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**The close bond between *ogbanje* daughters and their fathers in the
novels *Things Fall Apart* and *The Bride Price***

**O forte vínculo entre as filhas *ogbanjes* e seus pais nos romances *O
mundo se despedaça* e *Preço de noiva***

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria comprises over 200 ethnic groups, making it the most multi-ethnic nation in West Africa. As part of both the Igbo and the Yorubá cultures, *ogbanje/abiku* are children who are born to die and then return to be reborn by the same mother. This phenomenal cycle has been narrated in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* (1976). Based on Achebe (1986) and other scholars, this paper analyzes the *ogbanje* phenomenon and draws a parallel between both novels, bringing to light the close bond between *ogbanje* daughters and their fathers. As a result, the paper points out a connection by unveiling a shared attribute of 'manliness' between Okonkwo and his daughter with a focus on the neglect of local traditions. The comparative analysis is intended as a pilot study of a broader investigation of culture in the fields of literary and cultural studies.

KEYWORDS: *Ogbanje*; Igbo culture; Nigerian novels; Chinua Achebe; Buchi Emecheta

RESUMO

A Nigéria é formada por mais de 200 grupos étnicos, tornando-se a nação mais multiétnica na África Ocidental. Os termos *ogbanje/abiku*, presentes na cultura dos ibos e dos iorubás, referem-se às crianças destinadas a morrer e que, após a morte, renascem constantemente da mesma mãe. Esse fenômeno cíclico tem sido incorporado nos romances *O mundo se despedaça* (1958), de Chinua Achebe, e *Preço de noiva* (1976), de Buchi Emecheta. Ancorado em Achebe (1986) e em outros teóricos, o estudo tem por objetivo analisar o fenômeno *ogbanje* e comparar esses dois romances, lançando luz sobre a forte ligação que envolve as filhas *ogbanjes* e seus pais. Como resultado, a pesquisa aponta significativa conexão entre o pai Okonkwo e sua filha, quanto à masculinidade, com foco na negligência às tradições locais. A análise comparativa serve

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de estudo-piloto para uma investigação mais ampla da cultura no campo dos estudos literários e culturais.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Ogbanje*; Cultura ibo; Romances nigerianos; Chinua Achebe; Buchi Emecheta

The past is the ancestors', the present belongs to the living, and the future to the unborn. The deities stand in the same situation to the living as do the ancestors and the unborn, obeying the same laws, suffering the same agonies and uncertainties [...]the past is not a mystery and that although the future (the unborn) is yet unknown, it is not a mystery to the Yoruba but co-existent in present consciousness.
(Wole Soyinka)

Introduction

The belief that there is life after death is common in many religions practiced across the globe. That belief is an essential component of many African cultures, and often influences the mindset and practices in many societies in general. Notwithstanding the fact that Africans have embraced Islam and Christianity, many of their dogmas and views stem from domestic traditional religions and cultures (FALOLA, 2003). To some realists, death is the full termination of life. Others, on the contrary, perceive death as provisional and, therefore, an interruption of a specific cycle leading to transcendence over death.

Many African writers have linked these views of life and death, and their physical and metaphysical import in their productions. Such dual imaginings enable readers to encounter fascinating parallel worlds, where myth and reality coalesce. In an attempt to apprehend the nature of some of the West African spiritual and literary traditions, Cooper (1998, p. 39) states that

It is, of course, true that Nigeria's nationhood was artificially constructed by the British, and Soyinka's Yoruba and Achebe's Igbo backgrounds differ in fundamental ways. And where are Okri's roots to be found, given that his family migrated from one side of the country to the other? Different again is the past in Kojo Laing's Ghana, to say nothing of Cheney-Coker's Sierra Leone, which has a unique history entangled with the mutations forged by slavery. What is shared, however, is precisely a cultural milieu of borrowing, reading, and cross referencing; of Yoruba, Igbo, Akan or any other proverbs, tales or poetry; what is in common is a militant appropriation of devices, tools, narrative structures and poetic images, that will serve the purpose of proving that literature and art are not the preserve of the West, and that writing is not the sole form of literature [...].

