disseminate” (*tú*) them to the *ilé*. Knowing the *àbíké*’s sealed words enables an *ilé* to fetter the *àbíké* in one of the following three ways: by “blocking” (*dí*) the precise conditions necessary for its death, as one blocks a road or a womb; by “publicizing” (*tú*) that the *àbíké*’s secret aims have been discovered; and by disguising (*àmin*) the *àbíké* so that it will not be recognized when its *ẹgbẹ* comes to abduct it from the *ilé*. If an *ilé* successfully fetters an *àbíké* and “forces it to stay” (*dá dúró*) in the world, the *àbíké*’s *ẹgbẹ* will try to “snatch” it (*yọ*) from the house and bring it back to heaven. “Snatching from the snake-pit” (*yíyọ lófin*) is what the *ẹgbẹ* calls picking up (*wá mú*) one of its members from the world. In their eyes, a house in the world (*ilé ayé*) is a prison (*ẹwọn*); one of their members is

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doing time there, so they come and snatch it away (*yọ ọ kúrò*).” [...]

This official representation of *àbíké* as an errant *ẹgbẹ* robbing the fixed *ilé* is far from politically innocent, if only because *ẹgbẹ* and *ilé* are loaded terms in the context of Yoruba society and political history. *Ilé* means not only one’s current house and town of residence, but also one’s entire patri-lineage past and present, and the ancestral city to which the lineage traces its historical origins. The foundation of every *ilé* or “house” in all of its senses is sexual reproduction; having children maintains the lineage’s history

and extends it both temporally (into the future) and geographically (into new houses and towns). *Egbé*, by contrast, denotes any elective club or association based not upon lineage, ancestral city, marriage, or procreation, but upon an activity or project shared in common by the members (such as hunting, selling wares in a market, or worshipping an *òrisà*) and to the secrets associated with that activity or project (skills, sacred texts, rituals, records, or the activities themselves). Such clubs/associations often start as groups of friends, tend to be separated along gender lines, have an elected leader, often meet on a weekly basis, and are neither hierarchically organized nor constitutively tied to a particular geographical location.

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Traditionally, they included benign gangs of neighborhood children, professional/trade associations (e.g., hunters' guilds), *òrisà* cults (e.g., awo *Şàngó*), and groups whose activities and membership were more covert and ultra-secret, such as witches and thieves. *Ilé* and *egbé* thus constitute two contrasting templates of sociopolitical organization among the Yoruba: the male-dominated *ilé* is based on marriage, lineage, procreation, geography, and hierarchical structures of seniority and inheritance; the male-or female-only *egbé* is based on voluntary membership, mutual benefit, pursuit of a shared nonreproductive purpose, and group secrecy (the keeping of esoteric or specialized knowledge, practices, skills).

Potential rivals in theory, *egbé* and *ilé* historically interpenetrate in local Yoruba politics, with people having loyal ties to both. A single *egbé* is composed of people from many different *ilé* (patrilineages, ancestral cities) and can cover a wide geographical area. One of the primary aims of some *egbé*, such as the Egúngún cult or female worshippers of virtually any *òrisà*, is to protect or restore women's fertility-- the material basis for the *ilé*'s hegemony. *Egbé* (in the form of *òrisà* cults, hunters' guilds, or the *ògbóni*) have historically played a pivotal role in maintaining or shifting the balance of power between different *ilé*, sometimes bolstering the authority of chiefs and kings belonging to one *ilé*, but sometimes also undermining it and opening the way for political resistance and change. Similarly, one's *ilé* can often determine to which *egbé* one belongs; one becomes a warrior or a worshipper of *Şàngó* because one's parent or patrilineage belonged to the warrior profession or the *Şàngó* cult. Despite this practical interpenetration of *egbé* and *ilé*, most Yoruba today would say that one's membership in an *ilé* is more important than and takes precedence over one's membership in an *egbé*.

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**Abiku (1967)**  
**By Wole Soyinka (Nigeria)**

Wanderer child. It is the same child who dies and returns again and again to plague the mother.  
--Yoruba belief

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

5 Must I weep for goats and cowries  
For palm oil and sprinkled ask?  
Yams do not sprout amulets  
To earth Abiku's limbs.

10 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.

15 I am the squirrel teeth, cracked  
The riddle of the palm; remember  
This, and dig me deeper still into  
The god's swollen foot.

20 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  
White dew suckles flesh-birds  
Evening befriends the spider, trapping  
Flies in wine-froth;

25 Night, and Abiku sucks the oil  
From lamps. Mothers! I'll be the  
Suppliant snake coiled on the doorstep  
Yours the killing cry.

30 The ripest fruit was saddest  
Where I crept, the warmth was cloying.  
In silence of webs, Abiku moans, shaping  
Mounds from the yolk



Wole Soyinka  
born 1934