

The Medical and Social Dynamics of Ogbanje as an Occult and Paranormal in Nigeria

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Abstract

Prior articles indicate the existence of *ogbanje* in Igboland but knowledge about its social and medical dynamics as an occult and paranormal is relatively lacking. This paper is therefore set to address this gap in knowledge by adopting primary and secondary sources of data collection on the Medical and Social Dynamics of *ogbanje* ascribed as an occult and paranormal in Nigeria. This has become necessary in order to disabuse the mind of the public that *ogbanje* has nothing to offer in collaborative African studies. Patriotism calls for an inward look at the nature of African belief system. Exploring *ogbanje* through descriptive and analytical research, this paper has a valuable base line for the Medical and Social analysis of *ogbanje* and has ultimately identifies its functional use in Nigeria. The study has corrected the deep ignorance held concerning the ascribed Medical and Social Dynamics of *ogbanje*. It has opened a new academic study which could offer deeper insight when approached from different disciplines.

Introduction

Belief system is regarded as an integral part of human life in Africa. In Nigeria for instance, it helps the people irrespective of their political affiliation, ethnicity, religion and other cultural worldviews to explain natural occurrences of past and present everyday life. It helps others such as scholars, researchers, travelers, friends and sympathizers to understand man's relationship with God, his neighbor and the supernatural or super-sensible world. Belief system goes on to assist man to direct, control the course of nature and how the invisible world impinge on the physical world.

In every culture, man is said to be dual and this teaching has given expression to such concept as dualism. Dualism explains man as a circle, a creature who is made up of the physical, which is synonymous with corruptible, imperfect, destructible, finite, empirical and their degree of change is subject to time and space. The physical is therefore, not permanent, weak and is contrasted with the spirit which is invisible, incorruptible, non-physical, permanent, not subject to decay etc. Nabofa (1991) says that in Traditional African Societies, it is believed that everything in the physical world has a spiritual counterpart. This view

implies that all the events and creatures in the physical world are controlled by the spiritual beings in the super-sensible world. Idowu (1973) believes that system is strong especially as they try to explain the structure hierarchical order of African Traditional Religion and their functions as one of the world religions that has large followership, offers explanation to the problems of meaning of life and gives direction to the rebellious prone man. Spirits are lesser spiritual entities when compared with divinities. Both of them are not physical yet their activities are physical. The African worldview does not distinguish between the physical world with the terrestrial and celestial world. Perhaps, this is one reason why observers see the operation or activities of these spirits as an “expectation of abnormality: This paper may not dispute the premise, because for every cause, there is an effect. The effect could be responsible for the calamities such as sickness, diseases, barrenness, accident, unemployment, famine, draught, pestilence etc. These may go beyond natural occurrences. In every religion, adherents seek for spiritual help in order to either overcome these challenges or win them to their side so as to tap their spiritual resources for developmental gains in the environment.

'*Ogbanje*', '*Abiku*', '*Eka-Abasi*', '*Fon*' and '*Danwabi*' among the Igbo, Yoruba, Efik and Hausa respectively refer to those children who are born and die shortly after or later in their youthful age. It belongs to the variety of undomesticated spirits who do not have shrines or temples. This explains why the belief and practice are said to be hidden, secret, beside the normal, or without a clear assertion and seems to defy standard scientific expressions. *Ogbanje* could therefore, be classified an occult and paranormal and needs to be explored within its social and medical dynamics. This will offer improved, balanced and deeper insight into its actual and potential influence based on contemporary scholarship. The reality of *ogbanje* has increased and despite Nigeria march towards technological development, and globalization, the belief has continually increased. Standard methods such as sociological and historical methods are used to explore social and medical dynamics of *ogbanje* in Nigeria.

The Concept of *Ogbanje*

Ogbanje means many things to many people. One thread of unity binds the various view-points on *ogbanje* is that it is a mystery too difficult to define, describe, unravel and explain. It belongs to the classified knowledge and only those with exoteric knowledge are in a position to offer deeper insight into the concept of *ogbanje*. Anibo (2006) sees *ogbanje* as equivalent to repeaters or born-to-die children who enter into the wombs of pregnant women only to be born and die shortly after. They may decide to come to the woman as many times as possible. There is a significant part of the contract missing in the above idea of entering a pregnant womb.