There are some postcolonial novels – inside and outside West Africa – in which magical and real elements are combined, e.g. *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952), *My Life in the*

Bush of Ghosts (1954), and *The Witch-Herbalist of the Remote Town* (1981) by Amos Tutuola; *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) by Chinua Achebe; *The Famished Road* (1991) by Ben Okri; *Terra sonâmbula [Sleepwalking Land]* (1992), *A varanda do frangipani [Under the Frangipani]* (1996), and *O último voo do flamingo [The Last Flight of the Flamingo]* (2000) by Mia Couto, to name but a few.

Making up the majority of the Nigerian population, the Igbo and the Yòrubá share common doctrines and socio-cultural practices. One particular belief that bonds them together is the myth of wicked-spirit children, the “born-to-die” *ogbanje* (for the Igbo) and *abiku* (for the Yòrubá). According to Ebhomienlen (2015), this “spirit” child “[...] 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” (p. 143). It is worth mentioning that both Wole Soyinka and John Pepper Clark explored this issue in their 1967 eponymous poems, which are entitled “Abiku”.

Given the powerful cultural rootedness of *ogbanje* in Igbo cosmology, Chinua Achebe and Buchi Emecheta portray *ogbanje* children in their novels. Being themselves Igbo, both novelists were brought up and exposed to particular cultural elements within their ethnic group, such as the *ogbanje* phenomenon. On the strength of their corresponding ethno-socio-cultural background, these authors powerfully embody a wide range of indigenous traditional expressions in their literary productions.

This paper discusses Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958), and Emecheta’s *The Bride Price* (1976) as narratives of the special bond between *ogbanje* female characters and their fathers. In an attempt to comprehend the *ogbanje* phenomenon, our research is based on Achebe (1986) and other scholars who devoted themselves to the study of the aforesaid cultural belief. The analysis will unveil a shared attribute of ‘manliness’ between the characters Okonkwo and his daughter, Ezinma, with a focus on how the neglect of local traditions drives the plot of the novel.

1 Children destined to die: cyclical reincarnation or sickle cell disease?

In *The world of the Ogbanje* (1986), Chinwe Achebe investigates the procedures adopted by traditional healers to identify and treat the *ogbanje*. Once the phenomenon is diagnosed, the Igbo *dibia* – mediator between the human and the spirit world – makes use of different divination/healing techniques in order to prevent the evil spirit from

reincarnating. Some procedures consist of sacrifices, rituals, and small lacerations with a sharp razor on some parts of the person's body (p. 44). *Ogbanje* children are believed to exhibit the following behaviors/symptoms: talking to oneself, hearing voices, screaming, being struck dumb, often getting ill (high fever), standing out the traditional system, having violent nightmares, being bad tempered, stubborn, rebellious, among other occurrences (ACHEBE, 1986; EBHOMIENLEN, 2015).

Dr. Sunday T. C. Ilechukwu – a psychiatrist and neurologist – conducted an interview with three Igbo traditional healers who are seen as having deep knowledge of the *ogbanje* phenomenon. Two participants in the survey, identified as J1 and J2, list the characteristics of *ogbanje* women as:

1. Normal women who, upon getting married, begin to exhibit abnormal behavior;
2. Usually bright students, especially girls who have study difficulties around examination time (“brain fog”); they are problem-free between examinations;
3. Characteristic problem of excessive tears (epiphora) as if they were weeping without appropriate emotional provocation;
4. Socially and academically successful women who “bring shame to their family” by exhibiting masculine-typed behavior (smoking, public drinking, hanging out in bars); financial extravagance; repeated refusal of marriage suitors;
5. Women who have difficulty with feminine sex roles, e.g., infertility, or difficult pregnancies, frequent miscarriages, marital discord but normal pregnancy and pleasant behavior as soon as they return to parental homestead;
6. Persons who have mysterious diseases that are not diagnosable or effectively treatable by modern medical methods;
7. Prototypical dreams relating to mammy water, water, masquerades, snakes, dogs;
8. Rapidly changing fortunes;
9. Rapidly and dramatically changing health status including sudden death. (ILECHUKWU, 2007, p. 246).

