
*Original Paper***Cultural Study on “Abiku” - Wole Soyinka Poem**Adimasu Tumato¹

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Abstract

Cultural Study on Wole Soyinka Poem is to analyze the cultural aspect used in the poem “Abiku”. Through search of aesthetic flavor of written or oral literature together with appreciating the beauty and way of life in particular culture, this analysis of poem is done to show Nigerian culture underlying in Wole Soyinka’s poem. This study is considered to be very important in entertaining the aesthetic pleasure of the poem “Abiku” and developing experience of reader, trainer and researchers in this area. The other one is acquiring literary knowledge gained through analysis on the basis of selected cultural study principle. To bring the intended result, I used the descriptive analytical study approach that uses textual analysis: some words, phrases, or verses- of the poem are cautiously selected as pertinent primary source of data. The reading of Abiku-Wole Soyinka poem is strong in diction, versification, allusion but easily understood, plainly structured and highly organized. When I come to points that indicate culture, first two verses show Yoruba women have culture of wearing bangles to themselves and their children. Culture of superstition of Ogbanje are in verses 3-4, growing and breeding culture is mentioned in verses 5-8, storytelling and belief in ancestral god are also in verses 13-16, and culture of mourning or burial ceremony and using traditional medicine revealed in verses 17-28 are some cultural aspects mentioned in the poem.

Keywords: aesthetic, flavors, culture, gods, analysis, ogbanje

1. Introduction

This study focuses on poem analysis in pursue of cultural study by analyzing some indications mentioned in the Abiku a poem by popular noble prize winner Nigerian author Wole Soyinka. Here the culture pregnant words of the poem will be deeply analyzed to get some cultural events or activities of Nigerian Yoruba people. Thus, this study paper contains background of the study, statement of the problem, the phrase that indicate the reason why this study is carried out, delimitation of this study, analysis of the poem based on some selected theoretical framework and conclusion.

1.1 Background of the Study

Culture is total aspect of people’s every life that is revealed in their daily experiences. It is possible to say culture is underlying rule that guide people’s action or/and behavior in everyday movements of life. This is not the clear cut definition of culture but I simply lay a ground for it. An Oxford dictionary defines culture as the custom and belief, arts, way of life and social organization of a particular country or group. This aligns with the description put by Hofstede and other scholars that says culture as software of the human mind: beliefs, values, and internalized interaction patterns (Hofstede, 2001). Culture can be also defined from different stand points: way of, arts/music/literature, belief/attitude, and growing/breeding. Though these all can be wrapped up in way of life, it may be civilized way to explain building elements separately to make the concept vivid. In way of life we get arts, music, literature in which beliefs or attitude germinate and growing subsistent up to cash crops and plant together with group/country specific way of breeding different types of animals. Definition of culture goes back to its very root in Latin origin. The Latin word cultura means clear. It is also a derivative of

the verb *colo* (infinitive *colere*), meaning “to tend,” “to cultivate,” and “to till,” among other things (Tucker, 1931). Concept of culture pertinently produces different view in different areas or disciplines. As Hanna Musiol in Michael Ryan (2010) explains culture is often national in character. The culture of Japan is distinct in many respects from that of nearby China though we can find similarities in these very different national locations. These similarities may be born of worldwide media institutions or broadcasting and movement of goods from some developed countries such as America, Canada, China, Japan etc. to developing countries like Ethiopia. This difference can be intra-national or interdisciplinary. In other expression, culture of Amhara region differs from that of Wolaytta or what is culture in sociology may slightly differ from the whatness of it in literature respectively. Similarly the concept and meaning of culture may stand differently in linguistics, psychology, economics, theology and the like. This characteristics of culture openly invited scholars to investigate the characteristic similarity and difference as well as the total entity of it establishing cultural study. Thus, this indicates the researcher to cling to the intended aspect of cultural studies he/she planned to show.

Cultural study is the discipline that depicts the feature of people’s everyday life. It is relatively new discipline emerged late 20th century in Europe. It claims its beginning point as Birmingham University in United Kingdom. A dictionary of cultural and critical theory (2010) reported that the founder of contemporary cultural study in 1964 was Richard Hoggart within English Department of Birmingham University. This was instigated bouncing cross-disciplinary exploration of areas within media, youth culture, education, gender, and race by Stuart Hall and Richard Johnson. This was fundamental instance that cultural ideology, hegemony, and struggles over meanings in everyday life of people, ethnographic studies inside a framework of political and social change with exploration of theoretical framework highly developed. In everyday life, people under government of culture use different tools to express their feeling: joy or happiness, sorrow or sadness, relationship with others, intimacy and farness by using art, music or literature. Therefore, anyone who read the novel, short stories or poem written in some specific country or group of people in ones country can pick up some cultural elements of that particular country on which the literature basis. Likewise, this cultural study is intended to carry on the poem “Abiku” written by popular Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Investigation or research activity is gate opening key to knowledge economy of scholarly people in intellectual society. Through this way intellectuals touch and scratch different entities and phenomena focusing on recent solution for problems among the people. And similar studies are common in search of aesthetic flavor of written or oral literature together with appreciating the beauty and way of life in particular culture. Therefore, this study or analysis of poem is done to show Nigerian culture underlying in Wole Soyinka’s poem and its building components. This poem is chosen because though the author wrote different types of literary genres including novel, short stories, dairies, play script, autobiography and poems, there was no attention given to this poem in this aspect. However, this poem is believed to be pertinent to indicate some Yoruba culture of Nigerian tribe. The other reason is that the I have been attracted by this poem which conceives important cultural aspect of Yoruba. Based on this rationale, this paper attempts to analyze the poem Abiku by using cultural dimension principles- culture is ordinary by Raymond Williams (1989). To carry out this investigation and come up with expected outcomes, I tried to answer the following question:

What aspect of culture is found in the poem “Abiku”?

1.3 Objective of the Study

1.3.1 General Objective of the Study

The general objective of the study is to analyze the cultural aspect used in the poem “Abiku”.

1.3.2 Specific Objective of the Study

The specific objective is to find out het aspect of Yoruba culture indicated in the given poem.

1.4 Significance of the Study

If well done, this study is considered to be very important in entertaining the aesthetic pleasure of the

poem I selected in the first hand and developing experience of reader, trainer and researchers in this area on the other hand. The other one is acquiring literary knowledge gained through analysis on the basis of selected cultural study principle. Additional significance is inspiring the scholars to carry out established and highly organized analysis in different genre of literature. In line with this Di (2000) in Adimasu (2015) explains that through research in literature scholars will contribute much by way of providing clues which can promote a better literary appreciation. This contribution can surely help understand different maxims of social, cultural, political and other context of culture. Again this research or study would add my curiosity and motivate the other investigation by opening appetite to further exert utmost effort in covering untouched crude part of the culture. The other thing is it reveals the part of Nigerian culture and the style how the author inscribed these issues in his poem.

1.5 Delimitation of the Study

Having one literary genre, a scholar can interpret it in different way for different purpose based on different theoretical principle. From these multi purposeful directions, this study focuses only on analyzing underlying cultural aspect of the given poem.

1.6 Method of the Study

This study is descriptive analytical study that uses textual analysis. Some parts- words, phrases, or verses- of the poem are cautiously selected as pertinent primary source of data. The other data that are considered to be the secondary have been obtained through reading and assessing related writings and studies by other scholars. So data or extracts from the poem have been analyzed thoroughly to disclose cultural aspect mentioned in the poem, Abiku of Wole Soyinka.

2. Analysis of the Poem-Abiku

2.1 Introduction

This section focuses on the poem's cultural entities that were used as base for the author to write this poem. In the analysis, it is not the whole poem's ideas that the poem bears but only culture indicating part has been focused to bring about the intended outcome of the study. Therefore, this part may be the words or the phrases in the verse or the verse itself and more than that of the verse.

2.2 Analysis

As mentioned above culture is ordinary phenomenon that people produce, grow and consume in their everyday life (Raymond, 1989). As we saw the poem under analysis, it contains the words or phrases that talk about Nigerian Yoruba customs, traditions, and beliefs that are practiced in daily activity of Yoruba people. The reading of Abiku-Wole Soyinka poem is strong in diction, versification, allusion but easily understood, plainly structured and highly organized. When we come to points that indicate culture, our focus primarily falls on first two verses.

(1) *In vain your bangles cast*

(2) *Charmed circles at my feet*

These verses show that Nigerian Yoruba women have culture of *wearing bangles to themselves (1st line) and newborns (2nd line)*. Even though the jewelry culture is common all over the world, the difference here is putting it in infants as they born.

The other indication of cultural elements in the poem is found on third and fourth lines-verses. Here I come to understand that in Nigerian Yoruba people have *superstition* or tradition that if one infant die after birth they believe that it comes again and reenters to its mother's womb to be born again and again. This is shown in the phrases *... calling for the first (3rd line)...repeated time (4th line)*. This idea is also featured in lines 9-12. They call this "Ogbanje" in their culture (Chinua Achebe 1958). They believe Ogbanje even kills its mother.

(3) *I am Abiku, calling for the first*

(4) *And repeated time.*

(9) *So when the snail is burnt in his shell,*

- (10) *Whet the heated fragment*, brand me
 (11) Deeply on the breast – you must know him
 (12) When *Abiku calls again*.

Next to this four lines-verses of the poem (Lines 5-8) talks about Yoruba's growing and breeding culture in Nigeria. Simply in the merged verses: "***Must I weep for goats and cowries, for palm oil and sprinkled ash? Yams do not sprout amulets to earth Abiku's limbs,***" we find that *goats* from animal farming and palm oil and yams are familiar agricultural habit there in Yoruba. From this goats may be prominent animal farming in Yoruba Nigerians.