The Nobel Laureet, Wole Soyinka and Clark J. P. see *ogbanje* or *abiku* as being a wondering spirit which enters the womb of a woman so that it can be born in order to die. At what point does the *abiku* or *ogbanje* die? Is it on its accord? Or as entered into before a woman is chosen as a channel in the misery, pain and sorrow they chose in their guild? Onwujekwu (1981) sees *ogbanje* as the spirit of children who die shortly after they are born or while they are still children. The age limit does not limit to children but depends on the age agreed upon in the guild meeting. Some could die after the result of their senior secondary school certificate and after their university degree examinations. They may take their leave before their result is released. Such results are marked with brilliant success. Oduyoye (1998) states that the idea of re-incarnation leads us to another concept associated with death. This is born-to-die children called '*abiku*' by the Yoruba, *ogbanje* by the Igbo. Okwuesili (1983) seems to confuse *ogbanje* with a category of undomesticated spirit called Ghost which many experts of African Traditional Religion such as Idowu (1973) Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) Nabofa (1991) described as sadistic, mischievous and wandering or roaming about aimlessly. Orji (1999) calls *ogbanje* sylph as re-incarnation of children and young persons. The young persons die before their adulthood and such death is greeted with grief, misgiving and disturbing. The reverse is the case with the re-incarnation of their father or grand parents whose arrival are greeted with joy, celebration and merriment.

Characteristics of Ogbanje

It is mysterious, because it defies human wisdom, solution and verification *ogbanje* belongs to the spiritual realm of existence and cannot be approached by human force and ability. This implies that spirituality is needed to approach it frontally. African cosmology and metaphysics seem to offer help in approaching the challenges of *ogbanje* as an occult and paranormal. People react differently to the concept due to the belief or otherwise in it. Some discuss it with a wave of hand, others are indifferent to its oppressions in the family in particular and the society in general. *Ogbanje* remains a reference point in discussing the social and medical challenges of both children and adults whose ailments could not be scientifically diagnosed.

It has formed a fertile ground for African writers such as Achebe who tried to recapture the essence of *ogbanje* as children being prone to calamity in line with the covenant they entered in the spirit world. It is a form of re-incarnation in African metaphysics and philosophy of life. *Ogbanje* phenomenon explains certain mysteries of life. The consultative role of '*dibia*' (Spiritualists or medicine men and women) seems to identify and offer solution to the problems of *ogbanje* in Nigerian families. This claim has been disputed by a section of the society, but they could not query the dysfunctional role of spirits like *ogbanje* and witchcraft.

It exists and could be testified by names such as Onwubiko-death I implore you, Onwuma-death may please himself. Some rituals are offered amputations or scars are given before an end is put to the dying syndrome. When they reincarnate, they carry such scars back to this physical life. These scars and amputations at birth defy medical and scientific explanation till date.

Science has not proved the origin of such mutilation, amputation and scars. There is every tendency to resort to superstitious assumptions, mythology and spiritism. Pregnant women are afraid of them and in many Nigerian societies especially Yoruba land, Babalawo were consulted who fortells the kind of ori or destiny the child has. If it is discovered that the child has a bad or evil destiny, it could be spiritually corrected. The child in question would not go back to the guild he or she belonged before entering the world. *Ogbanje* children are generally believed to be sickly and manifest hopelessness to their parents, guardians and relations. Their recovery involves a lot of commitment. Collaborative studies show that their deaths are sudden or untimely and very painful.

The Origin of Ogbanje

A clear understanding of the origins of *Ogbanje* will help offer its characteristic features as a belief and practice in Nigeria. The exercise seems difficult but we will group the various shades of opinion into schools of thought.

The first school sees *Ogbanje* as originating from wandering spirits or roaming especially of those who lived undesirable life, died bad death and were denied befitting burial. Oti (1987) *Ogbanje* belongs to the spirit realm of existence and of undomesticated stick but certainly not of ghost. *Ogbanje* belongs to a guild and has a definite plan of action where it is to carry out an assigned duty, role and work and returns at the appointed day, date, time, month and year. While they are on their mission, they maintain close contact with their guild through visits and regular meetings. Confessions and testimonies from members of these group point to the reality of the above socio-medical predicament.

The second school sees *ogbanje* as originating from those who were denied according to Uchendu (1982:10) decent burial as a result of their bad or unacceptable way of life they lived while on earth. These category of spirits are wild, wicked, and sadistic. They have no peace and kept on roaming about with a definite aim to cause pains, sorrow and havoc if unchecked.

The Development of Belief in Ogbanje

It is difficult to ascertain the development of the belief in *ogbanje* and its practice in Nigeria. Some have presumably said it developed when the society became pluralistic with improved transport system, which enhanced movement from one community, town and state to another. Health problems and matters such as the

challenges posed by the influence of *ogbanje* was introduced with a view to sharing or making a collaborative effort on the matter. In the riverside areas, they are closely associated with spirits that are widely recognized by the religious tradition in order to pacify them. In riverside areas of Nigeria, it perhaps developed in order to conserve the potency of the belief, practice and influence on people, institutions and relationships.