Some scholars have analyzed the *ogbanje* phenomenon from a medical perspective, endeavoring to establish a connection between this cultural belief and sickle cell disease¹. Nzewi (2001) examines the symptoms of 100 children labeled as “malevolent *ogbanje*”, comparing them to their family history and infant mortality experience. The results demonstrated that 70 out of 80 children had sickle cell disease. In addition to that, they had been constantly hospitalized due to sickle-cell-related complications.

¹ Sickle cell disease is a group of inherited red blood cell disorders that affect hemoglobin, the protein that carries oxygen through the body. Also, according to the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute of the United States (2022), sickle cell disease is a lifelong illness. A blood and bone marrow transplant is currently the only cure for sickle cell disease, but there are effective treatments that can reduce symptoms and prolong life. For further information, refer to : <https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/sickle-cell-disease>.

In the same vein, Asakitikpi (2008) links the *ogbanje* phenomenon to existing medical conditions. He asserts that the mortality rate of children under five is still alarming in Nigeria, and this is so due to the perpetuating belief in the “born-to-die” *ogbanje*. The author states that society’s culturally constructed beliefs can affect its members’ expectations. Besides influencing mothers’ perception towards childhood diseases, this specific cultural conviction “[...] 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.” (p. 59). If a child is believed to be an *ogbanje*, their parents are more likely to take their offspring to a traditional medicine man than to an adequate health center. As a solution to this problematic scenario, Asakitikpi suggests that health workers take into consideration all the traditional beliefs that might harmfully influence mothers’ attitude and perception toward advances in scientific knowledge.

Ilechukwu (2007) reports some findings on the deployment of cultural cosmology in shaping individual and group adaptive responses. His analysis led to the conclusion that the concepts of *ogbanje* exceed the prospects of physical death. They represent the research participants’ assumptions that early mortality is not the projection “[...] of a Supreme God but an aberration.” (p. 253). The researcher also introduces some common *ogbanje/abiku* given names, and they all semantically turn out to express mournful ideas, such as grief, supplication, denial, and resignation. He concludes that such names may provoke stigmatization of children, especially at school.

2 The close bond between the *ogbanje* daughters and their fathers

Let us take a look at the poem “Abiku” prior to getting immersed in the two novels that constitute our *corpus*. John Pepper Clark – a Nigerian poet and playwright – depicts how grief-stricken traditional community members perceive an *abiku* child:

Coming and going these several seasons,
Do stay out on the baobab tree,
Follow where you please your kindred spirits
If indoors is not enough for you.
True, it leaks through the thatch
When floods brim the banks,
And the bats and the owls
Often tear in at night through the eaves,
And at harmattan, the bamboo walls

Are ready tinder for the fire
 That dries the fresh fish up on the rack.
 Still, it's been the healthy stock
 To several fingers, to many more will be
 Who reach to the sun.
 No longer then bestride the threshold
 But step in and stay
 For good. We know the knife scars
 Serrating down your back and front
 Like beak of the sword-fish,
 And both your ears, notched
 As a bondsman to this house,
 Are all relics of your first comings.
 Then step in, step in and stay
 For her body is tired,
 Tired, her milk going sour
 Where many more mouths gladden the heart. (SENANU; VINCENT,
 1988, p. 205-206).

The mood of the poem is shaped by the social imaginary significations² collectively shared. In other words, the multiple voices of this literary piece bring up a communal desperate plea, urging the *abiku* child to have sympathy for his/her hopeless mother. This can be observed in: “No longer then bestride the threshold/ But step in and stay [for] good/ Then step in, step in and stay/ For her body is tired,/ Tired, her milk going sour/ Where many more mouths gladden the heart”. Yet, the “reincarnated child” is recognized by the marks of mutilations on his body: “knife scars”, “Serrating down your back and front”, “And both your ears, notched”, “Are all relics of your first comings”.