- (5) Must I weep for *goats* and *cowries*
 (6) For *palm oil* and sprinkled ash?
 (7) *Yams* do not sprout amulets
 (8) To earth Abiku's limbs.

When we come to verses 13-16, the esteemed author, Wole Soyinka informs us about the culture of *storytelling* and *belief in ancestral gods*. Here it is clear that Yoruba people pass down their cultural belief through telling folk story designed to teach generation such kind of traditions of the tribe. Here also the belief about powerfulness of wanderer /Ogbanje that ignite fear in people is told. "... squirrel teeth... cracked... riddle of palm... etc.," indicate powerfulness and "...dig... dipper... god's swollen foot..." reveals the fear abide on people that should be protected.

- (13) I am the *squirrel teeth, cracked*
 (14) The *riddle of the palm*; remember
 (15) This, and *dig me deeper* still into
 (16) The *god's swollen* foot.

In the rest of poem verse 17-28 also discloses spiritual culture or custom of Yoruba people. It is expressed, to some extent, repeating some already analyzed entities such as wanderer or Ogbanje in lines 17 & 18. Connected with this, some other culture mentioned in 17-28 are *culture of mourning* in death of newly born infant, belief *spider's hunting system* (trapping flies at night), *using oil lamp* to light the darkness and use of *snake medicine at the doorstep*.

- (17) Once and the *repeated time, ageless*
 (18) Though *I puke*, and when you pour
 (19) *Libations*. Each finger points me near
 (20) The way I came, where
 (21) The ground is *wet with mourning*
 (22) *White dew suckles* flesh-birds
 (23) Evening *befriends* the spider, trapping
 (24) Flies in wine-froth;
 (25) Night, and *Abiku sucks the oil*
 (26) From lamps. Mothers! I'll be the
 (27) Suppliant *snake coiled on the doorstep*
 (28) Yours the *killing cry*.

The last stanza or last 4 verses indicate the culture *bitter sadness/mourning/* and *burial ceremony* of infant body just like adults in other part of country's culture. This seems to show the value they give for peace.

- (29) The *ripest fruit* was *saddest*
 (30) Where *I crept*, the warmth was *cloying*
 (31) In *silence of webs*, Abiku *moans*, shaping
 (32) *Mounds* from the yolk

3. Conclusion

To conclude, this poem inscribed Nigerian Yoruba cultural aspects as follows. These are female's wearing of cultural jewelry, belief of people about wanderer or Ogbanje, culture of people rearing goats & yams and grow palm oil, belief of Ogbanje, cultural storytelling, belief in cultural or ancestral gods, culture of mourning in death of baby during birth, belief that spider traps (hunts) at evening, culture of using oil lamps to avoid darkness, culture of using snake medicine putting on doorsteps/fear of snake by people and culture of burying. Again the wanderer or Ogbanje the poem symbolizes reuse of primitive culture or ideology in modern world and harm the nation. Here, mother symbolized the nation-Nigeria/Yoruba and wanderer represents culture-primitive/tradition.

However, in my opinion, the belief about wanderer and mourning or burial ceremony is unscientific and waste of time for productive people. Therefore, it should be improved.

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Glossary

Wanderer child (Ogbanje): It is the same child who dies and returns again and again to plague the mother. – Yoruba belief.

Wole Soyinka was born in 1934 at Abeokuta in western Nigeria. He won Nobel Prize for literature in 1986. With 20 works, he is considered the greatest writer of Africa.

Appendix

- (1) In vain your bangles cast
- (2) Charmed circles at my feet
- (3) I am Abiku, calling for the first
- (4) And repeated time.
- (5) Must I weep for goats and cowries
- (6) For palm oil and sprinkled ash?
- (7) Yams do not sprout amulets
- (8) To earth Abiku's limbs.
- (9) So when the snail is burnt in his shell,
- (10) Whet the heated fragment, brand me

- (11) Deeply on the breast – you must know him
- (12) When Abiku calls again.
- (13) I am the squirrel teeth, cracked
- (14) The riddle of the palm; remember
- (15) This, and dig me deeper still into
- (16) The god's swollen foot.
- (17) Once and the repeated time, ageless
- (18) Though I puke, and when you pour
- (19) Libations. Each finger points me near
- (20) The way I came, where
- (21) The ground is wet with mourning
- (22) White dew suckles flesh-birds
- (23) Evening befriends the spider, trapping
- (24) Flies in wine-froth;
- (25) Night, and Abiku sucks the oil
- (26) From lamps. Mothers! I'll be the
- (27) Suppliant snake coiled on the doorstep
- (28) Yours the killing cry.
- (29) The ripest fruit was saddest
- (30) Where I crept, the warmth was cloying
- (31) In silence of webs, Abiku moans, shaping
- (32) Mounds from the yolk