Experts in traditional medicine are equally responsible for its growth. This premises is based on the fact that every traditional medicine man cannot handle the *ogbanje* case. In the same manner, it is not every man of God that could handle *ogbanje* problem in the contemporary Christian church. This is why there are deviance pastors who are gifted in this aspect of ministerial work. When the influence of *ogbanje* spirits seemed to become a threat by being uncontrollable, traditional medicine men called '*babalawo*' and '*dibia*' in Yoruba and Igbo respectively diversified in their traditional medical operations by undertaking special training to master how to control, or put these undomesticated spirit in check so that the level of torments experienced in society may be minimized.

In addition to the training mentioned above, the various religious rites and ceremonies introduced helped in its development. Rituals served some needs which are apparent in having efficacy and potency. We can, therefore, reasonably assume that the abundant evidence which the healing culture of *ogbanje* provides is a planned action involving the traditional medicine man or woman, the *ogbanje* and their parents. Involving the immediate affordable expenditure especially in its traditional societies encouraged its growth. The patronage was another motivating factor in the growth of *ogbanje* phenomenon. Considerable efforts and resources have been put in place and involved especially with the move toward the integration of western or orthodox medicine and traditional medicine in Nigeria in particular and African in general.

We can reasonably assume also that the integration may have added to the growth of the concept of *ogbanje* in Nigeria. This paper indicates that effective consciousness of the belief, practice and influence has grown in response to a growing fear or sense of insecurity which can be correlated with the expansion of the traditional healing homes. In other words, opinion may be right to suppose that the human mind was already impressed by the integration of change which is concerned with the problems which the passage of time involves for any creature capable of rational reaction to its existence.

Ogbanje has grown in response of consistent attempt to perpetuate or preserve for the future the beneficial efficacy of a religious practice in Nigeria in particular and Africa in general. This natural desire on the part of man to preserve what he

values or what could be of value in some concrete occasions from the effacing flux of the time-process thus appears to have found expression in the growth of belief and practice of *ogbanje* in Nigeria. Scholars of Comparative Religion may have contributed to the growth of the practice through intellectual stimulation, and curiosity. A number of comparative analyses have been based on thematic, historical and other approaches adopted in studies such terms, concepts, beliefs and practices of *ogbanje* as an occult and paranormal in Nigeria.

An Exposition of Research in Ogbanje in Contemporary Nigeria

The belief in *ogbanje* contrary to some opinions is still as sure as the presence of tables, chairs etc. Thus, despite the longstanding Christian traditions, its prevalence in the contemporary Nigeria cannot be denied. This is one of the reasons *ogbanje* has been expressed by scholars in literary and visual arts in their various literary and dramatic works which tried to recapture the essence of African cultural life with a view to establishing that Nigeria in particular and Africa in general are not culturally barren (Achebe, 1986).

The concept of re-incarnation seems to fuel the continued research and persistence of *ogbanje* in Nigeria. Onwubiko (1991), Uchendu (1982), Oti (1987), Boloji (1973), Ogbanje (1995), Onunwa (1990), Oduyoye (1998), Orji (1999) and Ukadu (1987) have reinforced the re-incarnation model in the origins and the continued recognition and practice of *ogbanje* in Nigeria.

Another factor of contemporary scholarship in *ogbanje* is the name given to the *ogbanje* or its related cases. For instance, Onwubiko (Death I implore you) and Onwuma (death may please himself). Umenwa (Calamitous Child) and Umebuogu (Calamity has compelled fighting back) are widely given to reflect the predicament of families in the face of disappointment, pain and sorrow of infant mortality. Apart from being another visible feature of an *ogbanje*, abnormality is reflected in the scars or marks the *ogbanje* carry in the contemporary society. These marks were one of the punitive measures meted to the dead *ogbanje* before burial. As the *ogbanjes* come back, the marks point to re-incarnation.

Similarly, Achebe (1995:28) is of the view that an *ogbanje* abnormality is reflected in being exaggerated, uncommon, outside the norm and sometimes weird: Quick temper, stubbornness, disrespect, violence are also among those displayed by them. Some of them are the most beautiful or the most handsome beings that walk on earth. They are distinct from other members of their peer groups in wisdom, intelligence and knowledge.

Most *ogbanje* are known for their constant dreams and nightmares. Aniebo (2006) says these are one major avenues they relate and communicate with their groups in the spiritual world. Testimonies and confessions are hallmarks in revealing the persistence of *ogbanje* in contemporary Nigeria. It has gone beyond the jurisdiction of powerful traditional medicine men. Deliverance Christian Church services point to the power of designing spirits being displayed. It is a factor of *ogbanje* in contemporary Nigeria. The question now is what are the medical and social dynamics of *ogbanje* as an occult and paranormal?