Some occurrences in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) bring out the intersecting lives of Okonkwo and Ezinma. Imagined as an *ogbanje*, Okonkwo's ten-year-old daughter Ezinma grows into a round character as the plot is developed. Her aberrant condition seems to not bother Okonkwo whatsoever. In fact, Ezinma happens to be the apple of his eye due to her boldness and control at times, which is untypical of women in this society. Unlike other children, she shows a disposition to disregard certain customs and cultural expectations. For instance, she calls her mom by name – Ekwefi – as does her father. Besides, Ezinma cajoles her mom into giving her some eggs secretly, since her father had forbidden children to eat such food. On account of her boldness, Okonkwo goes on wishing his daughter were a boy. Contrary to his son (Nwoye), Ezinma is

² According to Castoriadis (1987, p. 146), “The social world is, in every instance, constituted and articulated as a function of such a system of significations, and these significations exist, once they have been constituted, in the mode of what we called the actual imaginary (or the imagined)”. See Moscovici (1981, 1982).

described as having strong personality traits inherited from her father. In a dialogue with his friend Obierika, Okonkwo says, “If Ezinma had been a boy I would have been happier. She has the right spirit.” (ACHEBE, 2017, p. 51).

Although the themes of misogyny and patriarchy are not the central point of our analysis, they become rather evident in Okonkwo’s speech. One of the reasons he disdains Nwoye is the fact that the boy takes after his mom. Even though he encourages Nwoye to enjoy listening to “masculine” stories full of violence and bloodshed, his son prefers the stories about the tortoise, the bird *eneke-nti-oba*, the quarrel between the Earth and the Sky, all of them told by his mom. Okonkwo considers these stories are for foolish women and children. While taking care of Ikemefuna – a young prisoner given to be sacrificed – Okonkwo notices that the lad has been quite a good influence on his son by successfully instilling manly behaviors in Nwoye. Not only does the excerpt below indicate Okonkwo’s contentment with the masculine influence of Ikemefuna on his offspring, but it also clearly reveals his misogynist thoughts about ruling over women:

He was like an elder brother to Nwoye, and from the very first seemed to have kindled a new fire in the younger boy. He made him feel grown-up, and they no longer spent the evenings in his mother's hut while she cooked, but now sat with Okonkwo in his obi, or watched him as he tapped his palm tree for the evening wine. Nothing pleased Nwoye now more than to be sent for by his mother or another of his father's wives to do one of those difficult and masculine tasks in the home, like splitting wood, or pounding food. On receiving such a message through a younger brother or sister, Nwoye would feign annoyance and grumble aloud about women and their troubles. Okonkwo was inwardly pleased at his son's development, and he knew it was due to Ikemefuna. He wanted Nwoye to grow into a tough young man [...]. And so he was always happy when he heard him grumbling about women. That showed that in time he would be able to control his women-folk. No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children (and especially his women) he was not really a man [...]. (ACHEBE, 2017, p. 41).

A significant divergence can be seen in the representation of women in the story. Contrary to Okonkwo’s sexist views, a powerful female character plays a crucial role in the Umuofia village. Chielo is a priestess, who guards the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves. When possessed by Agbala, she has the authority to make important decisions, such as permitting Umuofia to wage a war. If the clan fails to obey the commands of the Oracle, the war will surely be lost for “[...] their dreadful *agadi-nwayi* would never fight what the Ibo call a *fight of blame*” (ACHEBE, 2017, p. 12). Chielo thus represents a

potent female force, whose powers are given by the deities, and must be abided by all male and female individuals.

There is a fine line between Okonkwo and Ezinma's inclinations towards transgressing cultural norms. During the Week of Peace he beats up his youngest wife (Ojiugo) because she did not return home early to cook the afternoon meal. Despite his first two wives' attempt to avert the blasphemy by reminding him of the holy week, Okonkwo is "[...] not the man to stop beating somebody half-way through, not even for fear of a goddess." (2017, p. 25). Having offended the earth goddess (Ezeani/Ani) for causing a disturbance, Okonkwo ends up being penalized as is the custom.

Ani is also the guardian of all morality, and is recognized as one of the most powerful deities in Igboland. "Every living person in the Igbo world submits to the authority of the earth goddess because *ani nna bu ike nwa* ("the strength of the child rests on the integrity and resourcefulness of his or her father's land") [...]." (ACHEBE, 2016, p. 33). Later on in the story, Okonkwo and his family are ostracized after his inadvertently killing of Ezeudu's sixteen-year-old son. Though the 'thought to be' the unbeatable wrestler is again penalized for displeasing Ani, the great irony lies in the fact that he seeks shelter in his motherland. It turns out that the more Okonkwo looks down on womanly figures, the more their paths are crossed and put in close proximity.

The main character's behavior explicitly demonstrates his defiance and inflexibility to observe local traditions. In many cultures around the world older people are highly respected for their wisdom, experience, and knowledge. This is the case with the elders in Umuofia. Nevertheless, Okonkwo disobeys a command given by Ezeudu, the oldest man in the village and thus held in high regard in all the clan. The Oracle of the Hills and the Caves decides that they must put an end to Ikemefuna's life. Since the boy calls Okonkwo 'father', Ezeudu urges him not to dirty his hands with the young prisoner's blood. Okonkwo disobediently takes part in the ambush, and eventually murders the boy with a decisive machete blow.

Despite his abhorrence of feminine traits, Okonkwo does treat Ezinma differently. She is given certain privileges, which enable her to take part in his isolated and even tormented moments. When he is feeling contrite and miserable for the assassination of his son-like Ikemefuna, we can note that Nwoye fears his dad and keeps away from him. On the third day of isolation, only Ezinma is permitted to come into his *obi* to bring him food. She even gives him orders by boldly saying, "you must finish this" (p. 49). Not coincidentally, Jesus is assumed by the Christians to have resurrected

on the third day. This symbolic number then reinforces the overcoming of a specific unpleasant situation. Right after his interaction with Ezinma on the third day, Okonkwo decides to pay his friend Obierika a visit. While he is there, the narrator says that Okonkwo begins feeling like his old self again. Therefore, his daughter acts as a catalyst to bring him healing.

Scholars draw our attention to Ezinma's two-way personality traits. Concerning this absorbing antithesis embedded in the *ogbanje* character, it is argued that

How can the same child that brings promise and joy also cause uncertainty and grief? How, for example, can Ezinma the *ogbanje* girl in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* cause her mother Ekwefi, especially, and Okonkwo her father extreme anxiety and heartbreak and yet remain such a humanizing and constructively functional part of Okonkwo's life, family, and the Umuofia village at large? How can, or cannot she, be such 'diabolism' and 'so much beneficence' all at once? (OKONKWO, 2004, p. 657).

Aji and Ellsworth (1992) state that Okonkwo's unusual feelings toward Ezinma are in part due to his disruptive relationship with the spirit world. "Ezinma portrays the *ogbanje* characteristic of occupying a liminal space between spirituality and corporeality, all the while striving for agency within her community." (HARLER, 2013, p. 35). In other words, both Ezinma and Okonkwo can be considered complex characters for their in-between conflicting roles. Just as the girl is struggling to stay permanently in the human world, so is Okonkwo constantly trying to get away with his offenses against the deities. Their intersecting conditions/actions boil down to the same feature: the inner battle with dualistic forces.

Along the same lines, in *The Bride Price*, *Aku-nna* is portrayed as an *ogbanje* girl. However, this piece of information is considerably implicit when compared to Ezinma's ritualistic quest for her *iyi-uwa*³. The thirteen-year-old *Aku-nna* is frequently sick, contracting all illnesses/fever from her street neighbors. Her mother often "[...] begged her to decide once and for all whether she was going to live or die." (EMECHETA, 2014, p. 14). Somewhat analogous to Ezinma, *Aku-nna*'s kin also frets over their daughter's spiritual condition, which prevents her from thoroughly sticking with the world of the living.