Functionalism as theoretical insight of *Ogbanje* as an occult and paranormal in Nigeria

Functionalism is a sociological theory that explains how man and society interact in carrying out the social realities of life. It is traced to the pioneering efforts of evolutionary scholars such as Auguste Comte (1956), Herbert Spencer (1887), Emile Durkheim (1893), (Lewis Coser (1977) and Talcott Parsons (1975) who tried to explain the social components of society as they relate to religion and social problems of life. Functionalism according to Giddens (2010) is seen as a system that has several parts which are related to one another and at the same time functions independently. Omonijo, D. O., Nndeum, O.A.U. and Uche, O.C.O. (2013) are of the view that they contribute their quota to the maintenance and survival of the entire system.

Functionalism attributes the independent nature of each part of the society as well as existing values and norms governing its operation. Giddens (2010) is of the view that the combination of these norms and values bring about co-operation and consensus in the system.

Functionalist perspective of *ogbanje* has positive functions for humanity. It maintains or helps to promote social stability. It is observed that education of *ogbanje* as an occult and paranormal is essential channel of socialization whose social function is to transmit common values the Igbo society to future generation.

Functionalism as a sociological theory is relevant to this study. For one, religion like *ogbanje*, a religious component of Igbo Religion cannot be an illusion. *ogbanje* remains for practical purposes true. The ascribed reality of *ogbanje* is based on the various social functions it performs in Igboland in particular and Africa in general. The power of *ogbanje* which is shrouded in mystery is brought in to promote harmony, integration, and solidarity in the society. Upon this, it provides an ethical system which positively or negatively influences human behaviour and relationship in human actions. Another functional contribution of *ogbanje* is that belief in its practices serves as an instrument of social control,

maintenance of law and order in the wider society. Social and medical welfare of the society are not left out of social change and reforms which provides a system of values.

Medical Dynamics of the *Ogbanje* as an Occult and Paranormal in Nigeria

Belief in *ogbanje* and all the practices associated with it defy standard scientific methods or procedures. The facts cannot be subjected to empirical test yet the patient is dying. The blood tests, scanning and other specialized medical examinations do not show the cause and possible remedy. The doctors may give a possible name nearest to what they feel is the medical symptom.

The above situation does not seem to help matters. If it is true that mysterious powers are at work and there are experts such as '*babalawo*' and '*dibia*' (powerful medicine men), deliverance pastors, spiritual healing homes and other interested parties, they could work together in order to achieve better and improved results. Thus, *ogbanje* as an occult and paranormal has fuelled the call for the integration of orthodox medicine, traditional medicine and spiritual healing ministry into Nigerian's health care system. This functional integration will combine standard medical methods with exoteric knowledge and mysterious power exercised by the stakeholders in the integrated medical system. The success of the above will restore confidence in medical practice as a collaborative effort, regulate tradico-medical activities and improve the standards of traditional medicine men whose activities have been variously criticized as 'quacks'. *Ogbanje* will be medically more functional than dysfunctional by being important reference point in policy formulation and implementation in Nigeria in particular and Africa in general. It has thrown a serious challenge to our medical and laboratory or diagnostic scientists to re-address the mortality rate of children believed to be *ogbanje*. Instead of relying on standard medical methods, the voice of our elders is words of wisdom which the wise hears and gets wiser. There are powers greater than that of man. Man's ability to fight environmental problems depends on how close he is to the and willing to tap their spiritual resources to the progress and sustainable development of man in Nigeria.

History of standard medical breakthrough worldwide shows that they are not the works of an individual effort. The health problems *ogbanje* pose could be tabled during international medical conferences. With global attention, something substantive would be done or achieved.

Social Dynamics of *Ogbanje* as an Occult and Paranormal in Nigeria

ogbanje has left many families in Nigeria in a state of mind which is prone to perpetual fear, anxiety, sorrow, pain especially during and after birth. Apart from the pregnancy either dropping before time or dying after birth. It could be that the

pregnant woman is an *ogbanje* and may die based on the agreement she reached in their guild meeting. *Ogbanje* phenomenon has made prayer a universal language of all religions and connotes recognition by the supplicant of a power greater than man that is capable of changing both man and his institution. Orthodox liturgical prayers which are prescribed in tackling the occult and paranormal by religious institutions make Nigerians innate acuity and the propensity to resort to prayers when situations that are threatening to their well being impinge on their life. In the face of the series of life effacing situations or depressions in all facets of the nation's life, prayer expectedly has come in the front stage of Nigerian National life. In the entanglement of *ogbanje* problem in Nigeria, prayer has come to acquire various social connotations depending on the level of the social, economic, political, psychological, spiritual circumstances of life. Social dynamics of *ogbanje* is an incisive exposition on the use of spiritual to gain deeper meaning of the mysterious, the hidden, the secret and not available to the natural science but important in man's social development.