³ *Ogbanje* children are believed to stay in the human world permanently if their *iyi uwa* – an object that links them to the spiritual world – is found and destroyed by a diviner, also known as *dibias*. The ritual is performed by Okagbue, who successfully manages to dig up a pebble wrapped in a dirt rag. See Chinua Achebe (2017, p. 62-65).

Although Aku-nna's father, Ezekiel, does not commit any transgression against his people (unlike Okonkwo's rebelliousness in Umuofia), the reader learns from the very beginning the close bond that holds Ezekiel and his daughter together. The *ogbanje* girl is thought to share the same traits as her father: small, light-brown skin color, and large shiny eyes. In addition, Ezekiel himself chose Aku-nna's name, which means 'father's wealth'. Emecheta (2014) goes on even further by stating that Aku-nna is like Ezekiel in other ways, too. This implies that their lives are not brought together accidentally. Just as Ezekiel loses his life at an early stage of the story, so does Aku-nna's life come to an end precociously when she gives birth to her first child. Intriguingly, even the setting, where their death takes place, comes out to be identical – in a hospital.

In order to emphasize their special connection, Ezekiel and Aku-nna are described as having a lot of sympathy for one another. The father is often worried about his daughter's physical weakness and bad health, and the girl feels very sorry for his wounded painful foot. Once again there is some evidence of how their lives are purposefully linked. Whereas he died as a consequence for having fought the Burma Campaign – a series of battles in the British colony of Burma from 1941 to 1945 – Aku-nna's passing might have been caused as a consequence of her unwillingness to perpetuate some traditions.

Even though the author disassociates the girl's tragic ending from the breaking of traditional practices, that is, marrying the husband chosen by the woman's family and getting the bride price paid, it is said that other girls in Ibuza do not dare opposing the local customs for fear of having the same destiny as Aku-nna's. We can grasp Emecheta's criticism of the prohibition from marrying an *ohu/osu* (descendants of free slaved persons). This occurrence is held dearly among the Igbos, who believe that an *ohu/osu* still inherits the status of their enslaved ancestors (NWAUBANI, 2020). This is the reason why Aku-nna's family does not accept the bride price from their daughter's lover. Before dying, the poor girl was shunned by her family and community for not carrying on some of their dogmatic cultural practices.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the deep-rooted *ogbanje/abiku* phenomenon as incorporated in both the Igbo and the Yòrubá cultures. Whilst the myth of the “wicked-

spirit child” continues to this day to be a belief by some, scientific studies have – obviously – refuted this idea. Children labeled as *ogbanje* “[...] may actually be sickle cell patients or victims of other childhood diseases that were/are prevalent in most parts of southern Nigeria.” (ASAKITIKPI, 2008, p. 61). By the same token, Katundano (2020) claims that although culture falls into one of the pillars of sustainable development, some cultural elements can have a pernicious effect on society.

In spite of the controversy over the issue, this belief is powerfully portrayed in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and Emecheta’s *The Bride Price*. This literary analysis showed the significant and close bond between the *ogbanje* daughters and their fathers in both novels. It is crucial to mention though, that Achebe’s literary production furnished us with a more detailed insight into the topic. One reason for that lies in the fact that Okonkwo and Ezinma are both round characters, whose actions happen to be dynamic and multifaceted.

The result also provided evidence that Okonkwo and Ezinma are brought together by a shared attribute of ‘manliness’, especially when it comes to transgressing local traditions. Ezinma is regarded as being an *ogbanje* child, whereas her father continuously comes into conflict with the deities – the highest authorities the characters in the story must abide by. In addition, it was identified that Okonkwo’s misogynist thoughts generated a cause-and-effect relationship – the more he carries on his disdain for women, the more their paths converge.

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