Ogbanje has offered local and foreign scholars an improved understanding of those aspects of occult and paranormal among Nigerians. It is no longer hidden. It is of immense social significance to add that the problems shared are half solved. *ogbanje* as an occult and paranormal has opened another chapter in institutes of African studies, universities and international conferences to rob minds in order to explore the social effects of the belief, and the actual or potential influence of convictions about its reality on the daily life of people and institutions. The social importance of the international conference sponsored by Volkswagen Foundation of Germany tagged "Belief in the occult and paranormal in West Africa: Medical and Social Dimensions" cannot be over emphasized. The level of discussions, the quality of papers delivered and the presence of scholars from Hamburg, Ghana, Bayreuth, Heidelberg, Abidjan, Abuja, Illorin, Port Harcourt etc. point to the social dynamics of the issues involved in occult and paranormal as exemplified in *ogbanje*.

The above creative papers have offered a way out of the mysterious and the inexplicable in normal social and medical life in Nigeria. They explored reasons for social and medical trends, the types of rationality on its social development in West Africa.

Ogbanje is more of a religious concept and religion offers solution to the problem by trying to restore peace and harmony in individuals, families and society. Functionalists such as O'Dea (1966) sees social dynamics of religion and its systems as the main fabrics which web all elements of culture. *Ogbanje* as a religious belief helps in the advancement of man's cultural life. *Ogbanje* is seen as 'Ume', a concept which connotes one who is prone to calamity. This calamity

may be associated with repulsive attitude which drives people especially suitors from experiencing marital relationships. This process of social reintegration is an important field of academic pursuit in various social sciences especially in Sociology and Psychology. In humanities, historians, philosophers anthropologists and theologians face the challenges posed by occult and paranormal. The social dynamics of *ogbanje* has advanced genuine course for transformation and a fertile ground to test, study, analyze and proffer solutions to practical problems associated with *ogbanje* as an occult and paranormal in Nigeria.

There is hope for the socially alienated and this could be through moral, spiritual and emotional support, comfort and assurance in time of trauma, disappointment and uncertainty. The religious involvement in the healing process does not only bring Nigerians into a relationship with the divine put provides sacred authority for a valued belief system.

Conclusion

Ogbanje, *abiku*, and other cultural names ascribed to it as an occult and paranormal, therefore is shrouded in mystery. African metaphysics has not been successfully explained by the natural sciences. It is a belief system translated into cultural practice. *Ogbanje* is understood within the structure of African Traditional Religion as the third hierarchy after belief in God and divinities. With the belief in spirits, *ogbanje* is classified along with ghost, witches, sorcerers, familiar spirits as undomesticated spirits whose main aim is said to cause havoc to people, institutions and relationships in different spheres of human life. They are viewed by critics as detrimental to family system, a log on the will of progress and do not seem to promote rationality, creativity and intellectual stimulation.

This is an empirical study based on the practical experiences of our key informants, resource persons and personal observation, which informed the choice of *ogbanje* as an occult and paranormal. There is an assumption that even if you are not an *ogbanje* or you have not come into direct contact with *ogbanje*, you cannot deny that you have heard about it. *Ogbanje* is real and makes for a genuine academic survey. This will add to contemporary scholarship on *ogbanje*. Christianity has beclouded traditional vision and the wider society is made to accept that nothing good is found in *ogbanje* as an occult and paranormal. It has posed a fresh social and medical challenges that would make our thinkers, researchers, consultants, policy makers and scholars to close ranks in order to re-read the challenges posed by *ogbanje* and other occult and paranormal groups in Nigeria in particular and Africa in general. This is in support of the Igbo proverb which states that where a child is pointing at while crying, if the paternal relation is not there, the maternal relations must certainly be there. Thus, despite our

exposure, education, science and technology, globalization, Christian and Western influence, the belief in *ogbanje* is still very strong. Instead of ascribing derogatory names to it, social and medical reformation could be enhanced by integrating orthodox medicine with the traditional and Christian Church healing ministries.

In this way, the interplay between visible and invisible world, the importance of African Traditional Religion and the need to tap the spiritual or mysterious powers are ensured in promoting an improved health care system, social integration and sustainable development in Nigeria in particular and Africa in general.

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